

ENVIRONMENTAL APOCALYPSE IN  
RICHARD WAGNER'S *DAS RHEINGOLD*

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Fears concerning the destruction of the natural world and the imminence of an environmental apocalypse came to fruition long before the realization of global climate change. In fact, as early as 1848, Richard Wagner pondered the end of nature when he wrote the first drafts of what became his four-part opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring*). In this thesis, I will examine how the first music drama in this cycle, *Das Rheingold*, functions as a vision of environmental apocalypse.

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## Introduction

Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold* (1854) is the first installation of his four-part opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and is set in a mythical Nordic-inspired landscape. Ragnarök, a story detailing the cataclysmic end of the cosmos, inspired Wagner's opera cycle. According to two ancient pieces of Scandinavian literature, the Icelandic poem "Völuspá" and the *Prose Edda*, a collection of Germanic mythology, Ragnarök's plot unfolds as follows:

Ragnarök will be preceded by cruel winters and moral chaos. Giants and demons approaching from all points of the compass will attack the gods, who will meet them and face death like heroes. The sun will be darkened, the stars will vanish, and the earth will sink into the sea. Afterward, the earth will rise again, the innocent Balder [Wotan and Fricka's son] will return from the dead, and the hosts of the just will live in a hall roofed with gold.<sup>1</sup>

In his book, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, Klaus Vondung explains that as a people, Germans—including Wagner—have historically been fearful of global destruction.<sup>2</sup> Vondung explains that German apocalyptic symbolism toes the line between destruction and renewal: while Germans long for salvation—a concept derived from a Judeo-Christian worldview—they also fear existential demise.<sup>3</sup> For Wagner, Ragnarök embodied a tension between apocalypse and salvation, and helped support his view that history was in "continuous decline" and that a final apocalyptic world event was imminent.<sup>4</sup> He expected that the European revolutions of 1848 would destroy a

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<sup>1</sup> "Ragnarök," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Ragnarok>.

<sup>2</sup> Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, trans, Stephen D. Ricks, (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

broken, monarchical political system, paving the way for collective salvation.<sup>5</sup>

However, the outcome he anticipated never came to fruition, crushing his hopes for a reformed society. Wagner ends the *Ring* cycle by leaving it up to interpretation whether a new and improved world will emerge from the wreckage of apocalypse.<sup>6</sup>

Some of Wagner's anxieties about environmental apocalypse can be found in his prose writings, like his essay *The Art-Work of the Future* (*Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*). Here, he insists that people's inability to identify primal wants and needs undercuts their ability to make moral decisions:

Where there is no Want, there is no true Need; where no true Need, no necessary action. But where there is no necessary action, there reigns Caprice; and where Caprice is king, there blossoms every vice, and every criminal assault on Nature.<sup>7</sup>

It appears as though Wagner believed that when individuals are not in touch with who they are as living organisms, they succumb to wickedness. His phrase "criminal assault on Nature" is ambiguous; it might refer to crimes against humanity or the dampening of human creativity, but also may refer to how human failings result in the destruction of the environment. However, we might interpret this more broadly given some of Wagner's other views. For example, he believed that industrialism, which "deadens men" and "turns them to machines," was one such barrier preventing humans from living in right relationship with nature.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vondung, 278.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future, and Other Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The story of *Das Rheingold* exists in a supernatural reality, involving river mermaids, dwarfs, giants, and gods. The story begins when Alberich, the dwarf lord of the Nibelungs, steals magic gold from the bottom of the Rhine River; he then forges this gold into a ring, which gives its owner the power to dominate the world. The only caveat is that the owner of the ring must sacrifice love, a privilege Alberich willingly relinquishes. While Alberich plots world domination, Wotan, the lord of the gods, enlists two giants to build him a palace called Valhalla. Wotan soon learns that the giants' only suitable payment for their labor is either receipt of Alberich's gold or taking possession of Freia, the goddess of youth. Wotan seizes Alberich's gold ring in order to pay the giants for their construction of Valhalla. However, by coming into contact with the ring, he inherits the ring's evil and refuses to part with it. Wotan receives warnings regarding the ring's dark power multiple times throughout the opera, most notably from Loge, the fire god, and Erda, the earth goddess. In short, the theft of the gold and subsequent creation of the ring throws the whole world out of balance.

In this narrative of greed and world destruction, Wagner turns to anti-Semitic stereotypes and racially charged scapegoats. Two dwarves in the opera, Alberich and Mime, have been interpreted as Jewish caricatures, for example.<sup>9</sup> Yet, we cannot simply view Alberich as an anti-Semitic figure given that Wagner expressed his own identification with the character, as described in letters to his friend and fellow composer, Franz Liszt.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Michael Tusa has built on other scholars'

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars such as Theodor Adorno confront Wagner's antisemitism more directly. See Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: NLB, 1981), 10.

<sup>10</sup> See Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt*, vol. 2, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1889), 50.



observations of a connection between Mime and Wagner's rival, Meyerbeer, arguing that Wagner's rupture with Meyerbeer was a major source of inspiration for the *Ring*.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of my paper is not to answer these questions, as they have been extensively debated elsewhere, but rather to offer an ecocritical vision for *Das Rheingold* that subverts Wagner's racist ideology and newly engages issues of race and power in ways that reflect current events of today's world.

In order to examine *Das Rheingold* from the perspective of environmental apocalypticism, it is crucial to evaluate definitions of apocalyptic literature. In a 1986 article, biblical scholar Adela Yarbro Collins modifies an earlier definition of apocalyptic literature written by her husband, John J. Collins in 1979. Yarbro Collins points out that the earlier definition elaborated only on form and content, but her newer definition accounts for the way drama and history function within the genre. According to Yarbro Collins:

'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world; such a work is intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.<sup>12</sup>

In *Das Rheingold*, Loge, the fire god, and Erda, the earth goddess, function as otherworldly messengers because they relay important prophecies to Wotan, though ostensibly a god, functions as the "human recipient" of this revelation. Loge, too, is

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<sup>11</sup> See Michael C. Tusa. "Mime, Meyerbeer and the Genesis of *Der Junge Siegfried*: New Light on the 'Jewish Question' in Richard Wagner's Work," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 26 (2014): 113–46.

<sup>12</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 2.

ambiguous in his status. Since he is not a full god, he positions himself partly in the supernatural world and partly in the human world. For instance, in his aria in Scene II, Loge comes to the realization that the gods age because Freia can no longer guard the golden apples that preserve the gods' youthful appearance. Loge is only able to relay his message because of his mortal, half-human status.

Erda, on the other hand, is more obviously an otherworldly being. Whereas the other gods are fallible and more "human," she displays prophetic wisdom and clairvoyance, since her existence predates the beginning of time. Moreover, Erda's prophecy forces Wotan to confront his own death. In my analysis, I explore how this prophecy serves Wagner's vision of environmental apocalypse, drawing on literature concerning death studies and extinction in the age of the Anthropocene.<sup>13</sup> In their book, *Opera: The Art of Dying*, Linda and Michael Hutcheon explore Erda's prophecy from the perspective of death studies. They argue that *Das Rheingold* serves as "a moving narrative about Wotan's process of adaptation to the concrete understanding of his imminent end."<sup>14</sup> Wotan must die because he committed primal sins against nature. For one, he cut a branch off of the World Ash Tree and fashioned it into a spear, onto which he carved the laws of his land.<sup>15</sup> Two, he upset the world's power balance by seizing the all-powerful ring. Nonetheless, even if Wotan were to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens, the original guardians of the gold, there is no guarantee his world will survive another day.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Scientists acknowledge that this is a geologic timeframe in which humans dominate climate and the environment.

<sup>14</sup> Hutcheon, 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Environmental apocalypse brought about by climate change is a present-day fear that permeates many facets of culture. Devastating floods, wildfires, and droughts plague communities worldwide, and these crises are only becoming more intense with time. However, these kinds of images are hardly new. Greg Garrard surveys some of literature's most prominent apocalyptic works, from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which revealed the devastating multi-generational effects of pesticides on Americans, to Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, a book arguing that the moral responsibility for environmental apocalypse rests on those who fail to curb overpopulation.<sup>17</sup> These works have had far-reaching effects on the global literary community, and have reoriented discussions concerning environmental degradation.

Roy Scranton's recent work shares similarities with these earlier apocalyptic writings, though it ponders climate change catastrophe from his dual perspective as a philosopher and US Army Iraq War veteran. Scranton recalls the debilitating fear of death he experienced every day as a soldier:

Every morning, after doing maintenance on my Humvee, I would imagine getting blown up, shot, lit on fire, run over by a tank, torn apart by dogs, captured and beheaded... To survive as a soldier, I had to learn to accept the inevitability of my own death.<sup>18</sup>

Scranton applies his experience as a soldier to the ways in which global societies fail to accept the imminence of death. He maintains that "civilizations have marched blindly

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<sup>17</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New Critical Idiom. (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 105.

<sup>18</sup> Roy Scranton, "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene," *The New York Times* (2013): <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>.

toward disaster because humans are wired to believe that tomorrow will be much like today.”<sup>19</sup>

Scranton’s argument may be applied to the world of *Das Rheingold*. The gods in this opera, much like the humans of today’s world, are not entirely in control of their destiny, nor are they able to define the laws of nature. The gods are agents driving changes leading to apocalypse and ultimately are subsumed by a more powerful force—that of nature. Perhaps Wotan fails to imagine an apocalyptic future because, to borrow from Scranton’s work, environmental threats “[are] universalized and framed in scales that boggle the imagination.” Wotan and his kingdom are not equipped to survive the disaster Erda foresees, in large part because they cannot even imagine it coming to fruition.

The same environmental fears Scranton describes also permeate academic disciplines such as musicology. Alexander Rehding, for one, ponders how ecomusicology—an environmentally-oriented frame of musicology—can communicate a sense of apocalyptic crisis. Rehding explains that there are two primary facets of the literary environmental imagination: nostalgia and apocalypse. Of these two facets, critics consider apocalypse the “‘master metaphor’ of the environmental imagination.”<sup>20</sup> Rehding highlights the potential of ecocriticism in interpreting music. However, he notes that “the narrative arts have an obvious advantage over music [in implementing a sense of crisis].”<sup>21</sup> For this reason, he suggests ecocritical stagings of operas like

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Rehding, “Ecomusicology between Apocalypse and Nostalgia,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 410.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* as one way in which ecomusicology may communicate the urgency of environmental destruction. In this thesis, I examine how the first music drama in this cycle, *Das Rheingold*, functions as a vision of environmental apocalypse. I explore two excerpts from *Das Rheingold* through an ecocritical lens and propose my own staging of these scenes.

In demonstrating how *Das Rheingold* functions as a vision of environmental apocalypse, I will employ ideas from Yarbrow Collins and Rehding's definition of apocalyptic literature. Yarbrow Collins argues that apocalyptic literature illuminates present, earthly problems—such as greed and corruption—through its exploration of the supernatural. While Rehding agrees that apocalyptic literature must grapple with current issues, he believes it embodies “political relevance, powerful realism, and—in a very literal sense—sublime terror,” thereby complicating Yarbrow Collins's position.<sup>22</sup> Here, Rehding argues that political relevance is rooted in realism, not the supernatural as Yarbrow Collins suggests.

Nevertheless, Rehding's “sublime terror” and Yarbrow Collins' eschatology are intimately connected. Eschatology is key in conceptualizing apocalypse since it concerns death, judgment, and the final destiny of humankind.<sup>23</sup> The gods cower in horror during Loge and Erda's revelatory monologues. When Wotan wrests the all-powerful ring from Alberich, he also acquires the ring's curse. Nevertheless, he does not relinquish the ring, despite several warnings from his comrades, including Loge.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Eschatology, n.," Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University Press, September 2019); accessed November 19, 2019), <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64274>

This refusal inspires Erda, the primal earth goddess, to prophesize her bleak vision of the future: if Wotan does not relinquish the ring, the gods will perish. Wotan's terror is palpable only because he is confronted with the possibility of his civilization's collapse.

My conception of apocalyptic literature—as seen through my ecocritical stagings—marries some elements of the definitions used by Yarbrow Collins and Rehding. First, I believe that “sublime terror” is a product of powerful eschatological realizations, but is not the keystone of apocalyptic literature. Second, I agree with the authors' emphasis on political relevance within apocalyptic literature. While I do not think that the world of *Das Rheingold* has to be realistic in order to reflect pressing political issues, my production takes a more realistic approach. Also, since the characters act as otherworldly messengers in *Das Rheingold*, an ecocritical staging would equate them to figures who support science and reason. Thus, my definition of apocalyptic literature is as follows: Apocalyptic literature conveys a political message through its characters' eschatological realizations, which may emerge via revelations from someone who is perceived to be an otherworldly being.

My thesis explores two moments in *Das Rheingold*: Loge's warning about the golden apples in Scene II and Erda's prophecy in Scene IV. For each of these scenes, I analyze the libretto text and musical score. My musical analysis is based on short, repeated musical themes attributed to Wagner's music, called leitmotifs.<sup>24</sup> While many scholars have addressed leitmotifs, for my analysis I use those identified by Rudolph

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<sup>24</sup> Leitmotifs are clearly defined musical themes that “represent or symbolize a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or any other ingredient in a dramatic work. A leitmotif may be musically unaltered on its return, or altered in rhythm, intervallic structure, harmony, orchestration or accompaniment...” See Arnold Whittall, “Leitmotif,” *Grove Music Online* (2001); accessed December 9, 2019, [www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-000001636](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-000001636).

Sabor in his English translation of *Das Rheingold*.<sup>25</sup> I then compare three stagings—those of Otto Schenk, Patrice Chéreau, and Robert LePage— in order to assess the degree to which these productions can be interpreted as ecocritical. Finally, I respond to Rehding’s suggestion for an ecocritical *Ring* staging by offering my own creative vision of *Das Rheingold* that can potentially speak to today’s audiences about the threat of environmental apocalypse.

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<sup>25</sup> Rudolph Sabor and Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 86–90.

## Scene II: Loge's Golden Apples Monologue

LOGE  
Über Stock und Stein zu Tal  
stapfen sie hin;  
durch des Rheines Wasser-  
flut  
waten die Riesen:  
fröhlich nicht  
hängt Freia  
den Rauhen über dem Rücken.  
Heia! Hei!  
Wie taumeln die Töpel dahin!  
Durch das Tal talpen sie schon:  
Wohl an Riesenheims Mark  
erst halten sie Rast!  
Was sinnt nun Wotan so  
Wild?  
Dein selgen Göttern wie *gehts?*

Trügt mich ein Nebel?  
Neckt mich ein *Traum?*  
Wie bang und *bleich*  
Verblüht ihr so bald!  
Euch erlischt der Wangen  
*Licht;*  
der Blick eures Auges  
verblitz!  
Frisch, mein Froh,  
noch ists ja früh!  
Deiner Hand, Donner,  
entsinkt ja der Hammer!  
Was ists mit Fricka?  
Freut sie sich wenig  
ob Wotans grämlichem Grau,  
das schier zum Greiser ihn  
schafft?

FRICKA  
*Wehe!* *Wehe!*  
Was ist geschehn?

DONNER  
Mir sinkt die Hand.

LOGE  
Up the rocky road, down dale  
they plod, lurching along.  
Through the Rhine's deep waters  
now  
waddle the giants.  
Freia hangs,  
far from happy,  
across the clodhopper's shoulders.  
Heia! Hei!  
Those ruffians are rolling along!  
Through the vale see them push on.  
Soon at Risenheim's bounds  
will they draw breath. [to the gods]  
What brooding clouds Wotan's  
brow?  
The eternal gods look so old!

Vapours delude me;  
dream world, away!  
How weak you seem,  
wrinkled and worn!  
From your cheeks the bloom has  
fled,  
The blaze of your eyes has grown  
dim.  
Courage, Froh,  
young is the day!  
Mind your hand, Donner,  
you're dropping the hammer!  
What's up with Fricka?  
Is she unhappy  
that Wotan's grizzled and grey,  
an old man ahead of his time?

FRICKA  
Sorrow! Sorrow!  
What's going on?

DONNER  
My hand grows weak.



FROH

Mir stockt das Herz.

LOGE

Jetzt fand ichs: hört, was euch fehlt!  
Von Freias Frucht  
genosset ihr heute noch nicht:  
die goldnen Äpfel  
in ihrem Garten,  
sie machten euch tüchtig und jung,  
asst ihr sie jeden Tag.  
Des Gartens Pflegerin  
ist nun verpfändet;  
an den Ästen darbt  
und dorrt das Obst,  
bald fällt faul es herab.  
Mich kümmerts minder;  
an mir ja kargte  
Freia von je  
Knausernd die köstliche Frucht:  
denn halb so echt nur  
bin ich wie, Herrliche, ihr!  
Doch ihr setzet alles  
auf das jüngende Obst:  
das wussten die Riesen wohl;  
auf euer Leben legten sie's an:

nun sorgt, wie ihr das wahr!  
Ohne die Äpfel  
alt und grau, greis und  
grämlich  
welkend zum Spot taller Welt,  
erstirbt der Göttern Stamm.

FROH

My heart stands still.

LOGE

I have it! This is what ails you:  
of Freia's fruit  
you have not tasted today.  
The golden apples  
that grow in her garden,  
provide you with vigour and youth,  
thanks to an apple a day.  
The garden's guardian,  
she has been bartered,  
and the apples rot  
and fade away,  
and soon they'll hit the ground.  
Not that I'm worried.  
To me, dear Freia  
always was mean  
with the immaculate fruit;  
for half as god-like  
am I, not true-born like you!  
You staked your existence  
on those apples of youth;  
the giants are well-aware  
that this would wipe out  
Wotan and all

Now look to your own lives!  
Lost are your apples;  
old and grey, shrunk and  
shriveled,  
scolded and scorned by the world,  
the gods will be no more. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sabor, 87-90.

### *Background*

Scene II of *Das Rheingold* concerns Wotan's inability to find a suitable payment for the giants' construction of Valhalla, Wotan's palace. At this point, the giants have taken Freia—the goddess of youth and guardian of the golden apples—as their payment and the gods suffer the consequences in her absence. Since Freia can no longer guard her orchard of golden, youth-giving apples, they rot and fall off the trees, and the gods become weak in response. Loge's monologue functions as a prophecy pointing to the destruction of the world, and, in particular, how the gods' greed for their castle has led them to give up a life-giving natural resource, the golden apples.

### *Textual Analysis*

As indicated in the text, Loge comes to the following conclusion in his monologue: as the golden apples decay, so do the gods. He does not need a figure like Erda to reveal this information to him. Rather, he comes to this eschatological realization on his own terms. Loge begins by envisioning the giants traveling with Freia in tow. He narrates his vision by providing a visceral image of the giants throwing Freia over their backs like a bag of flour. Loge ponders her fate as he imagines her moving further away. Although he does not yet consciously realize that Freia's absence comes at a steep price, he exhibits a glimpse of awareness when he sings a jarring "Heia! Hei!" He notices that there is something amiss about Wotan, asking: "Wass sinnt nun Wotan so wild?" Loge appears disoriented looking at his feeble, unrecognizable friends—he even ponders whether he inhabits a dream world.

Loge finally identifies the golden apples as the entity that provides the gods with "tüchtig" (vigor) and "jung" (youth). He explains that Freia's absence and subsequent

inability to tend to her golden apple orchard is the reason for the gods' debilitation. In the line "Des Gartens Pfliegerin ist nun verpfändet," Sabor translates "verpfändet" as "bartered," referring to the exchange of Freia between Wotan and the giants. However, it is important to note that an alternate meaning of "verpfändet" is starved. This connotation serves as a premonition of the gods' fate, as they will no longer consume the apples that keep them healthy and young.

Loge's monologue is interspersed with lines sung by the other gods: Donner and Froh point out how their hands and hearts grow weak, while Fricka cries out "Wehe! Wehe! / Was ist geschehn?" The once formidable gods now have difficulty comprehending their newfound weakness.

Loge reveals his sentiment at the end of the aria: he has no sympathy for his companions, showing himself to be inauthentic. He sings, "Mich kümmerts minder," which Sabor translates to "Not that I'm worried." Loge explains that the state of the apples does not concern him since his half-mortal status protects him from rapid aging. As a half-human, his lifespan is not determined by Freia. This section ends on a monosyllabic "Stamm." In short, Loge's eschatological realization is that he will be spared from the environmental apocalypse—one brought about by the decomposition of the golden apples—while his companions will likely die.

### *Musical Analysis*

Musically, Loge's monologue contains four leitmotifs, those representing the golden apples (Figure 1), Freia (Figure 4), Loge, (Figure 7) and Grief (Figure 8). In his

book, *The Musical Topic*, Raymond Monelle explains how topic theory illuminates symbolic and cultural meaning behind leitmotifs.<sup>27</sup>

The Golden Apples leitmotif embodies the pastoral topic as defined by Monelle, but the leitmotif degrades over the course of the aria. Pastoral melodies, like the one representing the Golden Apples, are inherently simple, evoking peaceful feelings one may experience in the countryside.<sup>28</sup> The fact that pastoral music is almost always in a major key contributes to this joyous sentiment.<sup>29</sup>

However, although the leitmotif begins in this fashion, its happy mood does not persist for long. The horns play an important role in signaling key changes from major to minor. They play a D-major version of the leitmotif when Loge sings “Trügt mich ein Nebel? Neckt mich ein *Traum*?” This line exemplifies the good feelings associated with dreaming, but the horns’ B-minor variation of the leitmotif on “der Blick eures Auges verblitz!” interrupts this fantasy (Figure 2). Normally, pastoral music’s slow tempo denotes tenderness and nobility if it is in a major key.<sup>30</sup> In the leitmotif, when this slow tempo exists in tandem with a minor key change, a solemn mood emerges.

The rhythmic and intervallic integrity of the leitmotif continues to deteriorate. Monelle explains that the *siciliana*, one form of pastoral music, is in a dancelike compound meter of 6/8 or 12/8.<sup>31</sup> Although the time signature of the Golden Apples leitmotif is common time, or 4/4, the triplets give it the dancelike feel of 6/8. The last

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<sup>27</sup> Music *topoi* or topics are defined as “musical styles and genres taken out of their proper context and used in another one.” See Danuta Mirka, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 252, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=313175>.

<sup>29</sup> Monelle, 221.

<sup>30</sup> Monelle, 219.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

iteration of the leitmotif contains a syncopated fragment of the original leitmotif, which omits the triplets completely.

The original leitmotif is built on a pentatonic scale but no longer exists in this formation by the end of the aria. Monelle associates the pentatonic scale in pastoral music with a concept called *Volkseele*, which he believes “[engages] with the nation and the people” through its “involvement in soil, roots, and the homeliness of the tribe.”<sup>32</sup> Sabor notices this folkish element in the Golden Apples leitmotif, as it incorporates uncomplicated melody and strong rhythms.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Wagner himself was devoted to the German *Volk*—or folk—which may explain why he wrote a motif representing the gods’ ties to their homeland and to each other.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, this musical deterioration mimics both the physical degeneration of the gods and the loss of nature.

The degradation of the Golden Apples leitmotif signifies the fall from grace. Monelle explains that the pastoral genre suggests “Christmas and the Christian heaven.”<sup>35</sup> The Golden Apples leitmotif represents the desire to return to a pre-lapsarian paradise, since all pastoral poetry prefers nature over manmade art.<sup>36</sup> The gods’ actions now position them in an environmental apocalypse where the hopes of salvation are slim.

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<sup>32</sup> Although Monelle illustrates this relationship between the pentatonic scale and the pastoral topic in Dvorak’s Cello Concerto and Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony, this same concept can be applied to the “Golden Apples” leitmotif. See Monelle, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Sabor, 57.

<sup>34</sup> In his essay, “The Art-Work of the Future,” Wagner defines the term as follows: “[Volk] is the epitome of all those men *who feel a common and collective Want* (*gemeinschaftliche Noth*).” Wagner explains that this collective “Want”—or all primal human desires—will point the German community toward “the clear sweet springs of Nature.” See Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future, and Other Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 77.

<sup>35</sup> Monelle, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Monelle 195.

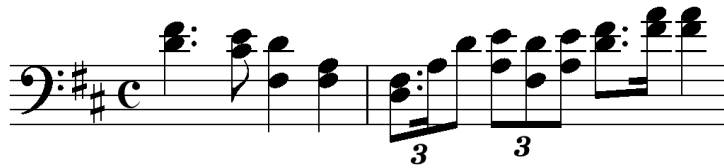


Figure 1. “Golden Apples” leitmotif

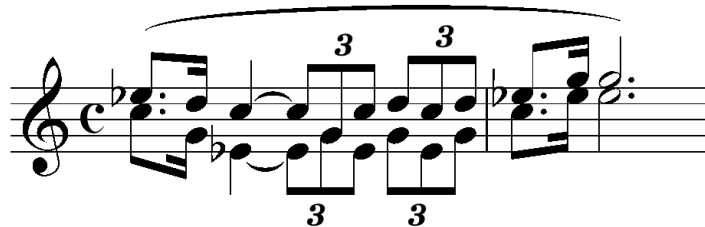


Figure 2. “Golden Apples” leitmotif variation in B-minor (played by horn in E)



Figure 3. “Golden Apples” leitmotif final iteration

The Freia leitmotif can be understood as ‘fairy music’ with its magical, chromatic qualities. In her article, “On Microscopic Hearing: Fairy Magic, Natural Science, and the Scherzo Fantastique,” Francesca Brittan explains how Enlightenment-era composers yearned for the “enchantment, wonder, and proximity to nature that [fairies] represented.<sup>37</sup> Thus, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century composers wove fairy music into their operas to channel nostalgia, the supernatural, and perhaps, a vision of nature that no longer exists. Characteristics of fairy music include “stepwise movement,” “small

<sup>37</sup> Francesca Brittan. “On Microscopic Hearing: Fairy Magic, Natural Science, and the Scherzo Fantastique.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 3 (2011): 531, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2011.64.3.527>.

leaps,” melodic figuration that “rarely encompasses a range of more than a fifth,” and frequent sequences.<sup>38</sup>

This leitmotif appears for the first time in the Loge monologue when he sings “Den selgen Göttern wie gehts?” Here, an oboe plays the Freia melody, suggesting the sorcery that controls the gods’ rapid aging.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, shimmering tremolo accompaniment in the strings contributes to a sense of excitement and uneasiness, which Sabor explains suggests the dark magic controlling the gods’ aging.<sup>40</sup> The violas take over this leitmotif when Loge sings “Wie bang und bleich / verblüht ihr so bald,” reflecting the descent into a dream world.

This trance does not last for long, however. Loge awakens to his surroundings, finally noticing his ailing comrades. The music distorts from fairy music to something more sinister with the help of sequences, particularly on the line “Euch erlischt der Wangen Licht.” The beginning of the leitmotif in B-minor materializes as Loge urges his friends to action.

After Loge sings “ob Wotans grämlichen Grau / das schier zum Greisen ihn schafft?” the clarinets play a diminished fifth instead of a perfect fourth in anticipation of a descending syncopated figure. This harsh dissonance suggests a kind of unraveling: the gods must understand that Freia may never return to her orchard and have an opportunity to restore the world’s natural balance.

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<sup>38</sup> Janice Dickensheets. “The Topical Vocabulary of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal Of Musicological Research* 31, no. 2-3 (2012): 122.

<sup>39</sup> For many 19<sup>th</sup> century composers, the oboe frequently symbolized mystery or the “exotic”. In Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, the oboe introduces the leitmotif associated with Isolde’s magic in the opening measures.

<sup>40</sup> Sabor, 89.





cannot avoid.<sup>42</sup>

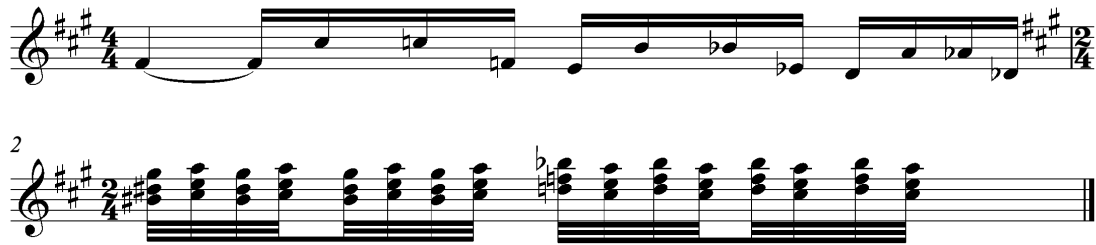


Figure 7: The “Loge” leitmotif

The Grief leitmotif also appears for the first time in this scene, when Fricka sings “Wehe, wehe!” (Figure 8). The leitmotif only consists of two notes, a descending semitone from B-flat to A. Here, Fricka recognizes that Wotan’s selfish desire to build Valhalla is responsible for the gods’ downfall. When she sings this leitmotif, the audience is not aware of the reason behind her sorrow. As we shall see in Erda’s monologue, this leitmotif appears a second time to a similar effect.



Figure 8: The “Grief” leitmotif

### *Production Analysis*

Otto Schenk’s 1987 production at the Metropolitan Opera embodies powerful realism, one of the qualities identified by Rehding in apocalyptic literature. The only detail in this scene worthy of ecocritical analysis is Loge’s burnt appearance, which

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<sup>42</sup> Dickensheets, 122.

suggests that his body endured physical harm from fire. It is unclear how he received these burns, but an ecocritical staging may suggest he received them via a house fire or a wildfire. However, Loge's power play overshadows aspects of the production that could potentially reveal an immediate environmental crisis. To begin with, Loge's gestures and emotional expression suggests that he knows what ails the gods, but enjoys their pain anyway. Despite addressing a weakened Fricka with supposed respect, as he is careful not to touch her, he has no intention of helping her up to her feet. Later, Loge is more explicit in his disrespect, rubbing Froh's head like he would a dog. Moreover, Loge's sound even comes across as self-righteous as he sings noticeably out of tempo with the orchestra.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1980 Patrice Chéreau production in Bayreuth, Germany, Loge's monologue evokes Rehding's "sublime terror" through his ear-splitting musicality and sadism. Unlike Schenk's version of the character, Loge sings in a clipped recitative style throughout most of the scene. For instance, Loge's exclamation of "Heia, hei!" is so speech-like that it is practically devoid of pitch. Additionally, he nearly yells when he sings "auf euer Leben legten sie's an." His sound is nearly painful to listen to.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, Loge legitimately enjoys tormenting the other gods. For instance, he infuriates Wotan when he sings "Was sinnt nun Wotan so / wild?" then slyly dodges Wotan's grasp. He smirks, realizing that Wotan is too weak to attack him on "Den selgen Göttern wie gehts?" The weak gods form a human caravan by holding onto each

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<sup>43</sup> *Das Rheingold*, directed by Otto Schenk (1990; Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 2002), DVD.

<sup>44</sup> *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, directed by Patrice Chéreau (1980; Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 2005), DVD.

other's hands in an attempt to protect themselves from Loge. Loge tries to break up this caravan multiple times to no avail, since the gods reunite each time. Finally, Loge changes his strategy and joins the caravan, grabbing Wotan's hand. On his last word of the monologue—"Stamm"—Loge lets go of Wotan's hand and all the gods fall in unison.

Environmental crises serve as catalysts for corrupt and powerful individuals—like Loge—to make covert moves in order to manipulate their subordinates. If this scene took place in a more naturalistic setting rather than in front of a Neoclassical backdrop, perhaps it could be interpreted from an ecocritical perspective.

The 2010 Robert Lepage production at the Metropolitan Opera is the most ecocritical of the three, since Loge's divine authority is expressed through his manipulation of fire. The fire, concentrated in his hands, serves as his communicative tool. In one moment, Loge regards his hands as healing agents. He hovers his hands over Fricka in an attempt to alleviate her pain, suggesting he is just as capable of healing as he is of harming.

Furthermore, Loge's hands also light up in response to his golden-apples epiphany. He uses them to illuminate his face, inviting the audience to share his exciting revelation. Then, when he divulges that the golden apples' decay will have no effect on him, he blows out his fiery hands. This gesture communicates that he no longer seeks to share his fire with the other characters and the audience.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Das Rheingold*, directed by Robert Lepage (2012; Berlin: Deutsche Grammophone, 2012), DVD.

### *Ecocritical Staging*

The universe Loge inhabits is akin to drought-stricken and wildfire-ravaged California, where there are important rules in place restricting the use of fire, particularly in forested areas and campgrounds. In light of my interpretation of apocalyptic literature, my staging communicates political relevance because it mirrors environmental problems and policies that face California in the age of climate change. More importantly, these problems serve as catalysts for eschatological realizations.

Loge's scene mirrors some of the issues plaguing California's fruit tree industry. The text of this scene centers the golden apples, and perhaps indirectly, the trees that they grow from. Freia's guardianship of the golden apples parallels the labor of primarily Latinx farm workers in agriculture. Both systems—the mythical golden apple orchard and California agribusiness—rely on exploitation.

Like the gods and their reliance on golden apples, American consumers cannot manage without cheap produce. In turn, agribusiness corporations meet this demand by underpaying workers and utilizing pesticides in production, which often leaches into nearby water sources.<sup>46</sup> The fruit in grocery stores originates from California fields where “crews of workers climb the trees with ladders, cut each piece of fruit by hand and carry it in 80-pound sacks to collection bins.”<sup>47</sup> These farm workers are forced to work in back-breaking positions for 13-hour days, are given few water breaks

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<sup>46</sup> Rory Carroll, “Fruits of labor: sunny California is no paradise for farm workers,” *The Guardian*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/15/california-farms-pick-your-own-fruit-vegetables-working-conditions-jobs>.

<sup>47</sup> Valerie Hamilton, “California’s undocumented workers help the economy grow - but may pay the cost,” *Public Radio International*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-03-06/californias-undocumented-workers-help-grow-economy-theres-cost>.

(sometimes in 100 degree Fahrenheit heat), and endure chemical exposure and low wages. Similarly, the gods and giants both exploit Freia's youth-giving qualities through her guardianship and possible cultivation of the golden apples.

My ecocritical twist on Loge's relationship with fire is assigning him the role of an arsonist. In the western United States, arson, combined with dry conditions, is a recipe for environmental disaster. Arsonists set fires for emotional reasons like excitement and revenge.<sup>48</sup> In this manner, Loge flicks his pocket lighter on and off in order to instill fear in others. In response, the gods huddle together opposite Loge, leaning on each other in this moment of vulnerability. Loge's actions demonstrate that setting both his friends and the forest alight is not one of his concerns because he knows that he can escape (Figure 9).

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<sup>48</sup> "Fire Prevention: Common Causes of Wildfires in Idaho," *Idaho Firewise, Inc.*, accessed November 24, 2019, <http://idahofirewise.org/fire-prevention/common-causes-of-wildfires/>.



Figure 9. Loge scene illustration

My staging blends Lepage's use of fire with Chéreau's human caravan. Wotan, Fricka, Donner, and Froh hold hands on the right side of the stage, whereas Loge stands to their left. I thought that the gods' assembly into this formation is particularly effective in creating a partition between a corrupt Loge and the good gods. Loge uses the lighter not only to illustrate his points, but to intimidate and provoke his comrades. The stage is dim, but light emanating from Loge's flame illuminates emotions—both malicious and gleeful—that surface on his face. He breaks the caravan with his lighter rather than with his hands, and the gods gasp in anticipation of searing pain.

Loge's overall appearance in my production opposes that in the Chéreau, Schenk, and Lepage productions. While the other characters in the production have utilitarian clothing (jeans, t-shirts, and athletic wear), Loge is handsome in a clean, pressed suit. What is more, his shaved head and face also appear unsettlingly polished, like a businessman who spends little time facing his environment. Wotan, on the other hand, wears rugged and functional dress (Figure 10).

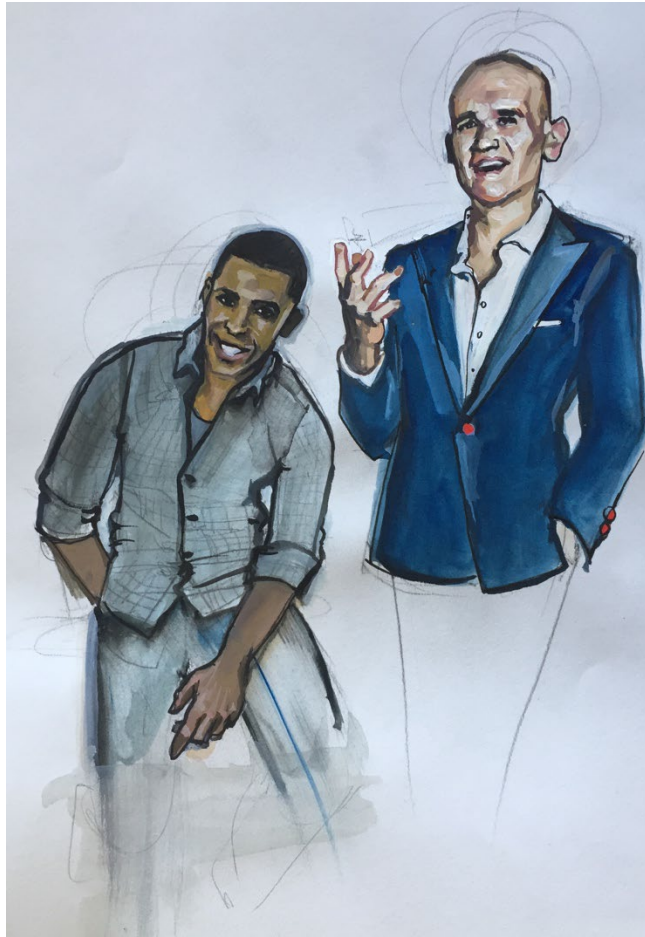


Figure 10. Loge and Wotan costume illustration

Tenor Michael Fabiano is a good fit for Loge. Fabiano is known for more romantic roles, so in playing a villain, he contributes a heightened sense of interest and tension. Fabiano's beautiful tone feigns trustworthiness, but the audience does not quite recognize his motives until he explicitly makes menacing comments. Additionally, Fabiano's Loge inspires unsettling feelings in the audience. Fabiano's characterization also illuminates the implications of white privilege and hegemony in the environmental apocalypse; the scene involves an interplay primarily between Fabiano, who is white, and bass-baritone Donovan Singletary, who plays Wotan and is Black. Since Loge

functions as a white man in my production, he is not held accountable for his actions in the same way that Wotan is. In the context of apocalypse, Loge's privilege is his half-human status. Although he is a mortal, he has a good chance of outliving his comrades, whose bodies quickly deteriorate. His privilege also allows him to evade responsibility for nearly harming the other gods and for setting the whole forest on fire. In this scene, the societal structure that upholds Loge's privilege is the environmental decay that causes the gods' weakness. Thus, Wotan and the others cannot hold Loge accountable for his arsonist violence because they are physically and socially weak. In this way, my conception of the Loge scene embodies political relevance by fusing environmental hazards and elements of environmental racism and capitalist exploitation of a non-white agricultural labor force.



## Scene IV: Erda's Prophecy

ERDA  
Wie alles war, weiss ich;  
wie alles wird,  
wie alles sein wird  
seh ich auch:  
der ew'gen Welt  
Ur-Wala,  
Erda mahnt deiner Mut.  
Drei der Töchter,  
ur-erschaffne,  
gebar mein Schoss:  
was ich sehe,  
sagen dir nächtlich die  
Nornen.  
Doch höchste Gefahrt  
Führt mich heut  
selbst zu dir her.  
*Höre! Höre! Höre!*  
Alles was ist, endet.  
Ein *düster* Tag  
dämmert den Göttern:  
dir rat ich, meide den Ring!

WOTAN  
*Geheimnis*-hehr  
hallt mir dein Wort:  
weile, dass meh rich wisse!

ERDA  
Ich warnte dich –  
du weisst genug:  
sin in Sorg und Furcht!

ERDA  
How all things were, know I;  
how all things are,  
how all things shall be,  
I foresee.  
The endless world's  
Ur-Wala,  
Erda, bids you beware.  
Daughters three  
Created Erda,  
before time was.  
What my eyes see,  
Nightly you learn from the Norns'  
lips.  
But danger most dire  
drives me here  
goddess to god.  
Hear me! Hear me! Hear me!  
All that exists endeth.  
A day of doom  
Seeks the immortals.  
Be counselled, flee from the Ring!

WOTAN  
Elusive lore  
flows from your lips.  
Wait! Let me hear more wisdom.

ERDA  
I've warned you now.  
You know enough.  
Weigh and dread my words!  
[she disappears] <sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sabor, 160-162.

### *Background*

In the middle of Scene IV, Wotan agrees to give up the Tarnhelm—the magic gold helmet Alberich forced his brother, Mime to make—in order to buy Freia’s freedom from the giants. The Tarnhelm, among many other pieces of gold, happens to hide Freia from view. However, there is a gap in the pile of gold covering Freia, which the giants believe can be filled by the ring. Wotan refuses to give up the ring out of hubris, and the giants say the deal is off. Suddenly, a female figure emerges from beneath the Earth. She is Erda, the earth goddess, and tells Wotan that if he does not give up the ring, the gods will perish and the world as he knows it will cease to exist.

### *Textual Analysis*

Erda’s prophecy is inherently political because it involves not just the fate of Wotan as an individual, but that of his entire civilization. Her reasoning for confronting Wotan is straightforward: Wotan’s possession the ring—despite its curse—is instrumental in the demise of his world. However, it is important to note that Erda does not guarantee the existence of the world even if Wotan relinquishes the ring.<sup>50</sup> Rather, similar to how politics function in the real world, as a wiser and more powerful figure, Erda seeks to hold Wotan responsible for his assaults upon nature. One such assault is cutting a branch off of the World Ash Tree and fashioning it into a spear, onto which he carved the laws of his land.<sup>51</sup> Another is the decision to seize the ring from Alberich, despite knowing that it was cursed.

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<sup>50</sup> Sabor, 163.

<sup>51</sup> Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 79,

Erda elucidates the severity of her message by differentiating the innocence of the past, the fear in the present, and the uncertainty of the future. When Wotan asks Erda to reveal her identity, she simply replies with “Wie alles war, weiss ich” or “How all things were, I know.” In describing the past, Erda provides the joy-filled details of her pregnancy with her three daughters, the Norns: “Drei der Töchter, / ur-erschaffne, / gebar mein Schoss.” The past was simple and uncorrupted before Wotan disrupted the world’s balance.

Erda’s jubilation quickly fades as she roots herself in the present moment when she sings “wie alles wird,” replacing the word “war”—was—with “wird”—is. This distinction between past and present sets her up to explain her reason for confronting Wotan in the first place. She explains that “Doch höchste Gefaht / Führt mich heut” or “But danger most dire / drives me here.” This danger is the “ruin, defeat / and ill fortune” that live in the ring. Erda does not aim for subtlety here.

What is arguably Erda’s most powerful line in her aria—“Alles was ist, endet”—confirms that there will be no future should Wotan hold onto the ring. She repeats the word “Höre”—“hear me”—three times, with each iteration louder than the last. Despite the clarity of Erda’s message, Wotan has difficulty comprehending her: He pleads for her to stay and share more information with him. In response, Erda commands Wotan to “weigh and dread [her] words.” Wotan’s eschatological realization is this: now a mortal, he essentially risks dying by his own hand.

### *Musical Analysis*

The Erda scene contains musical elements foreshadowing the looming environmental apocalypse with the help of three leitmotifs, representing “Nibelungen Hate,” “Grief,” and Erda herself. In terms of topic theory, Erda’s aria can be understood as an example of “ombra”, which represents the supernatural in opera and oratorio.<sup>52</sup> Ombra, derived from the word “ombers,” “implies a sense of shadowiness and approaching fear.”<sup>53</sup> This aria is slow and march-like, making use of dotted rhythms and pedal tones, contributing to a mysterious atmosphere.<sup>54</sup> Erda’s mezzo-soprano timbre, alongside the slow tempo, reveals the heavy implications of her message.

The motif representing Erda is an ascending motion with the same agitated, syncopated rhythms that characterize this topic (Figure 9). Erda’s motif is a rising arpeggiated triad in C-sharp minor, which signifies her ascent from the earth in order to confront Wotan.<sup>55</sup> An ascending scale in the brass and woodwinds announce her entrance.<sup>56</sup> When Erda reiterates this motif in the same key on “Wie alles *war*, weiss ich,” the instrumentation nearly doubles, representing the weight of her words. The clarinets take over this motif—this time in E-minor—a third time when it surfaces after Erda’s threefold “Höre!” As Erda sings “Alles was ist, endet,” the clarinets pass this motif to the strings, who reiterate it in C-sharp minor. The last time this motif appears, Erda sings “Ich warnte dich,” or “I’ve warned you now.” The C-sharp minor key persists through the end of the aria. This key, which represents primal knowledge and

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<sup>52</sup> Danuta Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 279.

<sup>53</sup> Mirka, 279.

<sup>54</sup> Mirka, 283.

<sup>55</sup> Sabor, 135.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



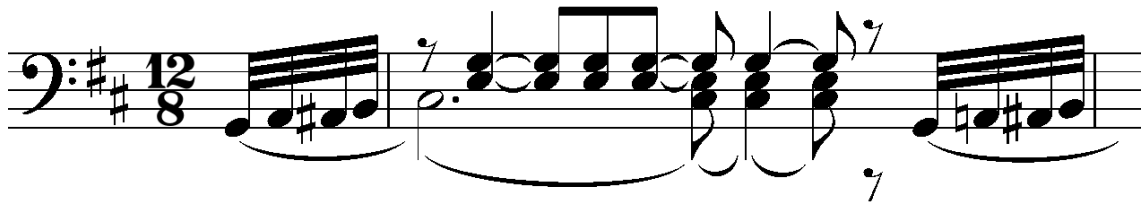


Figure 12. The “Nibelungen Hate” leitmotif

The Grief motif (Figure 8) is audible when Erda commands Wotan to hear her words. The motif is only a descending semitone from B-flat to A. While Sabor notes that this motif embodies anguish and despair in his analysis of the Erda scene, he goes a step further by explaining that “it comments on the folly of man, on the agony of life.”<sup>60</sup> Since Erda verbally prophesizes the gods’ demise, this leitmotif affirms that it is too late for salvation.

### *Production Analysis*

Schenk’s version of this scene is eerie. Fog hovers in the background, while Erda emerges from a rift in the ground, perhaps a dried-up river. The landscape is barren and cold, and Erda is as grey and ashen as the Earth she emerges from. Her face is the only one on stage that is illuminated by a low light. This scene is dominated by the Earth goddess: Freia and the giants are on audience right, but stand in shadow, while Wotan stands statue-like and stoic on audience left. Schenk’s staging provides an immersive experience for the audience—they cannot escape these hellish conditions. However, this production lacks a political angle, as it does not urge the audience to reflect on issues plaguing their own society.

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<sup>60</sup> Sabor, 18.

The apocalyptic circumstances of Chéreau's production predetermine an intimate connection between Erda and Wotan. A maternal, ghostlike Erda circles around Wotan while she shares her prophecy. Wotan stands completely still—perhaps out of fear—and refuses to make eye contact with the goddess. Nevertheless, Erda rests her head on Wotan's shoulder on "Alles was ist, endet." This gesture is almost comforting, like a mother consoling a frightened child. The two finally lock eyes when Erda sings "dir rat ich, meide den Ring!" In this moment, Wotan can no longer cower from Erda. By the time Wotan grabs the goddess' cloak in the attempt acquire more information, she is already gone. In short, Wotan realizes his need for interdependence with Erda in order to survive this crisis.

Urgency is a hallmark of Robert Lepage's production. The set works to convey this sentiment, featuring movable panels that lift to reveal an unshakeable Erda. Several feet separate Wotan and Erda and unlike the Chéreau production, the two never physically touch. In fact, for most of the aria, Erda sings straight into the audience rather than to Wotan. This partition positions Wotan and the audience as naïve equals, since they both hear her message at the same time. She finally meets Wotan's eyes when she sings "Doch höchste Gefahr," spelling out terrible danger. Here, Wotan and the audience are both recipients of this frightening prophecy. Erda's musicality even conveys this urgency, as she ends her penultimate phrase on a fortissimo "Ring!" Erda finally descends into the earth, leaving the god to grapple with his mortality.

### *Ecocritical Staging*

In my proposed staging of *Das Rheingold*, water is the contested resource, while the ring serves as a physical symbol of the water's power. In this universe, Wotan is the

CEO of a large bottled water company called The Ring Water Co., and receives a physical gold ring as a fringe benefit of the job. From his point of view, the ring and the bottled water company are necessary evils. Through this framing, I can show that the ring—as a physical object and larger corporate entity— symbolizes capitalism and corporate greed at the expense of the environment. More importantly, I can emphasize drought and water pollution without changing the libretto, drawing inspiration from the Nestlé water scandal and Flint water crisis.<sup>61</sup>

My rendering of the Erda scene illustrates what transpires when a corporation sets its sights on an economically disadvantaged area, reaps the benefits, and leaves it environmentally damaged. Here, I draw inspiration from Flint, where the State of Michigan Department of Treasury declared a financial emergency in 2011.<sup>62</sup> The Ring Water Co. functions as a substitute for Nestlé, inserting itself in a river community (like Flint), promising jobs and new infrastructure while exploiting tax breaks and clean river water.<sup>63</sup>

However, the characters cannot access this pristine water. Like Flint residents—whose water the EPA indicated had dangerous levels of lead— the people in Wotan’s universe also have poisoned water running from their taps.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the individuals in this universe have to rely on bottled water provided by The Ring Water Co.

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<sup>61</sup> Scott Neuman, “Nestlé Offered Permit To Continue Taking Water From California Watershed,” *National Public Radio*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/28/624156334/nestl-offered-permit-to-continue-taking-water-from-california-stream>.

<sup>62</sup> “Flint Water Crisis Fast Facts,” *CNN* online, July 2, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/04/us/flint-water-crisis-fast-facts/index.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Caroline Winter, “Nestlé Makes Billions Bottling Water It Pays Nearly Nothing For,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-09-21/nestl-makes-billions-bottling-water-it-pays-nearly-nothing-for>.

<sup>64</sup> “Flint Water Crisis Fast Facts.”



When Erda gives her prophecy, the river is dry and barren because The Ring Water Co. depleted it (Figure 13). I based this plot point on a 2003 court case involving Nestlé, in which a judge noted that the company’s water extraction depleted nearby streams and wetlands.<sup>65</sup> Both characters wear utilitarian clothing: Erda in a dirt-smeared white t-shirt (Figure 14) and Wotan in a dirty button-up and pants. Wotan’s comrades stand out of focus in the background. Boxed water bottles represent the omnipresence of capitalist greed.

Computerization and high-tech props detract from the environmental apocalyptic message, so my production will consequently be bare bones. The greyscale utilized in the Schenk and Chéreau productions is inconsistent with the dusty, drought-stricken, and hazy world in which my production takes place. In accordance with this barren landscape, Erda will emerge from a dry riverbed gripping Wotan.



Figure 13. Erda scene illustration

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<sup>65</sup> “Nestlé Makes Billions Bottling Water It Pays Nearly Nothing For.”



Figure 14. Erda costume illustration

There are two primary elements that I would carry out in this production: Chéreau's pianissimo "Ring" and Schenk's character blocking. Erda's dynamic contrast in Chéreau's production illustrates the care the Earth goddess has for Wotan, despite his selfishness. Like Schenk, I think that Erda and Wotan should interact with each other with both their bodies and their words. Wotan freezes in fear at Erda's touch, his emotional state palpable to the audience as well.

My production highlights social inequality and environmental justice principles. First, I want to highlight the fact that in the US, the responsibility for environmental crises often falls on young people, particularly millennials and Gen Z. The Chéreau, Schenk, and Lepage productions depict Erda as a middle-aged woman. Erda must be played by a younger singer, someone who can serve as an intermediary between the

past, present, and future: someone older and wiser than Wotan, but not too old to misunderstand his distress. For this reason, millennial mezzo-soprano J’Nai Bridges will play Erda.

Bridges is also a Black singer, so the dialogue between Erda and Wotan can develop the elements of environmental racism even further. The fact that Bridges and Singletary are both Black singers is significant, since most residents in regions with water pollution are people of color.<sup>66</sup> While Loge may emerge from the apocalypse unscathed, Wotan will suffer the most from the end of nature, not only because of his wrongs, but because of his race.

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<sup>66</sup> Bryce Covert, “Race Best Predicts Whether You Live Near Pollution,” *The Nation*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/race-best-predicts-whether-you-live-near-pollution/>.

## Conclusion

In both his prose writings and operas, Wagner expressed anxieties about environmental degradation at the hands of humans. Indeed, environmental apocalypse is a constant preoccupation in *Das Rheingold* because there is a looming threat of destruction. This is not only apparent in the Loge and Erda monologues that I analyzed, but also in other scenes such as the Rhinemaidens' warning about the loss of their gold. Problematically, however, Wagner's ideas about nature and environmental decline were rooted in decidedly unscientific explanations. On the one hand, he romanticized past worlds by exploring mythologies and manufacturing new ones. On the other, he employed racially charged scapegoating in his operatic narratives of environmental apocalypse. Wagner's nature ethic—rooted in German nationalism—was inherently anti-Semitic. He believed that Jews had no homeland—his anti-Semitic take on the Jewish diaspora—and were therefore an inferior people. In his 1850 essay “Das Judentum in der Musik,” Wagner described Jews as aliens in their respective societies.<sup>67</sup> Wagner's anti-Semitic views and his music's association with Nazism and Neo-Nazism presents an enduring ethical dilemma for anyone studying and performing his music.<sup>68</sup>

Future analyses could consider the relationship between environmental apocalypse, antisemitism, and capitalism in *Das Rheingold*, particularly in the Rhinemaidens' warning about the ring's destructive power in Scene I. Berthold Hoeckner argues that property theft, through Alberich's haul of the Rhinegold, is the

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<sup>67</sup> Wagner, 85.

<sup>68</sup> Wagner was reportedly Hitler's favorite composer. James Bennett II and Max Fine, “Cancel Culture: How We Deal with Wagner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *WQXR*, last modified May 22, 2019, <https://www.wqxr.org/story/cancel-culture-how-we-deal-wagner-21st-century/>.

source of evil in the entire *Ring* cycle.<sup>69</sup> Citing Wagner’s “Know Thyself” essay, Hoeckner argues that the opera echoes sentiments of nineteenth-century anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, blaming Jews for a corrupt modern economy “controlled by big capital.”<sup>70</sup> Capitalism functions on the basis of environmental exploitation and in Wagner’s ideology, seemingly Jewish characters are blamed for that exploitation. Additionally, one could explore Alberich as a symbol of capitalism in Scene 3, when he forces his brother, Mime, to create a magic helmet from the gold. In this scene, a priceless natural resource, the Rhinegold, is mined and commodified into material possessions. Other analyses could draw connections between apocalypse and the images of organicism in Wagner’s nationalism to explore *who* Wagner believed was responsible for nature’s end.

For now, my thesis demonstrates how the Loge and Erda scenes from *Das Rheingold* reflect environmental apocalypse and can be likened to environmental crises of the present. As a classical singer with opera experience, I know that this art form is more than just a vessel for esoteric stories: it can also be used to illuminate modern-day concerns. My generation feels the weight of climate change acutely, and I believe opera can be an effective vehicle to express those fears. I would like audience members and readers to recognize *Das Rheingold* in an ecologically, and politically relevant light. The libretto is flexible enough to allow for new ecocritical interpretations and the opera’s setting—a mythological world adjacent to the Rhine—can likewise be reimagined by the stage director.

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<sup>69</sup> Hoeckner, 166.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

My ecocritical vision of *Das Rheingold* suggests that opera has the ability to express modern concerns about environmental apocalypse. The loss of crucial resources—in the form of the golden apples and the ring—can be likened to the threat of mass extinction and biodiversity loss on Earth. In my production, I consider land and water as points of contention. My casting choices illuminate how both racial and class inequalities are bound up with the environmental crisis. My production communicates fear for the end of nature, but also the need for urgent action and interdependence as a means of survival.

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