



Weiss, M and Urbanec, M 2021 Opera as Comics: Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* in Craig P. Russell's Graphic Adaptation. *Open Library of Humanities*, 7(2): 7, pp. 1–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.4680>



Open Library of Humanities

Opera as Comics: Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* in Craig P. Russell's Graphic Adaptation

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The article explores the capacity of the comics medium to represent a complex opera cycle in a graphic narrative. It analyses specific features of transmedial transmission between opera and comics through the example of the most recent graphic adaptation of Richard Wagner's dramatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung* by P. Craig Russell, published by Dark Horse Comics (2000–2001). The adaptation, which fuses the disparate worlds of opera, comics, and fantasy culture, is stripped of Wagner's controversial ideology. Russell interprets the *Ring Cycle* as an essential source of inspiration for American comics, thereby making this complex magnum opus attractive and accessible to wider audiences. His chief aim, however, is to reproduce an operatic effect by way of graphic mythic grandiosity. The study explores the visual aspects of the adaptation, addressing the potential of the comics medium to capture Wagner's original vision. With a focus on illustration style and character depiction, this article discusses Russell's imagery, which combines the classic illustrations of Arthur Rackham and Carl Emil Doepler, images from American popular culture, and Alan Lee's illustrations of Tolkien's series *The Lord of the Rings*. This article further analyses the methods of transmission of sounds into the silent medium, including both linguistic and visual means of expressing the intensity and quality of sound. Special attention is paid to the meaning and visual form of the Wagnerian leitmotiv as well as the use of colouring in relation to timing.



Since the early stages of comics development, there has been a close link between the graphic medium and adaptation, especially of classics, ranging from Homer and Shakespeare to Alexander Dumas. The visual appeal of mythology and medieval legends, in conjunction with the accessibility of the comics medium to a wide public, was not lost on early comics artists and publishers. One of the first popular series, *Classics Comics* (known as *Classics Illustrated* from 1946), was established by Albert Lewis Kanter in 1941. Kanter, aware of the thriving genre of superhero comics, was determined to provide an alternative to popular entertainment and focused primarily on the fidelity of the textual aspect of his adaptations: the writing credit was given to the authors of the original works, with the style of his comic books following realistic art with regular panel arrangement (Versaci, 2007: 187). The chief aim of the series was to kindle interest in the classics, not to create an artistic product on its own, as Kanter notes in the inside front cover of *The Three Musketeers*: ‘It is not our intent to replace the old established classics with these editions of the “CLASSIC COMICS LIBRARY”, but rather we aim to create an active interest in those great masterpieces and to instill a desire to read the original text’ (1941: n.pag.). Such adaptations were therefore conceived, as well as perceived, as secondary and derivative, and made no claim to independence or originality.

Since the late 1980s, the perceived status of both comics and adaptations has significantly shifted, stemming from the current critical emphasis on interdisciplinarity.¹ The medium of comics has become a critically respected art form that is suitable for presenting complex social issues, with its theoretical background drawing predominantly on Umberto Eco’s study ‘The Myth of Superman’ (1962), Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996), or Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1993). Similarly, adaptation has been recognized as a valuable tool for not only for providing a variation on the original, but also one that is able to create new meanings by means of its setting or costumes (Geraghty, 2008: 4), giving rise to adaptation and reception theories.² In the last two decades, both artistic practices have thus gained popularity in scholarly circles and developed into established and flourishing research fields with specialized journals devoted to their respective areas, such as *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *Adaptation*, and the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, or *The Comics Grid*, *ImageText*, *iNKS*, *International Journal of Comic Art*, and the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*.

¹ See, for example, Hansen (2004) and Frodeman, et al. (2017).

² See, for example, Hardwick (2003), Stam and Raengo (2004), and Hutcheon (2006).

Despite the strong connection between comics and adaptation, comic book adaptations have not received as much critical attention as film adaptations.³ This is perhaps caused by the fact that the majority of comics adaptations have generally received less publicity than films, as Pointer and Boschenhoff (2010: 87) suggest. Similar trends can be observed in opera adaptations. Adaptations of opera in the forms of a theatrical performance or film are not uncommon and have received some, though limited, critical attention (see, e.g., Citron, 2010 and Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, 2017), yet the transmission of a musical form into the silent medium of comics is still a rare and intricate enterprise, both in the sense of making and reception.

Despite their seeming disparity, both comics and operas are hybrid forms, encompassing the textual and the visual, with opera further encompassing the audio aspect and performance, relying to a large extent on ‘artifice, exaggeration, and emotion’ (Citron, 2010: 246). Unlike the more prominent film adaptations of opera, the graphic medium provides the reader with a much higher level of clarity by giving the reader unlimited time to ponder the individual scenes, respecting the temporal flow of the opera more than the faster-paced medium of film which is dependent on cuts. The transmedial transmission between the medium of origin, i.e., opera, and the target medium of comics, as well as the specifics of such adaptation, can be demonstrated through analysis of the most recent graphic adaptation of Richard Wagner’s dramatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung* by P. Craig Russell, based on the translation of the libretti by Patrick Mason, with lettering by Galen Showman. The adaptation was originally released monthly by Dark Horse Comics (2000–2001), winning two Eisner Awards in 2001 for Best Finite Series/Limited Series, and Best Artist/Penciller/Inker Team. In 2002, it was collected into a two-volume paperback, and a one-volume hardback in 2014.⁴ The adaptation reflects both the structure and historicity of the original. There are no major omissions or compressions and the storyline is kept intact. When it comes to the language style, the translation retains the poetic and dramatic nature of the original, and remains accessible without attempting to sound modern or vernacular. This correspondence is further supported by the illustrations that, to a large extent, follow the established visual illustrations of Wagner’s characters, especially those by Carl Emil Doepler and Arthur Rackham, and are complemented by bright colouring, which establishes a reference to the early American superhero comics.

³ The few instances where comics adaptations of literary works have been addressed include Pointer and Boschenhoff (2010) and Boschenhoff (2013); Tabachnick and Saltzman (2015); and Mitaine et al. (2018). Leitch (2017: 192–201) and Hutcheon (2006: 88) also briefly discuss the medium.

⁴ The colouring was provided by Lovern Kindzierski, who was repeatedly nominated as Best Colourist for Eisner and Harvey Awards. Kindzierski won a Wizard Fan Award in 1993 and 1994, as well as a Comic Buyer’s Fan Award in 1998. In 2017, he was awarded the Canadian Comic Book Hall of Fame – Lifetime Achievement Award.

Comics have become, with film, one of the major art-forms engaging audiences with history and the representation of the ancient world and/or classical mythology.⁵ More importantly, as von Schnurbein maintains, comics as a visual narrative can ‘bring back to life the historical past, speak to the senses, and allow emotional identification’, creating a sense of identity and community (2017: 299). The choice of Wagner’s *Ring* for comics adaptation is therefore not surprising, as the tetralogy is perhaps the most discussed (as well as most often adapted) work in Wagner’s oeuvre. The *Ring* holds a firm place in both European and American culture and its protagonists have established themselves within the popular imagination, including comics, especially with the current interest in medievalism.⁶

The Ring of the Nibelung (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), commonly known as the *Ring Cycle*, was first performed at Wagner’s festival in Bayreuth in 1876 and has since become a subject of intense, often polemical, discussion. The scope and ambitions of the cycle transcended the understanding of opera of that time. Wagner transformed the form into an epic: staging the history of the world and human civilization from the beginning until the death of the gods, featuring universal and timeless issues, namely the loss of innocence, abuse of nature, lust for power, and the worst crime of all: lovelessness that can only lead to destruction. *The Ring of the Nibelung* consists of four dramas which blend the Germanic emphasis on human heroism with the Greek entanglement of the protagonists’ fate with those of the gods. While Wagner admired classical mythology and Greek tragedy, Germanic mythology was his major source of inspiration, mainly because of its human and heroic dimension that also carries the ‘ideal of human form’ (Williamson, 2004: 196). In *The Ring*, Wagner introduced an archaic setting, where the fates of people and the humanized gods are strongly intertwined. By using myth as his base structure, Wagner found a timeless model for an understanding of both world history and everyday life, presenting his revolutionary vision of a ‘political economy of love’ and his ideal of an artist who answers the collective need of his time (von Schnurbein, 2017: 303–4). Wagner did not limit his extensive preparation for his magnum opus to the scrutiny of sagas and folklore – he carefully studied contemporary philosophy and philology, and integrated their major ideas into his fictional mythology.⁷

⁵ See, for example, Gareth Hinds’s *The Odyssey: A Graphic Novel*, 2010; George O’Connor’s book series *Olympians*, 2010–2019; Ryan Kelly and Keiron Gillen’s take on ancient Sparta *Three*, 2013–2014; or more recently, Neil Gaiman’s *Norse Mythology* (adapted by P. Craig Russell), 2020.

⁶ See, for example, Fulton and Holsinger (2007), Bishop (2016), and Gerzic and Norrie (2018).

⁷ *The Ring Cycle* is thus not only a musical-dramatic, but rather a philosophical work, whose interpretation is enhanced by the knowledge of the ideas of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (see Berry, 2006). On the other hand, the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, which is often mentioned in connection with the *Ring*, is greatly overestimated; his influence is more pronounced in Wagner’s latest work, *Parsifal* (Bermbach, 2011: 378).

The complexity of Wagner's *Ring* is further discussed by Foster, who believes that the *Ring Cycle* was meant to serve as a national founding epic (2010: 62), similarly to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The mythic subject matter of the cycle, specifically the fates of gods, demigods, and heroes, is particularly appealing to comics artists, be it in the form of *Classics Illustrated* or superhero comics.⁸

Wagner's *Ring Cycle* has been adapted into the comic form before Russell by Roy Thomas, who, together with the illustrators Gil Kane and Jim Woodring, published a four-issue comics version entitled *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung 1-4* (1989). Their adaptation was a result of Thomas's fascination with Wagner, Thor and Norse mythology in general, which started in 1980, when Thomas began to introduce the *Nibelunglied* and Wagner's *Ring* in *Thor* magazine, issue 294, 'New Asgard for Old' (April 1980), presenting the notion of a cyclic Ragnarok and featuring the dwarf Alberich stealing the gold from the Rheinmaidens.⁹ Designed predominantly for comics readers and Thor fans, Thomas's adaptation of *The Ring* did not receive much critical attention. Moreover, the artists in their adaptation edited and heavily condensed the drama, while not attempting to convey the musical part at all. As Andy Helfer and Kevin Dooley comment in the Foreword to the volume,

We obviously could not show the music. By adapting the operas themselves we would draw attention to that fact. Lost would be each overture, each 'aria'. Attempting to translate the inspiring majesty of 'The Ride of the Valkyries' alone would seem reason enough to abandon the endeavour from the start. (1989: n.pag.)

Instead, they focus on the story itself, highlighting the features that Wagner's operas and comics share, namely the magic, battle, adventure, and romance.

Focusing on the graphic adaptation of opera rather than the story of Wagner's cycle, the present study discusses the most recent adaptation by P. Craig Russell, which includes behind-the-scenes production art, notes on the artist, and the history of the opera itself. Like Thomas, Russell interprets the *Ring Cycle* as an essential source of inspiration of American superhero comics, thereby making the complex work feel familiar to comics lovers and acknowledging *The Ring's* role in American (popular)

⁸ See, for example, the *Journey into Mystery* series by Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, and Jack Kirby (vol. 1, no. 83, 1 August, 1962) featuring Norse gods, especially Thor, as Vikings, or Hercules in Stan Lee's and Jack Kirby's *Journey into Mystery: Special King Size Annual* (no. 124, 30 June, 1965).

⁹ References to Wagner's *Ring* further appear in vol. 19 of *The Mighty Thor* (1980), in issues 294, 'New Asgard for Old!', 295, 'The Price and the Pride', 296, 'From Valhalla and Valkyrie', 297, 'The Sword of Siegfried', 298, 'Dragon's Blood', 299, 'Passions and Potions', and 300, 'Twilight of Gods.' Issues 294-297 were written by Roy Thomas, issues 298-300 by Ralph Machcio and Mark Gruenwald.

culture; though his chief aim is to reproduce – in a graphic form – an operatic effect by way of mythic grandiosity. Drawing on the hybridity of both comics and opera, Hutcheon and Hutcheon's emphasis on the process and creative interpretation of the medium's specificity (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2017), as well as Eisner's (2000) concept of comics as a sequential visual narrative, this article explores the visual aspects of the adaptation and the transmedial methods which Russell used to adapt opera and its effects into graphic novel.¹⁰ The main focus will be on the illustration style, and, more importantly, the methods of transmission of sounds into the silent medium, with special attention paid to the meaning and visual form of the Wagnerian leitmotiv.

Richard Wagner's Reception, Presence, and Impact on American (Popular) Culture

While much has been said about the times, personality and ideology of Richard Wagner, as well as his operas, the exploration of the impact of Wagner's work on the cultural development of both English and German-speaking countries has received significantly less attention and the discussion of Wagner's adaptations into modern literatures is still lacking.¹¹

Wagner's music entered the American cultural scene in the second half of the nineteenth century, predominantly due to the influence of German immigrants, and its impact is still vivid in the twenty-first century. Even though the American acceptance of Wagner was not universal and his political opinions are still disputed in the US, his work has significantly affected the development of American music, poetry and popular culture. Elise Dirk even considers Wagner '[t]he most profound influence on American operatic life', noting that a number of American composers wrote 'Wagnerian' operas, while using an American setting (2005: 197). One of these was Walter Damrosch, a conductor of German origin, who founded the Damrosch Opera Company in 1894 to promote and stage German repertoire.¹² In his opera *The Scarlet Letter* (1896), which was based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's psychological romance, Damrosch introduced Wagnerian elements into the American opera scene, especially Wagner's harmonic

¹⁰ Comic books are understood as serialized narratives, while the term graphic novel is used to denote complete narratives. The term 'graphic novel' was popularized in the 1980s by Will Eisner who used it to denote his book-length collection of graphic short stories *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, 1978. The format became widely popular in the 1990s. Eisner (2006: xvi).

¹¹ The studies concerning literary adaptations focus predominantly on Romanticism or provide a general and necessarily brief overview of writers influenced by Wagner, with the notable exception of DiGaetani (1978). Key publications in the field of reception include, in particular Horowitz (1994), Steinberg (2018) and, most recently, the comprehensive studies by Ross (2020) and Berry and Vaszonyi (2020).

¹² In 1902, he became the conductor of the New York Symphony, becoming famous especially for conducting the premiere of George Gershwin's *American in Paris* (1928). Under his leadership, the New York Symphony merged with the Philharmonic in 1928 to create the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (Ogasapian, 2007: 23–4).

approach to language, orchestral fabric, leitmotifs, as well as his continuous structure (Dirk, 2005: 198).

Wagner's influence on the US culture, however, transcended the musical scene. His concept of modern myth can be traced in the work of Walt Whitman (Ross, 2020: 152–5) and, via the latter's influence, in the poetry and critical essays of Anglo-American modernists. In his essay 'Of Tradition and Individual Talent', Eliot proposes that the historical sense any artist must have lies not only in the perception of the 'pastness of the past', but also – and perhaps more importantly – of 'its presence.' This historical sense, Eliot argues, which encompasses both 'a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional' (2014: 4).¹³

Despite the far-reaching impact on American literature, Wagner's legacy left an even more significant mark on American popular culture. The *Nibelungslied* was first translated into English by William Weber (1814), though the first complete translation came out as late as 1848 by Jonathan Birch, followed by William Lettsom's version from 1850.¹⁴ The first adaptation for children appeared in 1848 under the title *The Heroic Life and Exploits of Siegfried the Dragon Slayer: An Old German Story*. While omitting the author's name, the book included eight illustrations by one of Germany's leading illustrators, Wilhelm Kaulbach (Blamires, 2009: 356). As the legends were already part of folk tradition, the enchantment and fascination with the character of Siegfried opened the way to Wagner's reception in American popular imagination, especially the (superhero) comics.

The United States took a leading role in two specific media forms: the motion picture and comics.¹⁵ It is therefore not surprising that, while Adorno sees Wagner's work as the major inspiration for 'the birth of film' (1981: 107), Wagnerian motifs, if not Wagner's characters or whole works, have also entered the visual medium of comics, and, later, music videos. As Joachim Heinzle (2016) observes, Madonna's iconic Paul Gaultier bra, worn in the music video 'Express Yourself' (1989), evokes Carl Emil Doepler's illustrations of Valkyries. Wagner's opera characters, predominantly the Valkyries, were also transformed into superheroes. In the American fantasy TV series

¹³ Wagner's concept of modern myth, as well as his work with historical sources, thus opened the door to the modernist approach to mythology, tradition, and usable past, be it the poetry of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, or the novel *The Natural* (1952) by the Jewish American novelist and short story writer Bernard Malamud.

¹⁴ Four more translations came much later in the century, namely by Auber Forestier (1877, prose), A. G. Foster-Barham (1887, verse, reprinted 1891, 1893), Marguerite Armour (1897, prose, reprinted in Everyman's Library, 1908) and Alice Horton (1898, verse). See Sandbach, 1904: 44–54.

¹⁵ For detailed movie references, see Ross, 2020: 645–55.

Xena: Warrior Princess, which was originally based on ancient Greek mythology (though later included Roman and Egyptian locations), the protagonist Xena of Amphipolis (played by Lucy Lawless), also known as the Destroyer of Nations, is a heroic warrior battling evil. In Season 6, Episode 7, ('The Rheingold', 2000), the power-hungry Xena meets Odin, who turns her into a Valkyrie, after which she then tricks him into telling her about the Rheingold. Instead of Wagner's Alberich, it is Xena who steals the gold from the Rhine maidens and turns it into a ring, which makes her invincible. Yet, the ring is stolen by a monster named Grindl (a reference to the monster in *Beowulf*), whom she once defeated. Years later, Xena joins forces with Beowulf to kill the monster and get the ring back (Stewart, 2000).

The fascination with the character led Marvel to introduce a superheroine called Valkyrie (also known as Brunnhilde), a tall, blond, and muscular woman with her signature cone bra. Created by Roy Thomas and John Buscema, she appeared in *Avengers* (no. 83, December 1970). Brunnhilde is chosen by Odin to be the highest of the Valkyrie, seeking worthy warriors and bringing them to Valhalla. Yet her soul is trapped by the Enchantress, who is able to transfer both Brunnhilda's powers and form on herself or her pawns to deceive the Avengers. After centuries of captivity, Brunnhilde eventually wins her body and powers back and joins the Defenders, fighting the Dragon on the Moon. Ultimately, she dies during Thor's Ragnarok (*Marvel*, 314). In the Marvel cinema universe, the Valkyrie appears in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Valkyrie further appears in the mini-series *Air Fighters Comics* (first appearance in *Airboy*, vol. 2, no. 2, in November 1943) by Hillman Periodicals, written by Charles Biro and Dick Wood, with the artwork by Fred Kida and Al Camy. The Valkyrie, together with her girl squad airmaidens, served under the Nazis as deadly pilots.

As is documented from the abundant variety of cultural references to Wagner's *Ring*, the subject matter, major conflicts, and/or protagonists were already firmly embedded in American culture. Russell's adaptation therefore does not present new, formerly unknown material, but through a dialogue with its predecessors, provides an alternative and original approach to the classic.

P. Craig Russell's Vision of *The Ring*

Illustrator and comics artist Philip Craig Russell is a pioneer of opera adaptations, striving for an original and artistic attitude to adaptations of operatic classics. In the 1970s, he started adapting Wagner's *Parsifal* (*Star Reach Magazine*, nos. 8 and 10, 1977); since then, he has published three volumes of the series *P. Craig Russell Library of Opera Adaptations* (2003, vols. 2 and 3: 2004). An ardent opera lover, Russell pays homage to Wagner by stating the composer's name in the title of his work: *Richard Wagner's The*

Ring of the Nibelung. Yet unlike the less artistically ambitious versions of the *Classics Illustrated*, which dutifully reflected the ‘cultural and commercial hierarchy between respectable originals and their popular transpositions’ (Labarre, 2020: 134), Russell’s graphic novel functions as a complex work of art, not just as images accompanied by text.

Russell adapts the complete *Ring Cycle*, i.e., the approximately 16-hour-long musical drama, into a graphic mode. Although the task of adapting Wagner’s music into a medium which lacks auditory features is challenging, one of the major benefits of comics in regard to opera adaptation is its visual potential. For example, comics can graphically render Wagner’s original vision of the scene, costumes, and creatures. Brian Kellow highlights the ‘cinematic’ character of Wagner’s compositions: ‘From the sustained E-flat that signals the beginning of the world in *Das Rheingold* to the shattering final moments of *Götterdämmerung*, *The Twilight of the Gods*, the *Ring* veritably swims with imagery; one not only hears the music, one sees it’ (1991: n.pag.). Kellow thus signals the potential of comics to come closer to the artist’s original vision as Wagner was never fully satisfied with the opera’s stagings.¹⁶

The affinity between the comics adaptation and the original is further discernible in the matter of audience. Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* was intended for all people without distinction. In letters to Ernst Benedikt Kietz from 14 September, 1850 (Wagner, 1967: 404–5) and Theodor Uhlig from 20 September of the same year (Wagner, 1967: 425–26), Wagner introduces his idea for the festival and states that his preferred visitors are young people, academics and music enthusiasts, proposing that these groups should be invited to attend without admission. Despite numerous appeals for financial support, however, the festival was plagued by financial trouble and the composer’s plans concerning free admission were never realized (Eger, 1986: 595–8). Russell’s adaptation is based on Patrick Mason’s translation, which retains Wagner’s lyrical style, while successfully avoiding archaisms and slang. Russell made few changes to fit the panels (Russell, 2018: n.pag.). The adaptation’s text is based on the libretti, which were published independently and designed for the audience to read before the performance or between the acts, as the audiences were sitting in near darkness (Deathridge, 2019: xxvii). In terms of its text, Wagner’s magnum opus has thus gained its most accessible form without losing sight of the original.

The appeal and accessibility of Russell’s fusion of opera and comics is reflected by its uniquely mixed audience. Its publisher, Dark Horse Comics, seeks primarily to

¹⁶ Wagner was especially dissatisfied with the dragon, whose neck was missing at the premiere, as the whole construction was shipped in pieces and this particular part was by mistake sent to Beirut, Lebanon, rather than Bayreuth, Germany.

attract fans of comics and fantasy, marketing the book as ‘the epic as it was meant to be read’ and quoting renowned British writer and comics artist Neil Gaiman, who calls the adaptation ‘the most faithful and inspiring reworking of the opera into comics form, and the ultimate high-fantasy saga’ (Russell, 2002). Yet a ‘Mini Review’ published in *The Wagnerian* recommends the volume even to those who ‘have no interest in graphic novels as an art form but who do have an interest in Wagner’s longest, and possibly most popular work’ (2013). A review published on the comic-book website DoomRocket.com notes that the adaptation will appeal to readers with ‘an appetite for classic fantasy’ (Rivera, n.d.), while other reviewers, such as Pereira (2019), avoid the issue of readership altogether. Even though the publisher and the majority of reviewers do not explicitly mention classical music or opera admirers, the online customer reviews at Amazon.com and Goodreads.com indicate that the readership includes devotees of opera and Wagner, as well as students of music (who might be also comics and/or fantasy lovers).

Illustration and Character Depiction

When it comes to costumes and setting, Russell draws inspiration from major and acclaimed Wagner artists, namely the German illustrator and costume designer Carl Emil Doepler and the leading figure of the Golden Age of British book illustrations, Arthur Rackham (apart from the colouring, as Rackham used watercolour illustrations in subtle darker colours reflecting the mood of the cycle). While Doepler set the tone for future illustrations of the *Ring*’s costumes (e.g., the winged helmets), Wagner found his designs too historical. Wagner first asked Josef Hoffmann, a German painter famous for his heroic historical paintings, to create *Ring* decorations but soon grew dissatisfied with his illusionist vision. Later, he was equally unhappy with Carl Emil Doepler, whose artwork became prototypical as it was adopted by theatres across Europe. While Doepler strove for precision, studying archaeological sites and museums, Wagner hoped for a more timeless mode of expression, and urged Doepler not to employ the medieval *Song of the Nibelung* character illustrations by Peter von Cornelius or Julius Schnorr, or the traditional illustrations of classical Greek and Roman myths. Even Wagner’s wife, Cosima Wagner, in her diary recalls her dispute with Doepler, complaining that the costumes were archaic, reminding her of Indian chief clothes. Besides being ethnographically inaccurate, she also considered them tasteless (Gregor-Dellin, 2008: 713). What Wagner asked for were original designs that would bring to life a cultural epoch beyond any experience. While Wagner knew what he did not want, he could not imagine what it was he did want (Gregor-Dellin, 2008: 672–3). Or, rather, his clear mental image of the staging was compromised by miscommunication with the artists, as well as the technical possibilities of his time. Russell’s imagery combines Rackham

and Doepler's illustrations with images from American popular imagination: Louis Skye (2019) points out the visual affinities between the Rhinegold maidens and a Disney character, Princess Ariel, from the animated musical *The Little Mermaid* (1989), who dreams of becoming human and falling in love, disregarding her father's warnings not to trust humans. Similar to the maidens, she is portrayed with a wide smile, lush long hair and a green body and tail.

What is, however, detailed, realistic and highly original in Russell's volume are the characters' faces and expressions, as they have been modelled on actors (Russell, 2018: n.pag.). While many comic artists make sketches, Russell took photographs, which he used as a basis for the illustrations. Perhaps the most famous model was used for the character of Brunnhilde. Russell opted for Jill Thompson, an American comics artist, famous for her series *Scary Godmother*, as well for her modelling for other artists.¹⁷ Russell's Brunnhilde has sharp, almost masculine features (see **Figure 1**), corresponding with the scene in *Siegfried*, Part 3, where Siegfried mistakes her for a man: 'Ha! Is it a man in armour? – How his image happily stirs me! –' When he loosens her helmet however, 'long curly hair tumbles out', while '[w]ith puffs of breath his [i.e., Brunhilde's] chest is moving'. After he removes the shield from her chest, he sees Brunnhilde in a dress and is shocked, turning to his mother for salvation (Wagner, 2019: 511–13). Russell's Siegfried likens the beauty of the knight to 'first blossoms of spring' (Russell, 2018: n.pag.) and accurately pictures Siegfried's shock after the character realizes that the knight he found is not a man.



Figure 1: Brunnhilde. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

¹⁷ Alex Ross had used her as a model of Joker's daughter Duella in a comic book mini-series *Kingdom Come*, written and painted by Mark Wald and Alex Ross in 1996 (Cronin, 2008), while Russell had collaborated with her while working on his adaptation of the *Magic Flute* (Russell, 2018: n.pag.).

Siegfried's astonishment might seem unreasonable, as he claimed that his mission was to go to 'a fiery mountain where a woman is asleep' (Russell, 2018: n.pag.). Yet, as there are no precise stage directions concerning Brunnhilde's look, her boyish features provide some ground for Siegfried's confusion.

The graphic representations of Voton, the lord of the gods, and Alberich, the lord of the Nibelungs, are visually closer to the Alan Lee's illustrations of Tolkien's series *The Lord of the Ring* (and even the later film adaptations from 2001–2003, directed by Peter Jackson, which Lee codesigned) rather than Doepler's and Rackham's illustrations. Besides the shared reference to the powerful ring, the link between Wagner and Tolkien's works is further established after Alberich proclaims himself first 'The Lord of the Nibelungs' and later 'the lord of the ring' (Wagner, 2019: 93), though Russell (2018: n.pag.) has Alberich call himself 'the lord of the dwarves', to prevent younger readers or those unacquainted with Wagner from identifying the operas with Tolkien's book series.

Russell's modern interpretation of the characters is perhaps most visible in the representation of the dwarf. Wagner's Alberich and his visualization have been the source of considerable controversy, especially due to concerns about anti-Semitism. In *Versuch über Wagner* (written in the 1930s in British exile but not published until 1952 in Frankfurt am Main), Theodor W. Adorno was critical of Wagner, pointing to his anti-Semitic beliefs and identifying the Nibelung characters as Jewish cartoons and anti-Semitic Jewish stereotypes, especially Alberich, who renounced his love for gold, hoping to gain power over the world (1981: xiv). In the popular illustrations of the *Ring*, especially by Arthur Rackham (2009), Alberich looks like a small creature with wiry hairs covering his body and small sly eyes, a large nose and a beard. His scheming and villainous character is, therefore, reflected in his physical representation. Voton even calls him the 'Black Alberich' (Russell, 2018: n.pag.), even though, throughout the text, he is referred to purely as Alberich. Acknowledging his own guilt and connection to the lord of the dwarves, Voton calls himself 'Light Alberich' (Russell, 2018: n.pag.), the colour distinction signifying not only their respective realms (Valhalla, in contrast with the dark spaces which the Nibelungs inhabit) but also reflecting moral qualities, turning the Nibelung into Voton's shadow.

Russell is aware of the potential anti-Semitic connotations of certain characters, especially Alberich the dwarf and his brother Mime. Marc Weiner presents both characters as caricatures, representing respectively wealthy and impoverished Jews. This is true especially for Alberich, who strives to be accepted and recognized by others (1997: 144). It should also be noted that mythological representations of dwarves tend towards representing these often morally flawed characters as ugly or deformed.

While such an approach does not necessarily employ racial or ethnic stereotyping, it nevertheless perpetuates an equally harmful association between physical difference and/or disability and immorality and otherness.

What perhaps heightens the sensitivity towards the visual representation of certain comics characters is Wagner's attitude toward Jews. To avoid such connotations, Russell, disregarding the stage directions or even previous illustrations (specifically Rackham's portrayal of Alberich and Mime), shifted the representation by presenting the dwarves without beard, wiry hair or large hooked noses (see **Figure 2**). Drawing on the book illustrations of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Russell's Alberich is visually closer to a slimy little creature like Gollum, whose body and mind were deformed by the corrupting power of the Ring.



Figure 2: Alberich and the Rhine maidens. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

Voton, on the other hand, especially in *Siegfried*, turns into a Wanderer, an old man in a grey cloak and a hat, and with a spear that he uses as a staff. His face is covered by a long white beard, coming close to Tolkien's wizard Gandalf the Grey (later Gandalf the White). The visual references to Alan Lee's illustrations of Tolkien put Wagner's complex work into a more familiar literary and cultural context, which may expand the comics' readership, as comic readers are more likely to be familiar with Tolkien's work, in the forms of his books, or filmic and comic adaptations. While there are many connecting points between Tolkien and Wagner, however, their concepts of mythology and emphasis clearly vary (Wink, 2012).

Expressing Sound in a Silent Medium

The seemingly greatest challenge of adapting opera into a comics format is the evocation of sound and its effect. Though comics – as is true for any written text – do not have

the acoustic quality of music, they do have access to both linguistic and visual means, in terms of illustration, colouring and lettering, that indirectly suggest express the intensity and quality of sound. Two methods used to express sounds in comics are speech balloon shapes and lettering. As Eisner notes, graphic lettering serves as a 'extension of imagery', providing 'the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound' (2000: 10). The vocal expressivity and the degree of emotional charge of the utterances are marked predominantly by facial expressions, the use of bold letters, capital letters, font style and size variations, a choice of colour, the shape of the speech balloon, or a combination of several or all these techniques, as is documented in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Intensity and expressivity of sounds. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

The shape of the speech balloons can further indicate a character's thoughts or emotions, which are otherwise communicated by the orchestra, which, as Hutcheon and Hutcheon suggest, serves as an 'omniscient narrator, offering the audience access to the mind or even the subconscious of the characters' (2017: 313). The orchestra further provides sounds that are not made by the characters, such as stylized wild barking in *The Valkyrie*, Act 2, where the distressed Sieglinde hears the terrible sounds of her husband's dogs, which, as she imagines, are attacking Siegmund and tearing his flesh. Russell devotes two panels in shaded sepia brown to these sounds, one picturing

the wild hounds with their mouths open and the second portraying the dogs pursuing Siegmund. Both panels are accompanied by textual comments on the creatures' howls and ripping of flesh.

Sound can, however, be successfully expressed in silent panels, or panels without text, which are not necessarily silent, especially when portraying a vocal scene. As such, they can include effects such as lines or geometrical patterns that evoke sound, or musical notes. Forceville calls such methods 'pictorial runes', which include 'speed lines; movement lines; droplets; spikes; spiral; and twirl' (2011: 877). These 'runes' can be understood as visual metaphors depicting sound and/or movement, which cannot be otherwise captured in the graphic narrative (see **Figure 4**).



Figure 4: Pictorial Runes. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

The capacity of silent panels to express sounds is perhaps best observed in the prelude to *The Rhinegold*, where Russell introduces the visual key or metaphor, substituting the Wagnerian leitmotiv, i.e., a recurring musical theme denoting a theme, object or a thought: 'You have these musical moments that have such an emotional punch to them, and the dramatic punch comes solely from the music. So when I am doing the visualisation, if it is not going to be dead on the page I had to come up with some sort of visual metaphor' (qtd. in Shirley, 2005: 103). The story here is, therefore, not only told but, primarily, shown. Russell's visual keys are introduced in the opening pages

depicting the creation of the world from a drop of water falling from a finger and giving rise to the World ash tree Yggdrasil, where the female deities, the Norns, are weaving the fates of gods and humans (Figure 5).

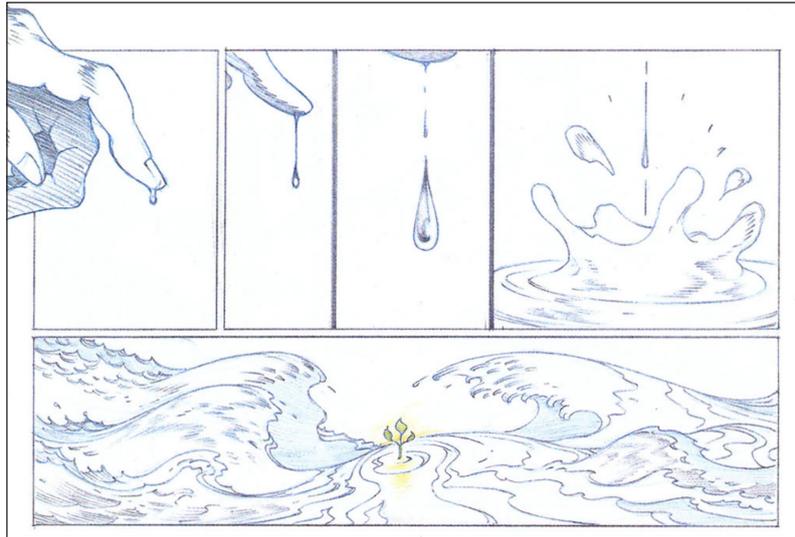


Figure 5: Creation of the World. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

Russell departs from Wagner by inserting an image of the finger from which the drop falls. He refers either to the giant Ymir from Nordic mythology, or perhaps he aims for an adequate expression of the *Ring's* musical opening, which starts with one tone that moves and divides, creating a powerful melody gaining force and depth. The water element, signified by the drop of water, followed by a series of images documenting the growth of the World ash tree (with a rainbow in the background) both open and close Russell's adaptation. This graphic metaphor implies the cyclical nature of world history, as well as creating a visual link between the origin of the world and the opening of *The Rhinegold*. Russell thus represents the action expressed on stage and orchestrally in a purely visual sequence.

The opening further features Voton drinking from the Mimir's well of wisdom. The significance of the well and its qualities are explained in three small panels which show the drop falling and splashing into multiple droplets and which are placed within a bigger panel with Voton closely observing and listening to the oldest Norn's thread. In exchange for higher wisdom, he lets the oldest Norn take his eye. While Wagner does not feature the Norn taking Voton's eye, Russell's presentation does have a partial background in *Edda*, where Voton (Odin) drinks from the Mimir's well of wisdom, though in *Edda*, he leaves the eye in Mimir's well (1990: 3). In *Valkyrie*, Part 2 Voton

tells Brunnhilde that his obsession for knowledge and wisdom made him search the depths of the Earth and this ambition made him sacrifice love and insight (that is, metaphorically, his eye), while in *Siegfried*, Part 3, he discloses to Siegfried, ‘I tell you, with my missing eye, you are looking at the one that remains to me’ (Russell, 2018: n.pag.), suggesting that Siegfried’s insight, capacity for love and compassion are indeed the part that Voton gave up for knowledge. To further enhance their connection, Siegfried’s eye has the same shape and blue shade as Voton’s.

Besides using the waterdrop as the symbol of the beginning of the world, Russell further employs it as a connecting device signifying birth, or beginning, on a metaphorical level. He explains his creative process regarding the representation of Voton’s inner thoughts as the god contemplates ways to avoid the foretold doom:

At the moment Voton conceives his idea, the sword theme, heard for the first time, sounds deep in the orchestra. Though nothing is verbally expressed, the music lets

us know that something important has just occurred. ... [S]o the challenge in the adaptation became to show the moment of the sparking of an idea, as well as the idea itself. It was my hope that this could be done in a manner more sophisticated than the use of a light bulb in a word balloon. (Russell, 2018: n.pag.)

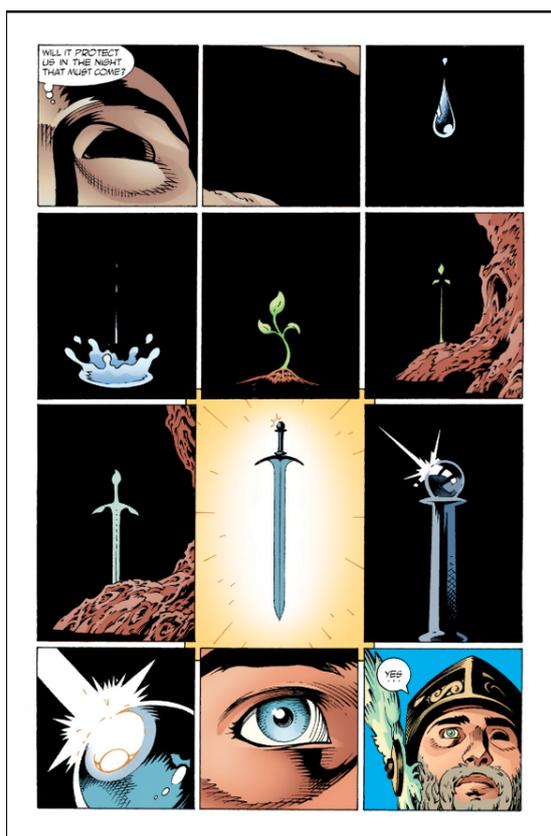


Figure 6: Voton contemplating a new idea. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner’s The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

The waterdrop introduced in the prelude to *The Rhinegold*, together with a green plant growing in a shape of a sword, stands for the tones, gestures and facial expressions used for communicating a flourishing of a new idea on stage, in this case the idea of creation of the Volsung sword Nothung (which becomes a crucial leitmotiv in *The Valkyrie*) (see **Figure 6**). The sword is portrayed as blue, suggesting a connection with the water element from the opening, as well signifying the realm of the gods rather than the world of Nibelungs that is associated with fire, i.e., red and yellow (Russell, 2018: n.pag.).

Colouring as a Sound (and Time) Maker

Besides expressing temporality and emotions, colouring also plays a significant role in representing sounds. As Spence suggests, there can be a general non-arbitrary correspondence between colours and sounds, specifically between loudness (or sound intensity) and colour brightness or richness (2011: 975).

In Russell's adaptation, Lovern Kindzierski's colouring is employed to present a character's flashbacks or summaries of unrepresented actions. In *The Twilight of the Gods*, Part 1, the Valkyrie Vaultraute urges Brunnhilde to return the ring to the Rhine maidens to lift Alberich's curse, appealing to her love of her father and telling her how Voton neglected the Valkyries and stopped eating Freia's fruit of immortality. Vaultraute's plea is set apart from the present by the choice of colour. Unlike the depiction of the present moment in the narrative, which features bright fiery colours, reflecting the urgency of the situation, her recapitulation of past events is in light blue ink, linked with the element of air associated with the realm of the gods (the same technique and colour are used when Siegmund retells the story of his life to Hunding and his wife Sieglinde in *The Valkyrie*, Part 1).

The same strategy, albeit a different shade, is used in *Siegfried*, Part 1, where Siegfried confronts Mime about his parentage, pointing out the similarity between parents and children (see **Figure 7**). In Wagner's stage directions, Siegfried '[w]ith exceptional calmness and evenness objectively [describes] the blissfully calm stillness of natural life' (Wagner, 2019: 357). In order to suggest the calm and soothing idyllic sounds of nature, all the images of mothers and the offspring are in green.

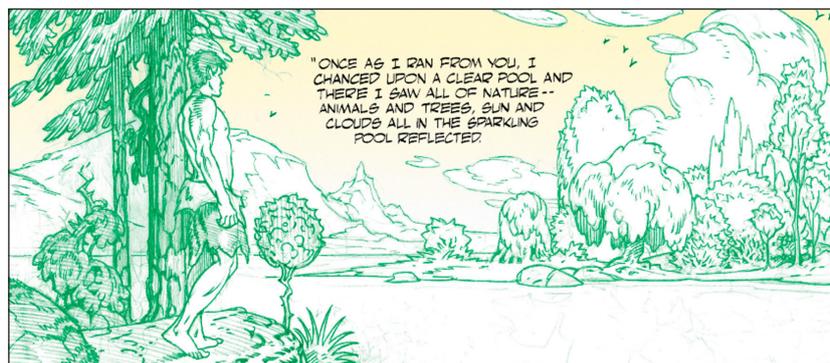


Figure 7: Siegfried confronting Mime. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

On the contrary, the cover of *The Valkyrie*, Part 3 features the Valkyrie silhouettes against the red sky and evokes the intense and loud tones of the 'Ride of the Valkyries', while upholding the claim of Palmer et al. that brighter colours are associated with a

faster music tempo, while de-saturated, darker colours and blue shades are associated with music of slow tempo in minor keys (2006). Kindzierski's love for bright colours that might seem too vivid for Wagner's dark story, however, constantly draws attention to the nature and history of the graphic medium, and gives it the potential to attract a wider audience, including those who are not opera lovers (or those who do not wish to spend over 16 hours watching *The Ring Cycle* performed).

However, at times, the brightness of the comics adaptation distorts the sense of melancholy or sadness (though it successfully indicates the intensity of emotions), especially in the famous scene where Brunnhilde pleads with her father not to deprive her of her immortality (*The Valkyrie*, Part 3). The emotionality and importance of the scene seems understated not only by the limited space of the smaller-sized panels but also by the fact that most of the panels are almost half-covered with speech. While Wagner's stage directions state that '[i]t must clearly be seen that now is the first time the spear slips from Voton's hand' (Wagner, 2019: 333), Russell omits the falling of the spear when he is announcing his punishment to Brunnhilde. The emotional charge of the parting scene between the father and his beloved daughter is therefore slightly diminished (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Brunnhilde hears her punishment. Philip C Russell, *Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (2018), n.pag. Reproduced with permission of the author.

What is more, while the bright orange, yellow, and blue are striking, they perhaps unintentionally evoke a more positive and optimistic mood. They capture the clash between the element of air (and spirituality), represented by the blue colour signifying the realm of gods, and the element of fire (and emotions), signifying both Brunnhilde's disobedience, as well as her father's anger and concurrent love for his daughter. The colours darken only in two wide panels, where Wotan looks back at his daughter for the last time. Yet, unlike in Wagner, where Wotan, determined, 'steps into the middle of

the stage' (Wagner, 2019: 333), in Russell, he walks out into a pale dark blue haze as a black silhouette and only then picks up his spear, calling for Loge.

Concluding Remarks

The multiple adaptations of *The Ring of the Nibelung* are not only a product of the current renewed interest in medievalism or myths but manifest the timelessness of Wagner's story and its firm place in the popular imagination. Despite the scope of the tetralogy, Russell's adaptation, with its modern visualization of mythic lands and characters, not only pays homage to the original but, at the same time, manifests the capacity of the comics medium to feature multi-dimensional works, including a complex opera cycle, in a graphic narrative. The graphic adaptation is more accessible and immediate due to its visual aspect than a libretto and more reader/viewer-friendly than opera due to the unlimited time which it gives the reader to contemplate individual scenes and return to them. Russell's adaptation encompasses the disparate worlds of opera, comics, and fantasy culture by highlighting and promoting the shared cultural history of mankind, stripped of Wagner's controversial ideology. As such, Russell's graphic novel foregrounds its timeless themes, namely desire for love and the equally timeless lust of power.

Despite the polarized reception of Wagner's personality and politics, Wagner's *Ring* is a classic, which, as has been documented, has a firm place in American culture and popular imagination due to its emphasis on universal themes. As Terry Eagleton noted, 'we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns' (1983: 12); or in Alex Ross's terms, '[w]hen we look at Wagner, we are looking into a magnifying mirror of the soul of human species. What we hate in it, we hate in ourselves' (Ross, 2020: 659–60).

Acknowledgements

This paper is a result of the project SGS/1/2020, Silesian University in Opava internal grant 'Přístupy k textové analýze v 21. století' (Twenty-first Century Perspectives on Text Analysis).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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