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# The Influence of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle on C. S. Lewis.

by John MacInnis

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Music listening and discussion factored regularly in C. S. Lewis's relationships, and he drew on his love of music to spur his creative endeavors and to prompt his best thinking. In fact, Lewis credited his imaginative renaissance to the moment when he encountered the titles to music dramas by Richard Wagner, "*Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*."<sup>1</sup> Later, Lewis pointed to his sudden affinity for Wagner and what he called "Northernness" as a grace; that is, he thought God was calling him to faith through these old stories and music.

Though not a musician himself, Lewis often wrote about and mentioned music, its effects, its power, and its proper reception, in some of his most influential works. This essay will examine Lewis's essays, letters, and autobiography, outline his engagement with the composer Richard Wagner throughout his life, and summarize his insights about music.

## IMAGINATIVE RENAISSANCE

In his 1955 autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis described his imaginative renaissance as happening suddenly, when he came across the 1911 Christmas issue of *The Bookman*.<sup>2</sup> Lewis recounted that, as

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1 C. S. Lewis, *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy, Reflections on the Psalms, The Four Loves, The Business of Heaven* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1994), 41.

2 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 40. Lewis described his renaissance as an adolescent as the sort of reawakening that happens when a person seems to experience the beauties and joys of the world with new eyes and ears. Lewis also called this a renaissance because he viewed the intervening years of boyhood, between childhood and adolescence, as a sort of desert. He wrote, "My childhood is at unity with the rest of my life; my boyhood not so."

he read the words “*Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*” accompanied by a picture by Arthur Rackham:

Pure ‘Northernness’ engulfed me, a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity. . .and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago. . .<sup>3</sup>

Wagner’s *The Ring of the Nibelung* is a cycle of four mammoth music dramas based on Nordic myths that lasts around fifteen hours, in total, and spans three generations of characters; in order, *The Rhinegold*, *The Valkyrie*, *Siegfried*, *The Twilight of the Gods*.<sup>4</sup> Both the librettos and music were written by Wagner himself, and he even built a special theatre to perform his music dramas, at Bayreuth. *The Ring* is a well-loved classic of Western music history, and the plot centers on a golden ring which grants power to rule the world, but requires that its owner forsake all love.<sup>5</sup>

Almost immediately after his personal renaissance, Lewis wrote over 800 lines of an epic tragedy called *Loki Bound* that he considered Norse in subject and Greek in form.<sup>6</sup> The libretto of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle was an obvious inspiration for *Loki Bound*, though Lewis had not yet experienced the *Ring* set to music.<sup>7</sup> *Loki Bound* became a collaborative project with Arthur Greeves, Lewis’s childhood friend

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3 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 41. Also, in this moment, Lewis remembered Joy: “And with this plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I had now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss . . .” Given Lewis’s affinity for Neoplatonic thought, his description, here, sounds reminiscent of the Neoplatonic doctrine of recollection. That is, his recollection is not simply of the joys of his childhood; he seems to recall and long for something further back than that.

4 In German, the titles are *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*.

5 The significance of Wagner’s music and musical ideas in Western music history are unquestioned, though receptions of his music vary. For example, the composer Gioachino Rossini famously quipped: “Wagner is a composer who has beautiful moments but awful quarter hours.”

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Family Letters (1905–1931)*, Vol. 1, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 20.

7 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 42.

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and longest correspondent; as a musician, Greeves planned to write the music accompanying Lewis's text.

This collaboration of Lewis and Greeves continued into 1914, and Lewis included a plot summary in a letter to Greeves dated 6 October 1914.<sup>8</sup> Lewis intended the part of Loki to be sung by a tenor, Odin by a baritone, and Thor by a bass ("of course"). With his plot summary, Lewis also included some musical ideas for Greeves, which are instructive to gauge his musical sense at this point, in 1914. By now, Lewis had experienced Wagner's music and learned ways in which that music functioned in Wagner's music dramas.<sup>9</sup> In the following, note the variety of musical elements that Lewis considers, e.g., music for atmosphere, music to express an actor's emotions and character, leitmotifs, etc.:

Of course you would readily see what musical points could be made. Nevertheless I cannot refrain from giving you a few of my ideas. To begin with, Loki's speech would be somber and eerie,—expressive of the fire-god's intriguing [*sic.*] soul, and endless hatred. Then (*Parados*) the first song of the chorus would be bright and tuneful, as a relief to the dramatic duet that precedes it. The next great opportunity for 'atmospheric' music comes (Episode I) where the theme of the 'spirit of madness' is introduced. *You* can well imagine what it ought to be like. Then (Episode II) we would have a bluff, swinging ballad for the huge, hearty giant; and of course the 'madness motive' again, where the horse breaks lose. Then some 'Dawn' music as a prelude to (Episode III) and Odin's speech about their position! What an opening for majestic and mournful themes. But the real gem would be some inexpressibly sad, yearning little theme, where (*Exodos*) Odin expresses his eternal loneliness.<sup>10</sup>

Later, in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis described his work on *Loki Bound* as a reversal of other Nordic stories; here, Loki

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8 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 75.

9 Cf., *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 42. Lewis reported that he first heard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" (from *The Valkyrie*) in a local shop, and that he then began collecting records of Wagner's music. "[T]he *Ride* came like a thunderbolt. From that moment Wagnerian records (principally from the *Ring*, but also from *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*) became the chief drain on my pocket money and the presents I invariably asked for. My general appreciation of music was not, at first, much altered. 'Music' was one thing, 'Wagnerian Music' quite another, and there was no common measure between them. . ."

10 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 78.

is the hero who opposes Odin, because Odin created the world and forced existence upon creatures without their consent. By Lewis's own admission, in this story, Loki is a projection of himself and voices his own questions about God. Lewis wrote: "I was at this time living, like so many Atheists or Antitheists, in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world."<sup>11</sup> In this account, one may see that, early in Lewis's life, he used his love for Wagner and "Northernness" to express and explore his own religious questions,.

### PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE

In his many letters to Arthur Greeves, Lewis often mentioned their mutual love for Wagner's music and critiqued concerts he had seen and recordings he enjoyed. Surveying Lewis's correspondence, therefore, especially notes from Lewis to Greeves, is instructive for understanding the importance of Wagner and music generally in Lewis's life and relationships.<sup>12</sup>

For example, on 8 February 1916, in a letter to Greeves, Lewis discussed a new composer as "one of the promising musicians of the day" and lamented not hearing Verdi's *Rigoletto* performed, because he knew the plot. In this letter, Lewis also speculated that listening to gramophone recordings actually spoils one for hearing live music. That is, listening to recordings improves a person's taste through wide exposure, but conditions one to expect a standard of performance that is not often realistic. And, when we return to one of the "best things" in a recording, for repeated hearings, it may not be as powerful to us when we finally hear the music performed live—the original pleasure may elude us.<sup>13</sup>

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11 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 64.

12 It is interesting to note that the friendship of Lewis and Greeves remained centered upon common interests, in this case, music. Lewis wrote of friendship in *The Four Loves*: "Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one." (*Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: The Four Loves*, 248).

13 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 164.

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Lewis owned English translations of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, but he also read Wagner in the original German. In a letter to Greeves from 8 July 1917, Lewis mentioned that all morning he had been reading the text of *Siegfried*, in German, and commended the "lovely wild" poetry, which he found to be better in its original language.<sup>14</sup>

On 17 June 1918, Lewis wrote Greeves to describe a performance of Wagner's *The Valkyrie* that he attended at Drury Lane with Thomas Beecham conducting. Lewis wrote: "The dream of years has been realized, and without disillusionment: I have had thrills and delights of the real old sort, I have felt as I felt five years ago [i.e., at his imaginative renaissance]." Lewis described that he had trouble getting seats and could only see part of the stage. He was also frustrated with the people who sat near him because of their enthusiasm:

One little man in front of me was so moved that at several interesting points he stood up, until at last I became so exasperated that I caught him by his coat tails and pulled him into his seat. Another, who was following the score, kept on giving vent to quite audible criticism such as 'Louder, Louder!' or 'No, no, no' whenever the conductor's design differed from his own.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these frustrations, Lewis enjoyed the performance and went on to describe what he heard:

The first act as you remember is in Hunding's hut with the tree growing in it: and towards the end you remember how Siegmund draws the sword and how they throw open the great doors at the back. This showed us a most beautiful scene of distant snow covered peaks and a wild valley. The lighting gave a really unusual impression of spring moon light, and that combined with the glorious love-music of the orchestra (you remember the spring song?) simply swept you away—and then all the time creeping in under this the faint horn blown motive of the Niblungs—oh, ami, it was simply heaven! . . . Wotan was magnificent whenever he came on, and all his music is splendid—there are whole hours of music just as wonderful as the little bits we know: the singing was in English, and so clear and un-strained that with my knowledge of the story, I could follow nearly all the dialogue, and so all the poetic and romantic pleasure came to help the musical. As a spectacle the third act was the best, where Brünhilde is hiding from Wotan. The stage is almost dark, lit only from time to time

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14 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 323.

15 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 381-82.

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by flashes of lightening [*sic.*], as the angry god draws nearer and nearer and at last enters in a glare of red light, glinting on the huge raven-wings of his helmet and the rings of his mail—one gleaming figure in that sinister gloom—and the music, I cannot describe it. . . .

You felt that [the singers] all loved the Ring and took it seriously not merely as an opportunity for noise. Sieglindë particularly, with a sweet voice and clear enunciation, acted very well, quietly & naturally not in the usual operatic style. And oh! The blessed absence of chorus! So you have my verdict that if the Ring is all like this it quite comes up to our old dreams, and that all Italian opera is merely a pastime compared with the great music-drama of Wagner. In spite of all our efforts we could not get a programme and so I cannot send you one.<sup>16</sup>

In this same letter, Lewis also explains to Greeves a solipsistic philosophy that Lewis later came to repudiate—that an individual is essentially trapped in her own head, without true access to the outside world.<sup>17</sup>

Of course we all start with the idea that our senses put us in direct contact with reality—you think that your eyes are windows by which your brain ‘sees’ the world. But science teaches you that your eye, or rather the nerve of your eye, is merely a telegraph wire. . . . [W]e still remain dependant [*sic*] on this long chain of communications, traveling by vibration from atom to atom: and we can never have any proof that the sensation which it produces in our brain conveys any true idea of the external Thing. . . . Hence you see we are driven to the conclusion that we have no knowledge of the external world: that it is conceivable [*sic*] that there IS no external world at all, and that if it does exist it must be quite different from our usual ideas of it.<sup>18</sup>

His statements are striking here, especially when they are read after such rich and evocative descriptions of what he saw and heard at the opera. Lewis described an experience that was outside himself, powerful and meaningful, and he was confident that his friend would understand him and sympathize. In fact, this is just the sort of disconnect Lewis said he lived with at this time, a disconnect between

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16 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 381-82.

17 Lewis would probably have referred to this philosophical position as Subjective Idealism.

18 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 382-83.

his philosophy and the richness of his imaginative life.<sup>19</sup> In another letter to Greeves, earlier that month, Lewis went so far as to assert that beauty is simply a sensation in the mind: “beauty cannot be in the material thing.”<sup>20</sup>

Lewis made a point of attending subsequent Wagner performances; for example, on Monday, 23 June 1924, Lewis again saw Wagner’s *The Valkyrie* at His Majesty’s Theatre in London, with the British National Opera Company performing. Lewis attended with A. Cecil Harwood, who, in 1933, asked Lewis to be godfather to Harwood’s son, Laurence. Lewis was visiting Harwood in London at the time, and they sat together in the upper circle of the theatre. Albert Coates was the conductor.<sup>21</sup> The performance was reviewed in *The Times* as poorly attended, but the orchestra was commended, especially the musical details from the woodwinds and horns and a good balance between voices and instruments in the performing space.<sup>22</sup> The reviewer had some criticism for Robert Parker who played Wotan; apparently, he tended to rant and rave excessively.<sup>23</sup> The only letters preserved from Lewis during this time are those to his father, and he does not mention this concert—just politics and his work establishing himself professionally. This silence about the music may have been because his father was helping to support him financially and might not have liked to hear of his son visiting the opera.

On 1 June 1930, in a note to Greeves, Lewis explained that he was sorting through old records and, since he was listening as he sorted, he played the “Magic Fire Music” from the *Valkyrie*:

Lying on the sofa and hearing these old favourites I had sensations which you can imagine. And at once (here is the advantage of growing older) I knew that the enemy would take

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19 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 95. “Such, then, was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow ‘rationalism.’ Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”

20 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 377.

21 To appreciate the sort of performance Lewis may have heard, recordings are available of Albert Coates conducting Wagner’s music, e.g., *Albert Coates (Great Conductors of the 20th Century)*, EMI Classics, 0724357548625 (2003).

22 “The Valkyrie [Review],” *The Times*, 24 June 1924, Issue: 43686.

23 This performance was reviewed positively in *The Sunday Times* (29 June 1924, Issue: 5281), but that reviewer was critical of illogical and inconsistent set design choices and the omission of Wotan’s monologue to Brünnhilde.

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advantage of the vague longings and tenderesses to try & make me believe later on that *he* had the fulfillment which I really wanted: so I balked him by letting the longings go even deeper and turning my mind to the One, the real object of all desire, which (you know my view) is what we are *really* wanting in all wants.”<sup>24</sup>

In referring to the “One” here, in 1930, Lewis expressed his current view, Absolute Idealism.<sup>25</sup>

In a letter to Owen Barfield, on 6 May 1932, Lewis asked Barfield to purchase tickets for them to see Wagner’s *Siegfried* at Covent Garden Theatre, on 16 May. In a same day reply to what was obviously a negative response from Barfield, Lewis said that he was sorry that Barfield could not manage *Siegfried* but that Lewis could not pass up the opportunity. He asked Barfield to still secure him a ticket as well as one for himself, should he reconsider. In a letter dated 12 May, Lewis thanked Barfield for getting him a ticket and again asked Barfield to join him, though he probably attended the concert alone.<sup>26</sup> In a letter to his brother Warnie dated 14 June, Lewis wrote that this was his first time seeing *Siegfried*, his first visit to Covent Garden, and that he enjoyed the experience enormously. Lewis praised the acting of the performance, but explained that he found some of the singers to be mediocre.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 898-99.

25 If Lewis’s “One” is understandable, in this quotation, Lewis’s reference to an “enemy” is puzzling. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis explained how he treated Absolute Idealism as a sort of safe religion, in which there was no fear of the Absolute concerning itself with us (*Surprised by Joy*, 115). It was as an Idealist that Lewis reread Euripides’ *Hippolytus* and so entered the final stages before his acceptance of Christianity, which Lewis described as the final moves in a losing game of chess (*Surprised by Joy*, 119). It is striking that, in his account of rereading *Hippolytus*, Lewis used the same language as when he first discovered “Northernness,” in the titles of Wagner’s music dramas, back in 1911. He described the imaginative renaissance of his adolescence as leaving behind the “desert” of boyhood and as a recollection of and reengagement in joyful longing. Here too, after reading *Hippolytus*, Lewis left a desert: “The dry desert lay behind. I was off once more into the land of longing, my heart at once broken and exalted as it had never been since the old days at Bookham.”

26 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Books, Broadcasts, and the War*, Vol. 2, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, HarperCollins Publishing, 2004), 79n.72.

27 Interestingly, in his letters to Greeves for the remainder of this year, Lewis did not mention attending *Siegfried*. It may be that he was being

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The review for *Siegfried* in the *Sunday Times*, on 22 May 1932, lists Robert Heger as the conductor. Heger was a German musician who conducted in England from 1925-35. The *Sunday Times* reviewer apparently agreed with Lewis's assessment of the singers, some of whom are described as "a little tired this year." And, in corroboration of Lewis's praise for the acting, the reviewer wrote:

Mr. Tessmer's Mime again struck me as the best I have ever seen: this is no mere whimpering weakling, but a thoroughly dangerous little rat who turns, as Mime should do, our sympathies in the direction of Siegfried: we feel that it is by the merest accident that Alberich forestalled him in the matter of the possession of the Rheingold, and that had Mime obtained it first, it might have gone even worse with the gods and the world.

On 2 May 1933, Lewis attended Wagner's *Das Rheingold* at Covent Garden with Owen Barfield. Lewis described the experience, in a letter to Greeves dated 13 June 1933, and said that he enjoyed it less than *Siegfried* and that they had bad seats. A generally positive review of this performance appeared in *The Times* on 3 May 1933; the reviewer's only criticism was of costuming choices which featured "semi-ecclesiastical *négligé*" in place of the "traditional Viking costume."<sup>28</sup> Robert Heger conducted with several other Germans singing leading roles.

In 1934, Lewis had hoped to attend the entire *Ring* cycle with his brother Warnie, Tolkien, Barfield, and Harwood. In preparation, Lewis, Warnie, and Tolkien met periodically to read the operas in German. Harwood was appointed to arrange tickets, and Lewis reminded him of his duty in a mock-serious note in April 1934:

Pray, pray, Sir, exert yourself. Reflect that no small part of the satisfaction of five persons depends upon your conduct: that the object of their desires is rational and innocent: and that their desires are fervent and of long standing."<sup>29</sup>

Harwood apparently failed to secure tickets, and Lewis wrote him a long sarcastic note on 7 May:

As soon as you can, pray let me know through some respectable acquaintance what plans you have formed for the

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humble and considerate to his friend, or that he regretted not attending with Greeves.

28 "Covent Garden Opera: Opening of Wagner Series [Review]," *The Times*, 3 May 1933, Issue: 46434.

29 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 138.

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future. In what quarter of the globe do you intend to sustain that irrevocable exile, hopeless penury, and perpetual disgrace to which you have condemned yourself? Do not give in to the sin of Despair: learn from this example the fatal consequences of error and hope, in some humbler station and some distant land, that you may yet become useful to your species.<sup>30</sup>

In a letter to Greeves on 7 December 1935, Lewis commented on a recent performance of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony that he heard and that he had "seldom enjoyed anything more."<sup>31</sup> Lewis added that Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* (a symphonic poem titled for Wagner's own son Siegfried) was included on the program, but that he found it dull.<sup>32</sup> Despite the disappointment of the *Siegfried Idyll*, Lewis went on to state that the only composer, subsequent to Wagner, to affect him as much as Wagner was the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, a fact that Lewis attributed to his love for Northern things.

Greeves must have pressed Lewis on this point, and, in a note dated 29 December 1935, Lewis explained what he meant. He referenced a previous conversation in which Lewis and Greeves had agreed that Beethoven should be considered Olympian and Wagner Titanic, Beethoven as spiritual and Wagner natural.<sup>33</sup> To Lewis's thinking, Sibelius's music is natural and evocative of Northern landscapes, like Wagner, and not noble, like Beethoven.

Lewis's metaphors, here, are striking in that they reverse the fact that Wagner came after Beethoven—and considered himself to be Beethoven's heir. In Greek mythology, the Titans precede their children, the Olympians, who eventually overthrow them. It may be that Lewis considered Beethoven and Wagner as expressing two independent and contradictory principles, regardless of chronology, and that he identified with the natural over the spiritual. It may also be that Lewis's comments speak to the narrative he presents for his conversion process in *Surprised by Joy*, in which his love for the natural led to love for the spiritual, and his theism led to Christianity. Considered this way, Lewis's comments about Wagner and Beethoven exemplify his account that love for Wagner was a push towards something higher and better, in the first place.<sup>34</sup>

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30 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 139.

31 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 171.

32 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 171.

33 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 175.

34 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 175.

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To the question of whether Wagner exerted any influence on Lewis's fictional writings, consider a letter dated 29 October 1944 and addressed to Charles Brady, a professor of English at Canisius College. Brady contacted Lewis regarding two articles he had written concerning Lewis's writings. In reply, Lewis emphasized his love for Wagner and noted that Wagner's influence on his creative work can be observed in the "operatic" build and climax in *Perelandra*.<sup>35</sup>

Other mentions of music in Lewis's correspondence are brief and occasional, with the exception of a letter to Mrs. R. E. Halvorson, in March 1956, in which Lewis briefly discussed church music and confirmed his emphatic dislike for hymn singing and organ playing.<sup>36</sup> Lewis's subsequent comments about the direct emotional impact of music and the learned ability to perceive musical structures is instructive, especially given Lewis's previous comments about Wagner's naturalness versus Beethoven's nobility. Lewis confesses his reliance upon direct, emotional content when enjoying music:

One must first distinguish the effect which music has on people like me who are musically illiterate and get only the emotional effect, and that which it has on real musical scholars who perceive the structure and get an intellectual satisfaction as well.

Wagner's music is emotionally rich, so it is no wonder that Wagner in particular worked powerfully upon Lewis. Whether one is inclined to receive music emotionally, as Lewis did, or equipped to receive it intellectually, Lewis stressed that "each can be a preparation for or even a medium for meeting God but can also be a distraction and impediment. In that respect, music is not different from a good many other things, human relations, landscapes, poetry, philosophy."

Lewis's notion that human experiences and human creativity are capable of orienting an individual toward God, and, in fact, may constitute a medium for meeting God, is actually quite old. For example, Augustine of Hippo taught the same principle, in his treatise *De musica*.<sup>37</sup> For Augustine, and subsequent Medieval writers, God is encountered and known through the created universe.<sup>38</sup> In *De musica*,

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35 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 2, 630.

36 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Vol. 3, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 731.

37 Cf., John MacInnis, "Augustine's *De Musica* in the 21st Century Music Classroom," *Religions* 6 (March 2015): 211-220.

38 To justify this principle, Augustine pointed to Romans 1:20: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been

Augustine extended this principle to the products of human culture, even music; that is, everything presents an opportunity to know God, if you let it. In contrast, any created thing may become an idol, if it becomes an end in itself. Lewis's concluding comments to Halvorson place him squarely in this philosophical tradition and present a reliable test for judging music:

I think every *natural* thing which is not in itself sinful can become the servant of the spiritual life, but none is automatically so. When it is not, it becomes either just trivial (as music is to millions of people) or a dangerous idol. The emotional effect of music may be not only a distraction (to some people at some times) but a delusion: i.e. feeling certain emotions in church they mistake them for religious emotions when they may be wholly natural. . . . So that the test of music or religion or even visions if one has them is always the same—do they make one more obedient, more God-centered, and neighbour-centered and less *self-centered*? ‘Though I speak with the tongues of Bach and Palestrina and have not charity etc.’!<sup>39</sup>

### “THE FUNERAL OF A GREAT MYTH”

In a letter to Christopher Dawson dated 27 September 1948, Lewis developed a train of thought that he had begun earlier, in an essay for *The Socratic Digest*, in 1945, by taking on what he called the “Great Myth” of “Developmentalism” or “The Evolutionary Myth.”<sup>40</sup> For Lewis, “Developmentalism” presented a formula for all existence, and he distinguished “Developmentalism” from the biological theory of evolution, which is used to describe changes observed in organic life (i.e., evolution describes change, Developmentalism describes refinement). Lewis’s thinking on this topic is fleshed out in his essay “The Funeral of a Great Myth,” included in his essay collection *Christian Reflections*.<sup>41</sup> In this essay, Lewis pointed to excellent artistic examples of “Developmentalism” in Keats’s *Hyperion* and Wagner’s *Ring* cycle and argued that, contrary to what one might assume about

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clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”

39 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 731.

40 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 3, 1584. The earlier essay from *The Socratic Digest* is titled “Is Theology Poetry” (cf., *Christian Reflections*, xiii).

41 C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed., Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1967), 82ff.

“Developmentalism” flowing naturally after the writings of Charles Darwin, “Developmentalism” actually predates Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, published in 1859.<sup>42</sup> That is, the science bolstered a theory that actually predated it. Lewis wrote,

And on the continent we have the *Nibelung’s Ring*. Coming, as I do, to bury but also to praise the receding age, I will by no means join in the modern depreciation of Wagner. He may, for all I know, have been a bad man. He may (though I shall never believe it) have been a bad musician. But as a mythopoeic poet he is incomparable. The tragedy of the Evolutionary Myth has never been more nobly expressed than in his Wotan: its heady raptures never more irresistibly than in *Siegfried*. That [Wagner] himself knew quite well what he was writing about can be seen from his letter to August Rockel in 1854. “The progress of the whole drama shows the necessity of recognizing and submitting to the change, the diversity, the multiplicity, the eternal novelty, of the Real. Wotan rises to the tragic height of willing his own downfall. This is all we have to learn from the history of Man—to will the necessary and ourselves to bring it to pass.”<sup>43</sup>

Lewis makes consistent reference to the Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, in this essay, and one may observe that, for Lewis, the *Ring* story was not just a fantastical tale about dwarfs, giants, and a magical ring. It was not only a moralistic tale about the importance of love. It was not even simply about the lust for power and how such desire can destroy us. Lewis perceived in Wagner’s *Ring* a powerful expression of the dominant story told by modernity, one of inexorable progress and development until our eventual undoing, the heat death of the universe—the twilight of the gods:

All this time Nature, the old enemy who only seemed to be defeated, has been gnawing away, silently, unceasingly, out of the reach of human power. The Sun will cool—all suns will cool—the whole universe will run down. Life (every form of life) will be banished without hope of return from every cubic inch of infinite space. All ends in nothingness, ‘Universal

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42 Lewis is referring to Wagner’s libretto to the *Ring* cycle which was completed in 1852 and published in 1853, which is when Wagner began composing music for the cycle.

43 Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 84. Lewis goes on to say, “Already, before science had spoken, the mythical imagination knew the kind of ‘Evolution’ it wanted. It wanted the Keatian and Wagnerian kind: the gods superseding the Titans, and the young, joyous, careless, amorous Siegfried superseding the care-worn, anxious treaty-entangled Wotan.” (85-86)

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darkness covers all.' True to the shape of Elizabethan tragedy, the hero has swiftly fallen from the glory to which he slowly climbed: we are dismissed 'in calm of mind, all passion spent.' It is indeed much better than an Elizabethan tragedy, for it has a more complete finality. It brings us to the end not of a story, but of all possible stories: *enden sah ich die welt*. I grew up believing in this Myth and I have felt—I still feel—its almost perfect grandeur.<sup>44</sup>

With that last bit of German (translated, "I saw the world end"), Lewis quoted an unpublished ending to Wagner's *The Twilight of the Gods* (Act III, Scene 3). Wagner actually struggled with how the *Ring* cycle should conclude, and he wrote several possible endings, one of which is known as the "Schopenhauer Ending," because it evinces the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy upon Wagner, at that time.<sup>45</sup> In this possible conclusion to the *Ring* cycle, Brünnhilde seeks an end to suffering through nonexistence, and she sings,

Enlightened and redeemed from reincarnation, I shall proceed to the most hallowed chosen land beyond both desire and illusion, the end of the earthly journey. Do you know how I attained the blessed goal of all that is eternal? The deepest pain of grieving love opened my eyes: I saw the world end.<sup>46</sup>

Continuing his critique of "Developmentalism," Lewis went on to explain some reasons why the Great Myth has such power in modern culture. For example, it presents a rationale to disregard one's parents and teachers. We did not descend from them; we emerged from them as something higher and finer. Again, drawing upon Wagner in his explanation, Lewis wrote,

One then gets a kind of cosmic excuse for regarding one's father as a muddling old Mima [i.e., Mime] and his claims upon our gratitude or respect as an insufferable *stamenlied* [i.e., *stammenlied*]. 'Out of the way, old fool: it is we who know to forge Nothung!'<sup>47</sup>

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44 Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 88.

45 Cf., Warren Darcy, "The Metaphysics of Annihilation: Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Ending of the *Ring*," *Music Theory Spectrum* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1-40.

46 Quoted in Roger Hollinrake, *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (New York, Routledge, 2010), 47-48. By quoting such an obscure portion of the *Ring*—not the ending usually heard in performances, Lewis assumes a great deal about his reader, in this essay.

47 Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 92.

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Here, Lewis is referencing Act 1 of Wagner's *Siegfried*, and the hero Siegfried's rude dismissal of the dwarf Mime, who raised him from an infant. In the story, Siegfried decides to reforge the magical sword Nothung himself, since Mime cannot do it. Nothung is the same sword Siegfried uses when he unknowingly fights with Wotan and breaks Wotan's spear. In this essay, Lewis's condemnation of "Developmentalism" was final, but he emphasized, in his conclusion, that, like all good myths, "Developmentalism" may be certainly enjoyed with good will and pleasure—though, not believed.

### SURPRISED BY JOY

Turning to Lewis's autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, one may note that Lewis's concept of joy, the key theme of this book, is tied to Wagner and "Northernness," throughout the narrative. After his imaginative renaissance, in 1911, Lewis immersed himself in Norse mythology, and he recounted how he tried to recapture the initial sensation of joyful longing through subsequent mythological studies. He soon discovered, though, that focusing on the feeling and trying to achieve it through self effort was futile.<sup>48</sup> Lewis concluded that the joy he wanted was only possible while oriented towards an object, even if only its memory, and that to achieve joy, he must forget himself. This insight resonates with Lewis's letter to Greeves, in 1930, in which he applied his Idealist philosophy to the act of listening to Wagner's music "by letting the longings go even deeper and turning my mind to the One, the real object of all desire." Lewis went on to speculate that all pleasures might actually point to the experience of Joy that he so prized, and that Joy itself pointed to something more ultimate: "Inexorably Joy proclaimed, 'You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not you nor any state of you.'"<sup>49</sup>

It is a well-known portion of Lewis's biography, that, though he tried to live out Absolute Idealism consistently, he found that he could not.<sup>50</sup> Through that experience, though, he concluded that there must be a personal God. Lewis did not come to this conclusion willingly; he described it as the sort of instant when a mouse finds the cat. And what was his chosen metaphor to express his state in this moment? "The best image of my predicament is the meeting of Mime and Wotan in the first act of *Siegfried*: *hier brauch' ich nicht Spärer, noch*

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48 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 92.

49 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 121.

50 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 125.

*Späher, Einsam will ich . . .* (I've no use for spies and snoopers. I would be private. . . ).<sup>51</sup> Here, Lewis takes on the persona of treacherous old Mime who, in the first act of *Siegfried* unsuccessfully tries to dismiss the god Wotan.<sup>52</sup>

Lewis's constant reference back to Wagner and Northernness in his theological journey is understandable because those stories worked powerfully upon his imagination. Lewis also thought that God was at work in his life through his engagement with Wagner. He wrote: "Sometimes I can almost think that I was sent back to the false gods there to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, while recounting his move to a personal Theism, Lewis explained further how this process was not random, but had a purpose: "Long since, through the gods of Asgard, and later through the notion of the Absolute, He [i.e., God] had taught me how a thing can be revered not for what it can do to us but for what it is in itself."<sup>54</sup>

### AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM

Lewis's most extended engagement with music and the arts is found in his book *An Experiment in Criticism*. In the chapter titled "How the Few and the Many Use Pictures and Music," Lewis, considered illustrations that he had loved in his youth, and saw that he failed to distinguish between their merits. For example, he mentioned Rackham's illustrations to Wagner's *Ring*, noting their admirable composition, but that he later saw that the human figures were often like "dummies." Lewis concluded that his error was in the act of substitution; he substituted the art for what it prompted within him instead of considering what was objectively before him.<sup>55</sup> This understanding, expressed near the end of Lewis's life and well after his conversion to Christianity, is actually of a piece with his previous insight, while an Idealist, about Joy pointing to something more ultimate. In both contexts, Lewis explained that real appreciation, real Joy begins when you lay yourself aside, i.e., your "preconceptions,

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51 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 125.

52 It is interesting that Lewis again adopts a character from Wagner's *Ring* in opposition to Wotan, as he did when he used Loki in conflict with Wotan in *Loki Bound* to express his growing doubts about Christianity.

53 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 43.

54 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 127.

55 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 14.

interests, and associations,” and take in something on its own terms. It is the difference between using and receiving, and the call is to orient oneself outward and engage the “other.”<sup>56</sup>

The real objection to that way of enjoying pictures is that you never get beyond yourself. The picture, so used, can call out of you only what is already there. You do not cross the frontier into that new region which the pictorial art as such has added to the world. *Zum Eckel find' ich immer nur mich.*<sup>57</sup>

In that last bit of German (translated, “With disgust I find only myself”), Lewis is paraphrasing Wotan in *The Valkyrie* (Act II, Scene 2), and, in this scene, Wotan needs to find a free agent to accomplish a task that he cannot; he calls out for something free of himself, something “other.” Here is a larger portion of the text that Lewis paraphrases:

How can I create a free agent whom I have never protected, who by defying me will be most dear to me? How can I make that other, no longer part of me, who of his own accord will do what I alone desire? What a predicament for a god, a grievous disgrace! With disgust I find only myself, every time, in everything I create. The other man for whom I long, that other I can never find: for the free man has to create himself; I can only create subjects to myself.<sup>58</sup>

With this nuanced example, drawn from Wagner’s *Ring*, Lewis explained how one should receive music and other arts, i.e., as an opportunity to have one’s perceptions changed, to see the world differently, to become a different person, to get over yourself and, through engagement with the other, find God.

Lewis compared this principle, i.e., an open-hearted, outward orientation, to how different people tend to hear music. Some music listeners seek only a tune to hum or tap their foot to; they disregard the musical structure, the performance, the interpretation, etc. Others listen only as a means of seeking status or so that the music may prompt fanciful imaginings within them:

In general the parallel between the popular uses of music and of pictures is close enough. Both consist of ‘using’ rather than ‘receiving.’ Both rush hastily forward to do things with the work of art instead of waiting for it to do something to them.

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56 Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 18.

57 Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 21-22.

58 “Libretti Die Walküre,” accessed 1 July 2016, <<http://www.rwagner.net>>.

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As a result, a very great deal that is really visible on the canvas or audible in the performance is ignored; ignored because it cannot be so ‘used.’ And if the work contains nothing that can be so used—if there are no catchy tunes in the symphony, if the picture is of things that the majority does not care about—it is completely rejected. Neither reaction need be in itself reprehensible; but both leave a man outside the full experience of the arts in question.”<sup>59</sup>

Lewis’s aesthetic insights are commanding because of their historical precedent, their intuitiveness, and because they seem true to life. It is also striking to observe the powerful interaction between Lewis’s aesthetics and his ethics; that is, he took the lessons he learned from art and about art and allowed them to change his life. To this point, recall Lewis’s words from *Surprised by Joy*: “Long since, through the gods of Asgard, and later through the notion of the Absolute, He [i.e., God] had taught me how a thing can be revered not for what it can do to us but for what it is in itself.”<sup>60</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In his essay “First and Second Things,” in *God in the Dock*, Lewis points out that the Nazis, in their glorification of Nordic mythology, had gotten it all wrong. They made Hagen the hero in place of Siegfried:

When I read in *Time and Tide* on June 6 [1942] that the Germans have selected Hagen in preference to Siegfried as their national hero, I could have laughed out loud for pleasure. For I am a romantic person who has frankly reveled in my Nibelungs, and specially in Wagner’s version of the story, ever since one golden summer in adolescence when I first heard the “Ride of the Valkyries” on the gramophone and saw Arthur Rackham’s illustrations to *The Ring*. Even now the very smell of those volumes can come over me with the poignancy of remembered calf love. It was, therefore, a bitter moment when the Nazi’s took over my treasure and made it part of their ideology. But now all is well. They have proved unable to digest it. They can retain it only by standing the story on its

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59 Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 25-26. Though Lewis does not discuss specific musical repertoires, comparing their relative merits, he leaves the question open as to whether there are songs that are simply bad, which to delight in is to delight in badness.

60 *Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*, 127.

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head and making one of the minor villains the hero.<sup>61</sup>

For Lewis, the Nazis had seemed to exchanged all their cultural inheritance for pre-Christian mythology—and then, paradoxically, got the mythology all wrong. Lewis went on to explain that this is an example of a larger principle: “every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made.”<sup>62</sup> Even the love of art, when made an end in itself, may actually constitute a regression and a loss of something more important:

It was only in the 19th century that we became aware of the full dignity of art. We began to ‘take it seriously’ as the Nazis take mythology seriously. But the result seems to have been a dislocation of the aesthetic life in which little is left for us but high-minded works which fewer and fewer people want to read or hear or see, and popular works of which both those who make them and those who enjoy them are half ashamed. Just like the Nazis, by valuing too highly a real, but subordinate good, we have come near to losing that good itself.<sup>63</sup>

Lewis’s searching statements, here, deserve some reflection. It may be that we are still guilty of such an error, when it comes to music and culture; by making them ends in themselves we lose the real good they offer us. Is Wagner and his Ring taught to students perfunctorily or simplistically, as an example of worthy art that deserves exposure? If so, we may squander the real good that Wagner offers us—the commanding and artful expression of a great narrative that explains so much of the world we observe, grand music that prompts our best thinking and most creative endeavors.<sup>64</sup> It is commonly said that the

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61 C. S. Lewis, “First and Second Things,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 278. A similar war-time misappropriation of Wagner by the Germans had occurred a generation earlier. Just before the end of the Great War, Lewis wrote to Greeves (13 October 1918) and mentioned that the Germans had named their trench systems after the heroes of the *Ring*. His own view was that “Anything more vulgar than the application of that grand old cycle to the wearisome ugliness of modern war I can’t imagine.” (Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 406)

62 Lewis, “First and Second Things,” 280.

63 Lewis, “First and Second Things,” 280.

64 This principle concerns me as a music history teacher, and I assume it may find application in other disciplines. Do we teach Shakespeare because he deserves to be known, or to share his timeless insights into the human condition? Do we teach scientific knowledge and methods for their practical

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arts are losing their place in our society, in our school curricula, in our shared national life, and there are calls to preserve our cultural inheritance. Lewis's lesson to us, though, is simply this: if our inheritance is not a lived experience—celebrating all the Joy and wonders offered to us in this world—we are no richer.

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value or because of humanity's call and responsibility to act with justice in our stewardship of this world?

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