

Visiting Scholar in Music

Thomas S. Grey
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Lecture

Thursday, April 18, 2013 - 5:45 PM in HFA 147

“Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle* as Eco-Parable”



Thomas Grey is a preeminent scholar of the music of Wagner and nineteenth-century music and culture. He is the author of *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (1995) and the editor and co-author of *Richard Wagner: The Flying Dutchman* (2000), among other works. He has been the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (1999–2001) and a member of the boards of the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, and *Wagner Spectrum*. His writings have appeared in *JAMS*, *19th Century Music*, *Opera Quarterly*, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, *Beethoven Forum*, the *International Dictionary of Opera*, *The Wagner Compendium* (1992), *The Mendelssohn Companion* (2001), *Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera* (2003), and many other publications. He has received fellowships and grants from the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (Fellow 1986–87), the National Endowment for the Humanities (1993), and the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung (2005, 1994). In addition to Stanford, he has taught at the University of California, Berkeley (2005) and UCLA (1988–89).

About Thomas Grey's lecture

Modern stagings of Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* since Chéreau's celebrated Bayreuth centennial production (1976–1980) have repeatedly suggested the relation of the natural environment to the agency of mankind (including gods and dwarves) as an interpretive key to the whole cycle.

Specifically, Alberich's theft of the symbolic "Rhine Gold" at the beginning of the cycle and his forging from it the magical talisman of world-domination, the Ring, is presented as an allegory of the human exploitation of natural resources in the modern era for industrial, military, or other economic and political ends. In such readings, the gesture of apocalypse that concludes the cycle, Brünnhilde's valedictory "immolation scene," resonates with various historical and potential forms of environmental catastrophe.

The lecture interrogates the conceptual foundations of this reading of the *Ring* cycle in the work's text and music, and in the reception history especially since George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898). Wagner's *Ring*, while obviously grounded in pre-environmentalist attitudes toward nature, actively participates in the construction of an ecological consciousness in Romantic-era artistic discourse contemporaneous with that of the American transcendentalists and other key figures in this history.