Richard Wagner’s set design in Der Ring des Nibelungen differed from that of later adaptations in the 20th century. Before Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, the grandsons of the composer, allowed for modern stage design theory to penetrate the walls of Bayreuth, nothing in the production of Wagner’s operas was noticeably changed since his death. Richard Wagner disliked the two-dimensional sets he was accustomed to using, composed of highly ornamental and richly painted backdrops that strove for a natural realism. For all his genius in operatic creation (specifically the musical composition), Wagner never fully challenged the contemporary method of staging in Der Ring des Nibelungen. In his writings he bemoans having to deal with them at all, yet never does anything of much significance about it. The changes he made were topical in nature, such as the sinking the orchestra pit at the Bayreuth. Shortly after Wagner’s death, Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) led a revolution in stage design, letting light and the movement of the actors, as determined by the music, to sculpt spaces. Appia saw the
ability for light to change and shape feelings, much in the same way that Wagner’s music did. A stage comprised of objects with three-dimensional depth allowed for different lighting conditions, not only by location of the physical lights and their direction, but more importantly, by letting the light react off of the stage and characters in a delicate precision of lit form, shade and shadow. By an analysis of Appia’s writings and charcoal renderings of proposed sets, this revolution in stage design can be shown to be a transmission of Schopenhauerean philosophy into the physical staging of Der Ring des Nibelungen.

Through a series of essays and charcoal drawings, Appia created rough guidelines to follow in the staging of Der Ring des Nibelungen in order to maximize the intentions of Wagner. But it would be twenty years after his death – and sixty years after the creation – that his ideas would finally be adapted into a stage production at Bayreuth. In his Comments on the Staging of the Ring of the Nibelung (1891-92), Appia divides ‘staging’ into three parts: Lighting, Setting and Characters. Over each he casts a Schopenhauerean veil.

Before looking further into Appia’s proposals for Der Ring des Nibelungen, it is important to understand what he was reacting against. The early sets of Der Ring des Nibelungen involved layers of two-dimensional paintings that created the illusion of depth. Trees, rocks, and outcrops were painted to a high degree of realism. A painting includes both lit elements and unlit elements (light, shade and shadow). In theory these painted elements are acting as ‘constants’ as opposed to ‘variables’. The direction of light (as depicted in the painting) will always remain the same, and its only variable is the brightness to which its two dimensional surface is lit. As characters move in front of the
paintings, their own shadows are flatly cast on the painting behind, a painting that could be representing a tree or craggy rock formation. Shadow would normally follow the surfaces of the rock or tree and wrap around corners. As such, the nature of the shade and shadow did not align with the actual lighting scheme of the stage. Carnegy, in his *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* states that “The illusion created by painted scenery was shattered as soon as an actor stepped in front of it” (179). Usually, stages were lit unnaturally with three or four light sources from the peripheries of the stage that directed the gaze of the audience to a focal point. The result was an overly enshrined actor dominating a stage with, at times, confusing perspectival differences arising from the constant and inflexible paintings and even further confusing painted shadows. The solution, as proposed by Appia, was to construct the sets with three-dimensional objects (we can call these ‘variables’) and not rely on paintings to create atmospheric effects, but the play of light on three-dimensional form. By a primitive construction of trees or rocks, the natural flow of light, shade and shadow was less distracting to the audience, and more powerful atmospherically. Our brains immediately recognize (not even at a conscious level sometimes) when lighting is not acting naturally. We feel something is wrong. Indeed, think of the age-old campfire practice of lighting your face with a flashlight from below.

Underneath these topical proposals on the structure of set design was a foundation of theory based on Schopenhauerean aesthetics and the nature of reality. Appia intended to negate all experiences at the opera that distracted from the music. Repeatedly in his essays Appia stressed this quote from Schopenhauer: “Music never expresses the phenomenon but only the inner essence of the phenomenon.” One could point out that
Der Ring is more a Feuerbachian philosophical art piece, the entire libretto written before Wagner’s conversion to Schopenhauer. But it could be because of this that Appia had such an attraction to the piece to begin with: to ‘Schopenhauerize’ Der Ring des Nibelungen in a way that Wagner was not able to. Bryan Magee comes to the conclusion in The Tristan Chord that although at Wagner’s cognitive surface he was creating a utopian political piece, in his intuitive realm (not invaded by his superficial desire or intellect) he was responding to something else. His discovery of Schopenhauer was not so much a ‘discovery’ so much as an affirmation of deep held beliefs that he could not earlier formulate into words. It is also important to remember that the music of Siegfried and Götterdämmerung was composed after this turn in Wagner’s life, composed on top of his Feuerbachian libretto. Much in the way that Wagner tried to mediate Schopenhauerean philosophy in his operas through the musical composition and its relationship to the libretto, Appia sought to mediate the same philosophy from the music to a realized presentation.

Appia’s own relationship with Schopenhauer is on a much different scale than that of Wagner’s. Walter Volbach suggests that Appia adopted several ideas and used a few quotations of Schopenhauer, but in general learned what he knew about him from Wagner’s own use of those ideas (Volbach 45). In addition to the quote of Schopenhauer’s mentioned earlier, Appia would also be influenced by another quote from Friedrich Schiller: “When music reaches its noblest power, it becomes form.” Armed with these two ideas, both expressing essentially the prominence of music amongst the arts, Appia went to task.
In much the same way that the noumenon pierces our perceived reality as phenomenal experience, the stage presentation of Wagner’s works are a physical representation of another existing reality (in this case, the ‘rule book’ of score and libretto). Something will be lost in translation, and it was Appia’s goal to make this translation as clear and minimal as possible. As mentioned earlier, Appia sought to limit any variable that could distract from the music (or to Schopenhauer, the direct expression of the Will). Wagner, as mentioned in his essay on Beethoven, had come to believe that “Music expressed the innermost essence of gesture with such immediate comprehensibility that, once it has completely filled our beings, it diminishes even the power of our sign to concentrate on the gesture, so that finally we understand it without even seeing it” (Carnegy 119). Wagner himself struggled with this, though at a smaller level. “Taken as a whole, the 1876 Ring premieres had revealed the chasm between Wagner’s attempt to keep faith with a production aesthetic formulated more than a quarter of a century earlier and the ideas which had arisen from his Schopenhauerean epiphany, and which were manifest in the composition of Tristan, if not in its first staging. Much of his frustration in his stagings of the Ring in 1876 and Parsifal in 1882 is indeed attributable to the disparity between the theoretical position he had maintained since 1870 and his efforts to realize every detail of the original Ring poem” (Carnegy 119). The task that Appia undertook is something Wagner wrestled with all his life, and it is something to which Appia dedicated his life. It was in their joint appreciation of Schopenhauer that Appia revolutionized Wagner’s stage productions. The most prominent point to be made is the power and role of music in the composition of libretto (in the case of Wagner) and production (in the case of Appia).
Appia went straight to the score for inspiration. Sometimes he disregarded Wagner’s directions and sought to extract “the inner action from the external events” (Volbach 67). “It does mean the internalization of dramatic feeling, inspired by the assurance that music has the means of expressing the inner life without restraint” (Appia, *Theatrical Production and Its Prospects in the Future*). Appia was already in the habit of using his own words of expressing Schopenhauerean philosophy. To Appia, only the music was to be trusted in determining the actions onstage. As a result, the movements of the actors would be based on the music. For if the music was the only element to be trusted, the rest of the performance should be as minimal as possible. To this effect he used a “non-literalistic, suggestive approach, striving to avoid graphic, literalistic depiction because he did not believe in showing on stage things that were already fully described in the music” (Carnegy 181). This ‘suggestive approach’ has its Schopenhauerean & Kantian roots: it is reminiscent of the illusory reality we experience as phenomenon from the concrete non-perceptible reality of the noumenon. Appia believed the further we defined things on stage, the further the ‘things’ were removed from ‘the thing it itself’. Music, the super art of Schopenhauer, was the closest thing to experiencing the noumenon (or ultimate reality), and is the only of the art forms that is nonrepresentational. Appia tried to keep the remaining ‘representational’ objects (lighting, actors, stage design, movement) to a minimum, and always as an extension of the music, in the same way that Wagner’s later operas of *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and *Parsifal*, the libretto was an extension of the score.

Now that we have the understanding of Appia’s aesthetic foundations in Schopenhauerean philosophy, we can look at how these things were physically translated
to the stage. In returning to his *Comments on the Staging of the Ring of the Nibelung*, the three sections on Lighting, Setting and Characters are easier to summarize. Under his section on “Lighting”, Appia begins his writings about lighting by describing methods of producing his reforms technologically. He elaborates on the physical use of his lighting: the machines, footlights, gaslights, lanterns, etc. Each of these must be used (or in the case of the footlights, not used) in certain ways, depending upon the activity of the scene. These machines in turn are further categorized into ambient lighting sources, primarily from above (daylight) and direct lighting sources (lamps, torches, spotlights). The subject of lighting is juxtaposed with “Setting” via this quote: “The more restricted the setting (painting and spatial arrangement), the more independent and flexible is the lighting. One may even assert that, through light, anything is possible in the theatre, for it suggests unmistakably, and *suggestion* is the only basis on which the art of staging can expand without encountering any obstacles; material *realization* is of secondary importance” (Appia, *Comments on the Staging of the Ring of the Nibelung*).

It is important to understand this nature of artistic suggestion and material realization. His suggestions are in line with Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art, that an object is only the material phenomenon of an unavailable noumenal experience. By allowing the possibility of *suggestion* in his staging, Appia frees his audience from much of the kitsch or cluster on a stage and can feel the drama in a way that is more experiential, or that is to say, more noumenal. In short, to show less could be to suggest incomparably more. This is purely an application of Schopenhauerean principles. “Schopenhauer’s whole argument on the presentation of the performing arts is that they should be non-literalistic, deliberately creating incomplete, indefinite images that seek an
active response from the spectator’s imagination” (Carnegy 51). It is because of this that Wagner and Appia felt that the operas should be free from specific social, political or historical contexts. Perhaps it is easier to understand the nature of suggestion or even subtlety in art would be through a series of aphorisms and one-liners. Alfred Hitchcock quipped, “There is no terror in a bang, only in the anticipation of the bang”. Or the 20th century master architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: “Less is more.” An audience that is not asked to think for itself, to fill in the holes, will be playing a less dominant role in aesthetic appreciation. It is in the art forms that challenge us, leave things to the imagination, that we find ourselves reflecting more on the work. Suggestion is, then, a form of artistic subtlety and the use of deliberate absence, and allows one to meditate further on the themes of art than if the art activity were more forcibly handed to them. “Scenic illusion was absurd because it showed the audience only what they perfectly capable of imaging for themselves” (Carnegy 179). To put it bluntly, we have imaginations for a reason!

Continuing with his portion of his essay towards Setting, Appia becomes more specific to Der Ring des Nibelungen in his observances. Operas, acts, and scenes are broken down and offered ideas. One of the most interesting dilemmas in staging Der Ring des Nibelungen is the dominant use of the ‘rocky landscape covered with minimal vegetation’ as described by Wagner. Outside of Das Rheingold, this setting is used in six of nine acts. Appia wrote, “There is a danger of monotony and every precaution must be taken to avoid it”. (Adolphe Appia: Essays, Scenarios and Designs 95). So limited are Wagner’s physical designs for Der Ring that Donald Oenslager, an American set designer, designed a single permanent set that could cater to every single act in Der Ring.
des Nibelungen (Carnegy 198). Once again, Appia employs the idea of simplicity and suggestion to resolve the issue. Firstly, light is the most powerful presence or emotive source in the visual opera (music being the most important in the entire opera). Secondly, the “symbolic” nature of Der Ring des Nibelungen is so prominent that, as Appia mentions, the drama is higher in experience than just the local or mythological. By keeping the characters, costumes and set “extremely simple”, the desire to dress the characters according to our taste and place them in corresponding locations is satisfied.

At times Wagner could be quite descriptive in the exact locations of objects and subjects in the libretto of Der Ring des Nibelungen. This posed an obvious dilemma to Appia who was determined to reevaluate the staging. With Wagner’s instructions on one end of the spectrum and Appia’s own aesthetic sensibilities and interpretations on the other, he sought to wed these ideals. “The author’s wishes were known to me exclusively through his indications in the text and the score; if I have occasionally deviated from them I have no other justification for having done so than my strong feeling of deep reverence…[w]henever this vision permitted no alternative, I presented it as it appeared to me. Whenever the freedom of choice was too obvious or my vision not precise enough, I was content with more general indications or simply guiding remarks” (Adolphe Appia: Essays, Scenarios and Designs 95). As stated earlier, Appia at times went straight to the score and bypassed Wagner’s descriptions, which he found to unsatisfactorily portray a scene.

In the last section of Appia’s essay on the staging of Der Ring des Nibelungen, “Character” refers to the choreography of the actors. Lighting and practicability blend the performer into his surrounding, and the harmony of the entire production is dependent
upon the close workings of character and setting. Appia does not elaborate much on these points, as opposed to his earlier suggestions in “Lighting” and “Setting”, and instead lightly delves into costume design and even the arrangement of wigs and the use of heels.

Appia, apart from the hundreds of articles he wrote, finished three books in his lifetime. In *La Musique et la Mise en Scène*, we see a different approach to stage production. Instead of a division of Lighting, Setting and Character, we see one for the performer and one for scene design. “Appia considered the singing actor, later the performer in general, the intermediary between the ever-flowing mobility of music and the permanent immobility of the scenery. All of a performer’s actions, gestures, and movements are determined by time durations and by rhythm” (Volbach 58). In following with Schiller’s earlier quote, Appia dictates, “music is transported into space and there achieves material form.” Below this hierarchical element number one (the performer), he placed set design, which was composed of three things: spatial arrangement, lighting, and finally painting. Appia further subdivides setting and its three-dimensional arrangement into three other parts: the lower section, the middle one, and the upper section. The lower, being the stage and platforms while the middle refers to where the action takes place. The upper is defined as the areas that hold the backdrops and borders. This creation of the performer as the central figure in production was a radical departure from traditional opera.

It will be helpful to look at some of Appia’s own words espousing his theories than to simplify them too much (or rather fall into the same trap of interpretation that he
had with Wagner’s libretto!). It is worth quoting at length his charming interplay between the actor and the arrangement of the stage:

We already have two basic elements: the actor, and the arrangement of the stage, which should be suited to the actor’s plastic form and his three dimensions.

What remains?

Light.

Our stage is a dark, undefined space. Obviously, the first thing we need to do is see it. But that is merely a precondition – like the simple physical presence of the actor before he begins to act. Like the actor, light must become active. Now, the actor is light’s hierarchical superior; and if light is to rank as a means of dramatic expression, it must be put in the actor’s service – in the serve of the actor’s dramatic and plastic expression.

Let us suppose we have created a space that suits the actor; light will be under the obligation to suit both the actor and the space. We shall see the obstacle that our modern staging puts in the way of that. The flexibility of light is something almost miraculous. Light contains all degrees of brightness and movement; like a palette, it contains all possibilities for color.
It can create shadows, and it can spread the harmony of its vibrations out in space exactly as music would. With it, we control all the expressive power that is in space – if space is put in the actor’s service.

It is evident the mastery Appia had on controlling his prose to the barest essentials whilst describing the complexity of relationships that arise from musical drama. The idea of ‘plasticity’ (and thus movement) is implied not only when referencing actors but light. This organic process is birthed from the musical score, creating a unified whole. A score as diverse as Der Ring des Nibelungen, given the infancy of musical complexity displayed in Das Rheingold, to a more realized piece in Die Walküre, and then the Schopenhauerean Siegfried and Götterdämmerung, there was a variety of ways each act could stand out from the others. In addition to this, let us not forget the twelve year gap between the second and third acts of Siegfried, where the musical change is immediately apparent as the prelude to the third act layers a number of recognizable motives from the preceding operas with a mastery only evident after composing something like Tristan und Isolde.

Appia published alongside his writings many charcoal renderings of suggestive spaces, not only for Der Ring des Nibelungen, but other Wagnerian operas (and even a few non-Wagnerian operas and plays). There is a growing evolution of simplicity in the drawings. Appia kept removing the superfluous aspects of his own designs until what was left were ramps, blocks, stairs and drapes. As an example, in one sketch is an image for Act III of Die Walküre, presumably night or dusk, with a craggy rock projecting into the sky. A single blurry tree is rendered on the right. Silhouetted against the sky are
figures, the Valkyries, wearing helmets and holding spears. Years later, this same scene was more standardized: portions of the craggy rocks became stairs. By the time his proposal reached the Basel production of Der Ring des Nibelungen in 1926, only a grouping of blocks and drapes remained. These final renditions of Der Ring des Nibelungen were realized interpretations of another project he had conceived. In his ‘Rhythmic spaces’, made in 1909, Appia has simplified set design in a way mentioned earlier, but more importantly, is entirely dependent on the movements of actors’ bodies. A simple set of stairs, weaving behind two impossibly high walls, disappears around a corner. Or a series of ramps disappearing in the back of the stage to signify the Elysian fields. These images are the most powerful that he drew. These are also the images for which Appia is famous.

Even in the production of these renderings did Appia transmit Schopenhauerian philosophy. His charcoal renderings are hardly drawn at all: they were created with broad movements and gestures of charcoal, and more time was spent smudging and erasing than drawing. The end pieces do not look so gestural, however. Materiality is implied, lighting is expressed, and the precision almost Spartan. This is reminiscent of Wagner’s own approach to Tristan und Isolde. Magee states that when Wagner was writing to a friend about his idea for an opera for Tristan und Isolde, he mentions that “at this point it is only music.” It was through feeling out the intuitive that Wagner created the calculated score. In the same way that Appia was unable to draw the renderings (thus following a measured and intellectual process) as opposed to intuitively, Wagner did with Tristan und Isolde, a Schopenhauerean work.
From the inception and process of drawings and the wedding of light, movement and space on stage, Appia filtered and facilitated Schopenhauer through all means of his artistic creation. Without his influence, it is difficult to imagine what kind of ‘revolution’ might have taken place, if at all. Cosima Wagner was always reticent to adopt Appia’s proposals, for she never wanted to artistically alter the production of her husband’s work. “The crucial difference was that while Cosima believed that music and stage instructions told the same story, Appia maintained that the latter were an aberration” (Carnegy 148). She was not without reservations for no reason, as she made comparisons to Shakespeare, and Goethe, who left the faintest guidelines on stage production or how the pieces were to be performed. Wagner, however, built his own theatre for Der Ring des Nibelungen and designed Parsifal for the Bayreuth as well. Any aberration from this, to Cosima, was not in keeping with what her husband would have wanted. As Bryan Magee humorously states, “It is often said of Wagner’s writing of The Ring that only a megalomaniac would have embarked on such an extravagantly large and impossible-to-stage project that was to take him over a quarter of a century to complete, and then require him to build his own opera house to put it on in.” (103) It is not hard to imagine why it would be half a century later that any major changes to his operas would take place. The truth of the matter is that both versions – Cosima’s traditional insistence and Appia’s modern theory – are interpretive. But it seems that only Appia saw it that way.
Reflections on Appia

I would like to take this point in time to show a few images of the Rhythmic Spaces that were mentioned earlier. I have taken inspiration from these images and interpreted them for two set designs for a contemporary staging of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

The first image is Appia’s own drawing entitled *The Staircase*

![The Staircase](image)

The second image is my interpretation of it for Act II of *Götterdämmerung*. Siegfried can be seen in the boat after his Rhine journey.
The third image is Appia’s drawing entitled *Echo and Narcissus.*
My interpretation of that drawing follows, and is the Valhalla set for *Die Walküre*. In this image we see Wotan walking towards Fricka.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


