

Preface

I first worked systematically through Wagner's *Ring* cycle between finishing my final exams in Physics and Chemistry at University College London and awaiting the results. I borrowed the vocal scores from the Senate House Library and the vinyl recording of Karl Böhm (Bayreuth 1967) from my good friend Adrian Bury. I still remember vividly those weeks of being lost in the world of the *Ring* or, to be more precise, being lost for successive periods of half an hour, having to return to anxiety about degree results as I changed the record.

Over the next four years when I was working on a PhD in theoretical Physics I became more and more obsessed with this artwork and became an “evangelist” for the *Ring* cycle, which had so captivated me. I invited individual friends from the Department of Physics and Astronomy to my home to experience edited highlights from the *Ring* but I am unsure how many lasting converts I won. It was fitting that when I left the department to pursue the study of theology (with the intention of becoming a minister in the Church of England) I received the kind gift of Karl Böhm's *Die Walküre* recording.

The *Ring* has been part of my life ever since, but when my teaching and research interests turned to Wagner and Christian theology I was drawn first to the work that appears most clearly to address theological issues, Wagner's final stage work, *Parsifal*. My 2013 book was a theological appreciation of *Parsifal* in the light of the composer's intellectual development; I then decided to do the same sort of thing for the *Ring*. Moving from *Parsifal* back to the *Ring* does involve a change in perspective; e.g., being an earlier work means that the late theoretical essays such as *Religion and Art* (1880) are not so central and Hegel rather than Schopenhauer is the dominating philosopher in the artwork. Further, we appear to be in a somewhat different world—the tough world of the *Ring*, in many ways rather “Old Testament” in its outlook, contrasts with the atmosphere of compassion (“Mitleid”) of *Parsifal*. Whether there is such a radical difference will be considered in the pages that follow and it may be that there are more continuities throughout the composer's creative years than has generally been acknowledged.

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My work will not only consider the theological and ethical issues presented in the *Ring* cycle but also how Wagner presents them, looking at his theological method. Unearthing this will involve delving into his theoretical writings and whilst his gifts are most certainly in composing poetry and music and not in essay prose, the essays are nevertheless fundamental in understanding his artistic and theological project.

My work on the theology of the *Ring* cycle comes in two volumes. Just as an individual opera of the *Ring* can be appreciated on its own, so I have written each volume such that it is a complete entity (with its own bibliography and indices); but just as one gets a greater appreciation of an individual opera of the *Ring* in the light of the whole cycle, one will gain most benefit by reading both my volumes. This first volume studies the genesis and development of the *Ring* cycle together with Wagner's appropriation of sources (Germanic and Norse), artists, philosophers, and theologians. How Wagner appropriates his sources and the ideas of those who have gone before him (together with his contemporaries) is of general interest to the study of the *Ring* and will prove to be particularly important when we come to discern his theological interests. The second volume will then look at the various theological and ethical themes of the *Ring*, such as nature, power and love, law and sexual ethics, death and immortality, freedom and necessity, sin, incarnation, and redemption, together with questions of authority, gender, and human psychology. These themes will be prefaced by a chapter on Wagner's sketches *Jesus of Nazareth*, which, I claim, unlocks many theological secrets of the *Ring*, and a chapter on the question of "God" and the "Gods."