

*Wagner's*

THE  
RING OF THE  
NIBELUNG:

*Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried and Götterdämmerung*

A SHORT  
GUIDE TO  
A GREAT  
OPERA

MICHAEL  
STEEN

WAGNER'S  
*The Ring of the  
Nibelung*

A Short Guide To A Great Opera

By

*Michael Steen*



ORIGINAL WRITING

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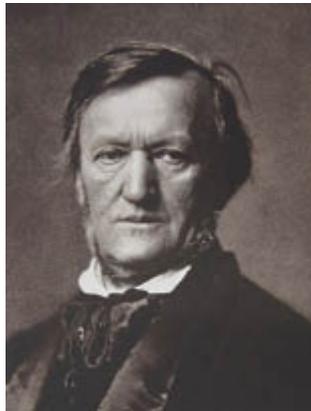
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Richard Wagner

## ***ABOUT THE SERIES***

This Guide is a compendium of four short guides, which are interrelated. There is one for each of the four operas in Wagner's monumental *Ring* cycle. The Guide is part of the series entitled *A Short Guide to a Great Opera*. Several of the Guides in the series have already been published individually, or have been included in the compendium *Great Operas – A Guide to 25 of the World's Finest Musical Experiences*.

In the Preface to that book, the author explained that the Guides were originally designed to inform Rosemary, his wife, in a quick, efficient, light and amusing way, about what it helps to know and expect when going to a performance of a particular opera, or when experiencing it electronically in the increasing number of ways available today. People generally find that they do not have time, and there are too many distractions, to inform themselves once they have arrived in the foyer.

A broad-ranging but economical, practical, crisp, and modern Guide contributes greatly to appreciation and enjoyment. Today, people enjoying opera may be found in the cinema (experiencing, say, ROH Live, Met Opera Live in HD or Glyndebourne Festival in cinemas) as well as in the opera-house, or just listening to it, or watching it at home.

Visit [greatoperas.net](http://greatoperas.net) to find out more.

## ***USING THIS EBOOK***

A quick grasp of *Das Rheingold* and the *Ring* cycle can be gained by reading the section on *DAS RHEINGOLD: WAGNER'S PRELUDE TO THE RING CYCLE* and the subsequent WHO'S WHO and WHAT'S WHAT. Specific links in [blue](#) may be followed as desired. (The reader can return again by selecting the next appropriate 'Back' link.)

Similarly, for the other three operas, a quick grasp can be gained by turning to the relevant BACKGROUND and the subsequent WHO'S WHO and WHAT'S WHAT. Links may then be followed, as desired, from there.

The sections on INTERVAL CHAT are intended to increase the reader's general appreciation of each work. In particular, the opera-goer who has read the relevant one will be more knowledgeable when socialising and thus will enjoy the opera experience more.

Those not attending the complete cycle, and who wish to know the rest of the myth, can turn to '[A summary of \*The Ring\* myth](#)'.

Further elaboration may be found in each ACT by ACT (which expands each Who's Who and What's What).

The reader is also encouraged to turn to the footnotes. This can be done by touching the applicable number on the screen, and the relevant 'Back' button within the footnote.

### ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***

Michael Steen OBE was born in Dublin. He studied at the Royal College of Music, and was the organ scholar at Oriel College, Oxford. Opera has been one of his great pleasures. During a successful thirty year career in the City of London, and afterwards, he has met many who go to it, thus gaining considerable insight into the information which it helps to know in order to enhance one's appreciation and enjoyment of the opera experience. He has been the chairman of the RCM Society and of the Friends of the V&A Museum, the Treasurer of The Open University, and a trustee of Anvil Arts and of The Gerald Coke Handel Foundation.

### ***ALSO BY THE AUTHOR***

*The Lives and Times of the Great Composers* (ebook and hardcopy)

*Great Operas – A Guide to 25 of the World's Finest Musical Experiences* (ebook and hardcopy)

*Enchantress of Nations: Pauline Viardot, Soprano, Muse and Lover* (hardcopy)

At the back of this ebook may be found further information on these and on the individual ebooks published in the series entitled *A Short Guide to a Great Opera*.



WAGNER'S  
*Das Rheingold*

His prelude to  
*The Ring of the Nibelung*

A Short Guide To A Great Opera

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ORIGINAL WRITING

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# DAS RHEINGOLD: WAGNER'S PRELUDE TO THE *RING* CYCLE

## *Its creation*

*The Ring of the Nibelung*, by [Richard Wagner](#), is the largest work in classical music. It opens with his own introduction to it, *Das Rheingold*, which he entitled a 'preliminary evening'. Sometimes this is performed as a stand-alone opera, as are each of the other three components of the 'cycle', *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. With music lasting two and a quarter hours, *Das Rheingold* is the shortest component of the cycle, and is often performed without interval.

Wagner intended the four operas to be performed on consecutive evenings, but the demands on the singers are such that this virtually never happens. Indeed, during the first complete performance, the bass-baritone singing the part of Wotan (the equivalent to the Scandinavian chief god Odin) had *Siegfried* postponed for twenty-four hours, having claimed that he was hoarse. Wotan is the longest and most demanding part in the entire operatic repertoire.

In November 1848, Wagner started on the work which evolved into *The Ring*. Six months previously, he had been an active participant in an abortive political uprising in Dresden. With Liszt's assistance and using a false passport, he escaped to Zurich where he lived as a political refugee for nearly ten years. His work on *The Ring* was constantly interrupted. His life-style, his literary and political activities, although highly formative, inevitably slowed up its composition. And other operas intervened.

So, the gestation period of *The Ring* was extraordinarily long. He took at least twenty-eight years to bring the four operas together onto the stage. This culminated between 13-17 August, 1876,<sup>1</sup> in the purpose-built theatre which he constructed above Bayreuth, fifty miles north-east of Nuremberg. This represented an astonishing achievement, fraught along the way with problems, artistic, theatrical, political, sexual, organisational and financial among others. Even as late as at the beginning of July of that year, it looked as if the necessary cash would run out before the cycle was produced.

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<sup>1</sup> For the challenges that the first Bayreuth performances entailed for Wagner (who had to grab hold of the German Emperor as he was about to trip over, there being no health and safety rules in those days), the reader should turn to the author's *The Lives and Times of the Great Composers* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2003) p. 487. In the opening performance of *Das Rheingold*, the ring was even mislaid.

On those August evenings, the first performances of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* took place. *Das Rheingold* had already been premièred in Munich on its own, on 22 September, 1869, and *Die Walküre* nine months later.<sup>2</sup> Even these had been delayed until around fifteen years after he had finished composing each opera.

Back in the middle of the century, Wagner had envisaged a 'Grand Heroic Opera', a 'great parable of life', three performances of which would be given in a festival theatre, a temporary building which would then be dismantled. Admission would be free. As was his wont, he would write the libretto, the poem, himself.

For it, he prepared a 'Sketch for a drama', 'Siegfried's Death', about the hero who would become a central character in *The Ring*. This evolved into the poem for *Götterdämmerung*, *The Twilight of the Gods*. A further half-hour of poetry, which a friend<sup>3</sup> told him was needed for clarification, subsequently became the Prologue to that opera.

But he found that he needed to provide yet more background to the young Siegfried. After that, he needed to explain more about his bride, Brünnhilde the 'Valkyrie'. (The Valkyries are the horsewomen of the air who fetch dead heroes to Valhalla, the abode of the gods and heroes.)

After this, he felt that he should explain the start of his myth by telling the story of Wotan in *Das Rheingold*.

Thus it was that Wagner wrote the text of each operas in reverse order, another extraordinary feature of the work. He completed the entire poem by the end of 1852, when he read it to friends. In the following year, five years after initiating the process, the poem was privately printed. At this stage, the die was cast, although he made some alterations to it over the years.

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2 The second part of Scene 1 of *Das Rheingold*, called 'the Rape of the Rhinegold', and 'the Entry into Valhalla', had been performed in 1862 at a concert in Vienna, conducted by Wagner himself.

3 This was Eduard Devrient who had been a friend of Mendelssohn, and was brother-in-law of Wagner's ideal soprano, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. He was first Christus in Mendelssohn's revival of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.



Wagner in 1853

He composed the music forwards! He started with *Das Rheingold* in November 1853.

He had difficulty working out how to start the immense work: the inspiration came to him when he collapsed with exhaustion brought on by dysentery caused by eating too many Italian ice creams. He felt as if he was sinking into a mighty flood of water. This is what his depiction of the bottom of the Rhine sounds like. It starts almost inaudibly (depicting the silence of the deep) and builds up waves of music with eight separate horns, and then woodwind and strings, eventually leading to woodwind scales, portraying the swooshing, swirling, incessant surging of the water.

He completed *Das Rheingold* in the following September. But since he was then still a political refugee, there was no chance of it being performed anywhere. Composing the other operas in the cycle suffered from interruption and delay.

### Some Diversions

After *Das Rheingold*, the next opera in the cycle was *Die Walküre*. In Zurich, the beautiful [Mathilde Wesendonck](#) provided Wagner's inspiration when he was composing the music for this. He completed it in the Spring of 1856. Then, in the summer of 1857, when his composition had progressed almost up to the end of act 2 of *Siegfried*, he stopped work on the project. He diverted his attentions to his great love story, *Tristan und Isolde*, for which Mathilde was his muse, his heroine. After that, he composed *Die Meistersinger*. He also needed to earn some money. He decided that he would only to resume work on *The Ring* if someone sponsored him, or he was well enough off that he could afford to make a present of it to the world. That sponsor eventually appeared in the guise of King Ludwig of Bavaria.

So, we need to fast-forward to the 1860s. Very shortly after succeeding to the Bavarian throne on the death of his father in March 1864, [King Ludwig](#) (the 'mad king'), entered the composer's life, out of the blue, with his seemingly unlimited patronage. Under the formal financial arrangements between Wagner and the King, the four Ring operas, the final two of which were to have been completed within three years, became the King's property. That he had already pledged the two completed operas to Mathilde's husband Otto, a financier, and that they had also been sold to Wagner's publishers, was, one may suppose, the kind of detail that was not of much concern to an artist with Wagner's degree of self-estimation.

Not surprisingly, Ludwig was impatient to unwrap his purchases. There was no reason to delay the production of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, which were 'ready to go'. (The music for act 3 of *Siegfried* still remained to be composed, as did the whole of *Götterdämmerung*.)

In summer 1869, preparations began for the production of *Das Rheingold* at the Munich court theatre. Despite Wagner's use of delaying tactics to defer its production, the King eventually forced the pace.

To a great extent, Wagner's desire for delay was for the good reason that he wanted the first performance of the entire *Ring* to be performed as a complete cycle. After all, the première of the complete *Ring* would be a unique, epoch-making event in the history of art. The atmosphere should be reverential, the audience suitably deferential, and the performance should be at a time and place of his choice.

There were other specific reasons as well. He recognised that *Das Rheingold*, taken on its own, is not the easiest of the operas, either to

produce without it becoming comical,<sup>4</sup> or for the audience to experience as a work of art. As the writer and critic George Bernard Shaw<sup>5</sup> put it, *Das Rheingold*, out of context, could seem to be ‘a puerile fairy tale,’ or even ‘a damned pantomime’, whereas it is ‘a profound allegory’. A negative audience reaction to a premature production would undermine, even wreck, the whole *Ring* project. A positive one would weaken his argument that the entire *Ring* cycle had to be presented, promoted and financed in a unique and costly venue – such as the Festspielhaus, his opera house in Bayreuth, would become.



In Munich, 1864

Although Wagner might have felt that Munich could provide an opportunity to have a trial run of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, and to do so would accustom the singers to his new vocal demands, the timing was especially bad. He had been expelled from Munich in December 1865 for interfering in politics and draining the exchequer. Also a production performed under the cloud of disapproval<sup>6</sup> thrown up by his controversial ‘private life’, could attract adverse criticism. His reputation was severely tarnished by his improper behaviour with Liszt’s daughter *Cosima*, the wife of the court conductor Hans von Bülow.

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4 As well as Alberich being transformed from a gnome into a dragon and then a toad, the Rhinemaidens swim at the bottom of the Rhine, there are difficult transitions from the mountain tops to the nether-world of the Nibelungs, and the gods enter Valhalla across a Rainbow Bridge.

5 George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), born in Dublin, was a Nobel Prize-winner, and a leading Socialist. He wrote a large number of plays including *Pygmalion* (the basis for the musical *My Fair Lady*), *Saint Joan*, and *The Apple Cart*. He started out as a journalist, art and music critic. One of his publications was his essay of 1898, *The Perfect Wagnerite*.

6 In Munich, Wagner became known as Lolotte, after the pseudo-Spanish adventuress and dancer Lola Montez from County Sligo, Ireland, whose scandalous affair with King Ludwig’s grandfather had led to his abdication.

In these circumstances, there was no possibility of Wagner spending time in Munich for the rehearsals. So, ruthlessly, Wagner continued to do his utmost to stymie the premières of both *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, and did not attend either.

Conductor, singers and the production team nevertheless trooped to 'Tribschen', his house near Lucerne in Switzerland, to be rehearsed. When Bülow resigned, suffering from strain and exhaustion, Hans Richter,<sup>7</sup> Wagner's protégé, was the obvious choice to replace him. Richter was then central to a series of shenanigans, a conspiracy to sabotage the first performance of Wagner's own work, because the composer still wanted it delayed. After the dress rehearsal, Richter, Wagner's stooge, resigned, at the last minute, expressing himself to be unhappy with the stage effects, (such as the gnome's transformations, the Rainbow bridge, the flames created by the demi-god of fire). He wanted the première 'postponed'.

The King, who was 'by no means the gushing half-wit he is popularly supposed to have been', called Richter's bluff. He was suspended by the court chamberlain, with the King's complete support. Although far from being the first choice as replacement (others such as Saint-Saëns were approached), Franz Wüllner, a staff conductor, was persuaded to conduct. Three performances of *Das Rheingold* were successfully staged on 22, 24 and 26 September, 1869. This was despite an irate Wagner giving an order to Wüllner: 'Hands off my score; if not, go to Hell'. Wagner also sarcastically advised Wüllner to restrict his future conducting activities to directing music clubs.

The performances were 'as great a "success" as any musical work can be that breaks with tradition at so many points'.

The King got *Die Walküre* staged nine months later, to great acclaim.

Later, with great duplicity, Wagner managed to defer a performance of *Siegfried* until the full *Ring* production of all four operas, although its full score had been completed five years earlier. Although he had composed some music for 'Siegfried's Death' back in 1850, *Götterdämmerung* was only finally completed less than two years before the Bayreuth première of the complete *Ring* cycle.

Back to Background for:  
[Back to Die Walküre](#)  
[Back to Siegfried](#)  
[Back to Götterdämmerung](#)

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<sup>7</sup> Richter would later precede Mahler at the Imperial Opera in Vienna, and conduct a disastrous première of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*.



In 1877, a year after the *Ring* première

### *Myth, style, music and reputation*

For many in the audience, Wagner's myth was, and remains, a 'nebulous haze'.<sup>8</sup> Nobody can answer the question for certain: What is *The Ring* all about? A simple explanation, could be that its message is timeless: his gods, dodgy characters, are more like self-seeking politicians or businessmen rather than the gods with which most Western people may be familiar, the Greek or Roman gods or the God of the Jewish-Christian tradition. On this interpretation, *The Ring* can be considered a 'frontal attack on middle-class institutions and values', an allegory about the evils of 'unregulated industrial capitalism', the established Church, the underlying anarchy of modern society, the objectification of human labour.

However, one can easily find a more complex explanation, an alternative which is more philosophical and metaphysical.

Where did Wagner get these ideas from? Wagner created his own myth out of many sources, principally the early thirteenth century Icelandic 'Eddic' poems of Snorri Sturluson, the *Volsungssaga*, and, to a lesser extent, the *Nibelungenlied*, which since its discovery in the middle of the eighteenth century had been regarded as the German national epic. More recent sources included the German mythological researches of the Brothers Grimm, widely known for their collection of many of the fairytales, such as Cinderella, and Hansel and Gretel.

Wagner overlaid his ancient sources with his own 'utopian socialist' thinking, fostered particularly in Dresden in the 1840s. This was rooted

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase was coined by Ernest Newman, who has been called the most celebrated critic in the first half of the twentieth century.

in the writings of the leading political and philosophical thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Kant, Hegel, Proudhon and Feuerbach. Schopenhauer, who greatly influenced Wagner's later operas, had only a limited influence on *The Ring*: its text had been completed and printed before Wagner encountered his writings.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, many in the audience did not find [Wagner's style](#) easy: *Das Rheingold* is 'musically, poetically, and in every other way a clean break with tradition'.

With each of the components of *The Ring*, Wagner aimed to create a 'music drama', rather than a typical opera. He intended to provide an amalgam of 'philosophy, politics, history and literature, as well as myth, language, poetry, drama and music', that is, [a complete art-work \(\*Gesamtkunstwerk\*\)](#). The concept was new even if conceptually its roots were to be found in ancient Greek theatre, and he had assembled his myth from old Norse, Icelandic and German myths and poems.

For his audience, the subject matter and the poetry were unusual, as was the music.

[Wagner's poetry](#) imitated ancient Nordic poetry in which lines are linked together by alliteration rather than by conventional rhyming or blank-verse. (Alliteration arises where stressed syllables begin with or contain the same letter or sound, as in a phrase such as 'After life's fitful fever...')

As to the music, the critics were disappointed by the absence of the familiar operatic structure. Traditionally, opera composers had used recitative, 'speaking in music', to describe the action; they had used melodious arias to comment on it and to express emotion. However, people do not sing arias in real life, nor, on the whole, do they (that is, adults) speak at the same time, except perhaps when making love, or congregating together. So, in his quest for 'music drama', Wagner jettisoned the traditional operatic forms, the ensembles, choruses etc. He experimented with musicalising speech, *Sprechstimme*, speech song.<sup>10</sup> Much of the music therefore comprised long stretches of this, which is akin to recitative in other operas.

This was risky, because recitative can be tedious. Verdi, always alert to the pulse of his audience, wondered whether any composer 'can set

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<sup>9</sup> However, Wagner claimed that Schopenhauer was of like mind, even though neither realised it at the time.

<sup>10</sup> Hopefully, the conductor will restrain the orchestra sufficiently to allow the singers 'to sing rather than bark'. Wagner himself taught a pure *legato* line for his *Sprechstimme*.

a hundred lines of recitative without boring everybody'.<sup>11</sup> Besides, with recitative, few audiences understand what the characters are 'banging on' about, especially if it is in a foreign language, a problem recognised since Handel's day.

The role of Wagner's singers was also different. The typical opera goer was conditioned to the singers taking the lead, accompanied by the orchestra. In Wagner's 'music dramas', the voice – perhaps 'the power and clarion sound' of an immortal such as Kirsten Flagstad, Birgit Nilsson or Hildegard Behrens – is just another prominent instrument in the overall sound created within Wagner's integrated art-work. He wanted his orchestra to support the singer 'as the sea does a boat, rocking but never upsetting or swamping it'.

So, although Tchaikovsky recognised that *The Ring* was 'one of the most significant events in the history of art', and conceded that there were many really good moments, he also used adjectives such as 'boring' 'long-winded', even 'interminable'. Schumann's wife Clara, a romantic if ever there was one, was less polite about *Das Rheingold*: she reported that, for the whole evening, she felt as though she was 'wading about in a swamp'.

Wagner bound together his opera, and indeed the whole cycle, with snippets of melody, which catch the ear, known as [leitmotives](#). These melodies, perhaps about a hundred and twenty of them in all, highly structured and developed, are each a sort of musical label associated with a particular person, thing or emotion. Many are glorious, and the ordinary listener does not want to let them go. That did not stop the famous conductor Sir Thomas Beecham despairing of them: 'We have been playing for two solid hours and we're still playing this bloody tune', he is reputed to have said. (No doubt he was aware that in many cases the same tune probably recurs over thirteen operatic hours later.) [Examples of leitmotives](#) are given at the end of this Short Guide.

It would be unwise to try too hard to identify the leitmotives. In *Das Rheingold* there are nearly two hundred and eighty occurrences, ignoring repetitions in the immediate vicinity. If such repetitions were counted, the figure would be in the thousands. In view of the long gestation period, it is amazing that, against all odds, Wagner eventually tied together the threads and loose-ends and assembled the work 'in a prodigious whole'.

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11 The Count, albeit a lightweight, superficial character, in Richard Strauss's *Capriccio*, deplored recitative's absence of 'sweetness of melody and stimulus of speech'.

Today of course, Wagner's gods and heroes do not appear in Viking-style animal skins with helmets and shields, like the characters in Wagner's sources. Nor does Brünnhilde's horse, Grane, appear on stage. After his death, his widow Cosima, who survived her husband by forty-seven years, continued productions in the traditional style at Bayreuth. The appropriation of Wagner by the Nazis, and the representation of the Nibelungs as Jews, discredited these productions.

Elsewhere, productions of *The Ring* increasingly adopted up-to-date stage techniques and facilities, especially for lighting. This made sense. However, it was rather different when Wieland Wagner, Cosima's grandson, after World War II edited out anything that did not fit his vision, or which he found 'boring'. Since then, Wagner's works have been 'open season' for producers around the world and are often controversial. Patrice Chéreau's 1976 centenary production at Bayreuth, conducted by Pierre Boulez, humanised the gods, and by depicting 'the horrors of an industrialised late capitalist world', led a vogue for using operas as a vehicle for making contemporary social statements. Many recent productions are derived from this lineage, and often attract support from an audience which primarily enjoys the music while feeling that it is being provided with a 'relevant', 'fashionable' production.

Some, on the other hand, consider that we have gone a long way down a slippery slope. Plácido Domingo warned that 'if any detail of a production has confused rather than elucidated the substance of a work for a reasonably intelligent person, it has failed in its function'.

The support or antipathy for specific [recent productions](#) has fuelled a furnace already stoked by the composer's adversaries and adherents. [The dislike of Wagner](#) manifested by 'anti-Wagnerites', and his defence by 'Wagnerites', has led to considerable contention. It is improbable that anyone will ever reconcile their diametrically opposed positions.

However, Wagner's consciousness of his own genius, financial chicanery, womanising, hypocrisy, political inconsistency, political meddling, ruthlessness and a personal urge to dominate, and not least his shocking anti-Semitism, have incited intense hostility. W. H. Auden, the English poet, called him 'an absolute shit'.

Whatever view one may have about the man and a particular production, there is so much to enjoy. *Das Rheingold*, which was designed to describe the background, is not as easy as the other *Ring* operas, not least for audiences who do not understand, or cannot pick up, the language in which it is sung. But, with its pantomime aspects – dragons, toads, its orchestra with eighteen anvils of varying sizes – it can be as much fun. Nobody can fail to leave the theatre without

having enjoyed the marvellous music which accompanies the gods over the Rainbow Bridge to Valhalla. By that time, we will have been jerked to attention by Wagner's depiction of the giant's murder of his brother Fasolt, its brutality dramatically portrayed on drums and low strings, fortissimo. Donner, the thunder-god, reckons a breath of fresh air is needed and calls up one of his thunder-storms, which must have astonished audiences used to musical storms such as the one which Beethoven depicted in his *Pastoral Symphony*. There is nothing quite like Wagner's: lightning strikes overhead, and the two drums crash onto bottom F.

Back to Myth, style, music and reputation

*Die Walküre*

*Siegfried*

*Götterdämmerung*

# DAS RHEINGOLD:

## WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT

The myth, set in the imaginary past, is based on Wagner's text. As mentioned in [Warning! Recent productions](#) certain directors may amend opera stories to suit their production.

In the imaginary past, before time began, Wisdom lay deep in the waters of a well beneath the World Ash-tree. The three roots of the tree ran to Heaven (the abode of **gods**), to the land of the **giants** and to the depths of the earth, an underworld called **Nibelheim**, which is occupied by gnomes called **Nibelungs**. (Nibelheim is a Orwellian '1984' world of totalitarian government, where humans are treated not as subjects but as objects.)

**Wotan** gave one of his eyes to drink at the well, thus acquiring wisdom and thereby becoming the chief of the gods. In this role, he found that a spear hewn from the ash-tree was insufficient to maintain world order. He had to enter into deals and compromises which were inscribed on his spear in the ancient writing of the Teutonic tribes, called runes.<sup>12</sup> He soon discovered the consequences: 'since by my treaties I rule, by those treaties I am enslaved.' He was already in a fix, on that slippery slope, discovered by many politicians, which fits one interpretation of the subject matter of the *Ring* cycle.

In particular, Wotan needed to pay for **Valhalla**, a splendid fortress which he got the giants to build in order to impress and satisfy his wife and his arrogant colleagues. It was also needed to secure their immortality by defending them from the **Nibelungs**. His building contractors were two giants, **Fafner** and **Fasolt**. As barter for Valhalla, the contract specified handing over the goddess of love, youth and beauty, **Freia**.

**That is all background.** The story of *Das Rheingold* itself begins at the bottom of the River Rhine where the three **Rhinemaidens** guard the **Gold** belonging to Father Rhine. They scorn the advances of the ugly **Alberich**, who is not just a Nibelung, but the ruler of **Nibelheim**. He learns from their chatter that a **Ring** made out of the Gold will confer omnipotence. However, the Gold can only be obtained at the cost of forswearing love. (Love and might are incompatible.) Having tried but failed to seduce a Rhinemaiden, Alberich reckons that he might as well forswear love, obtain the Gold and seize power.

The Ring<sup>13</sup> is forged by Alberich's brother **Mime**.<sup>14</sup> He also manufactures

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<sup>12</sup> The Anglo-Saxon word 'runes' also denotes the magical: the knowledge of the runes and their implications was confined to a small élite. Hence the expression 'reading the runes'.

<sup>13</sup> The 'Ring of the Nibelung' is the ring belonging to Alberich the Nibelung. Nibelung is singular.

<sup>14</sup> Mime is pronounced 'Meemer'.

the **Tarnhelm**, a magic garment or hood whose wearer can become invisible, assume any shape desired, or be transported to any chosen place.

Meanwhile, the gods must hand over Freia, in payment for Valhalla. She possesses the golden apples which the gods need to eat to give them eternal youth; losing Freia will deprive them of immortality and be disastrous. So, **Fricka**, Wotan's wife, the supreme goddess, the patroness and guardian of women, persuades him to try to renegotiate the deal. To provide an alternative means of payment, **Loge**, the flickery demigod of Fire, Wotan's slippery adviser and fixer, suggests stealing the Gold from Alberich.

Wotan descends to Nibelheim. Together with Loge, he steals the Rhinegold by tricking Alberich to use his Tarnhelm, first to assume the shape of a fearsome dragon, and then the shape of a tiny toad which Wotan traps. Robbed of his Gold, Alberich places a **curse** on it, condemning to death its possessors. To lift the fatal curse, the Ring would have to be restored to the Rhinemaidens.

Despite the intervention of **Erda**, the omniscient Earth goddess, who warns Wotan to return the Gold and the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, he settles up with the giants who insist on both the Ring and the Tarnhelm being included in the hoard being transferred to them on completion. Freia is released.

Alberich's curse, by which possessors of the Ring are condemned to die, immediately becomes effective: Fafner kills Fasolt and lumbers off with the Gold, including Ring and Tarnhelm. Even the gods are aghast at the speed and violence of the murder.

But Freia's brother **Donner**, god of thunder, creates a storm to clear the air. And her brother **Froh**, on whom rain and sunshine depend, summons up **the Rainbow Bridge** to enable the Gods to cross to Valhalla and take possession of their property.

Wotan puts a brave spin on what he knows is an awful prospect. The omnipotence conferred by the Ring, now possessed by Fafner, will eventually be fatal to the giant (owing to Alberich's curse) but meanwhile his possession of it constitutes a terrible threat to the gods. Loge, no fool, reckons the gods are hurrying to their doom. Much more has to happen before the climax of *Götterdämmerung*. Meanwhile, the Rhinemaidens bemoan their sorry situation.

A **Glossary** is included of what George Bernard Shaw called 'the curious harlequinade of gods, dwarfs and giants'. [A summary of \*The Ring\* myth](#) is also provided.

# DAS RHEINGOLD: INTERVAL CHAT

## ***The real Who's who:***

**Richard Wagner** was born in Leipzig on 22 May, 1813. His ostensible father was an official in the police, but, more probably, he was his mother's lover.

He was a small man with an outsize ego, and almost superhuman ability. He was a poet as well as a composer, philosopher, pamphleteer and polemicist; political revolutionary, businessman, financier, as well as fundraiser. He was also an architect, theatre designer, acoustician and builder, festival director and, last but not least, womaniser. It is amazing that he achieved so much, his life's work, while being a dispirited melancholic, who at the age of thirty, would sit down and cry for a quarter of an hour.

His early years – 'professional purgatory as a conductor in small-time provincial opera-houses', including two years in Riga (then in the Russian Empire, now the capital of Latvia) and around thirty months in Paris – were a time of considerable struggle and poverty. *Rienzi*, with which he had hoped to succeed in Paris, and *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman) were staged in Dresden. This led to Wagner's appointment as conductor at the Dresden Royal Opera House in 1843. During his work there, he composed *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.

Wagner was notoriously anti-Semitic, at a time when anti-Semitism was endemic in Europe. Twentieth century anti-Semitism has been attributed to him, particularly to his *Jewishness in Music* (*Das Judentum in der Musik*), published in 1850. His attitude did not stop him employing a Jewish conductor and Jewish soloists: Hermann Levi conducted the première of *Parsifal*; two of the Rhinemaidens were the Lehmann sisters, Lilli and Marie, whose mother was Jewish. Lilli became the most famous Brünnhilde.

He became involved in the politics which led to the 1848 Revolution in Europe. During the 1849 uprising in Dresden, Wagner was a look-out on the steeple of a city church. He was fortunate to escape to Zurich.

Wagner immersed himself in the work of Schopenhauer; later, Nietzsche, another philosopher, was for a time a personal friend. During some of his lengthy period as a refugee, Wagner was provided with a house and finance by Otto Wesendonck, a Zurich-based businessman. Wagner's love for Otto's wife Mathilde inspired *Tristan und Isolde* which he began in late 1856. When the 'carry-on' got out of hand, Wagner had to move on.

The 1850s were another period of desperate insecurity for him. Eventually, on 3 May, 1864, he received a call from the King of Bavaria, who was obsessed with Wagner's operas and became his sponsor. His financial position immediately became better. He joined King Ludwig in Munich, but was later expelled for interference. He settled near Lucerne, in Switzerland. Liszt's daughter Cosima von Bülow, left her husband, the great conductor, and moved in with Wagner. In 1870, she became his second wife.

During 1868-1870, the premières of *Die Meistersinger*, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* took place. Wagner built his own opera house in Bayreuth, in Franconia (northern Bavaria), where he moved in 1872. This was a suitable venue for the première of the complete *Ring* cycle, including *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. He died in Venice on 13 February, 1883, just over six months after the première of *Parsifal*.

A leading musicologist has suggested that 'never since Orpheus has there been a musician whose music affected so vitally the life and art of generations'.

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***The real Who's who:***

**King Ludwig** (1845-1886)

Although Wagner reckoned that Ludwig was totally unmusical and endowed only with a poetic temperament, the 'mad king' must rank with some of the greatest and most influential sponsors and patrons of art that there have ever been. Without Ludwig's support *The Ring* would never have been completed, and we would never have had Wagner's later works, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*.



The ancient Wittelsbach family, the rulers of Bavaria in southern Germany, had recently created the new Munich, and restored the family castle of Berg, fifteen miles to the south, and also the 'castle of Lohengrin' at Hohenschwangau, on the edge of the Alps. When only twelve, Ludwig heard about a production of Wagner's *Lohengrin*; he began to study Wagner's writings and soon he knew the texts of *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* by heart. Ludwig was passionately fond of music, and he called his steam-launch for cruising on Lake Starnberg, 'Tristan'.

To the consternation of his ministers, Ludwig built his own magical castles. These were shrines to German medieval chivalry and, in particular, semi-fictional characters such as Tannhäuser, Lohengrin and Parsifal. The castle at Neuschwanstein - which has been described as 'one of the most fascinating toys in the world' - was begun in 1869. Linderhof was begun in the following year, and Herrenchiemsee in 1878. The overall cost was little more than the indemnity which Bavaria paid to Prussia after backing the losing side in Austria's War with Prussia in 1866.

But Ludwig's eccentric behaviour and his support for Wagner led eventually to his deposition. He and his doctor drowned in Lake Starnberg, next to the castle of Berg, when out on an evening walk. What exactly happened remains a mystery. 'The King was not mad', said his relative, Elisabeth, Empress of Austria. 'He was just an eccentric living in a world of dreams'. How fortunate we are that he did!

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Lenbach's portrait of Cosima

### ***The real Who's who:***

#### **Cosima**

Cosima Liszt was present at one of Wagner's readings of an excerpt from *The Ring* in October 1853. Then a fifteen year-old, she eventually became Wagner's second wife. She was born in 1837, the second daughter of Franz Liszt, the composer, and his then mistress, the Comtesse Marie d'Agoult. Cosima's parents were unmarried and unsettled: as a consequence, she had a most unhappy childhood.

She married her father's pupil Hans von Bülow, a virtuoso pianist who was to be the first superstar conductor, and first conductor of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*. Cosima was no beauty - she had her father's prominent Roman nose - but her extraordinary attraction is caught in the portrait by Franz von Lenbach. It was Cosima who seduced Wagner. Although initially surprised and hesitant, he was ripe for the picking. A satirical magazine called her 'Cosima fan tutte', much to her chagrin.



Hans von Bülow

Bülow was remarkably tolerant: Cosima had three children by Wagner before she got her divorce and married him. Minna, Wagner's first wife, 'an illiterate, unimaginative woman, whose mind, such as it was, was all foreground without perspective', had died a few years earlier.

An adverse press campaign about Wagner and Cosima began in summer 1866. In an unforgivable, 'despicable joint conspiracy' between Wagner, Cosima and her husband, the King was inveigled into issuing a statement that there was not a word of truth in the rumours about the relationship. Meanwhile, Cosima had already given birth to Wagner's daughter Isolde, in the previous year. Wagner only told the King the true state of affairs two years later.

In July, 1870, a Berlin court dissolved Cosima's marriage to Bülow on the grounds of her desertion. Five weeks later, she and Wagner were married in Lucerne. At the end of that year, on her thirty-third birthday, she awoke to hear the *Siegfried Idyll* being played on the staircase by around fifteen musicians conducted by Wagner. It includes motives from *Siegfried*. He composed it especially for her.

She died in 1930. She was surely one of the most forceful female figures in music in her time.

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## WHAT IS THE RING ALL ABOUT?

The components of *The Ring*, the individual four evenings of opera, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, can only be understood properly in the context of the complete myth created by Wagner. Individually, they do not make much sense. [A summary of \*The Ring\* myth](#) is provided in this ebook.

Even then, nobody can say for certain what *The Ring* is exactly about. Fauré, well-known for being the composer of *The Requiem*, told his wife that it is stuffed with philosophy and symbols ‘which are only manifestations of our own misery and nothingness – no help at all’. Unfortunately, there is insufficient time in a live performance for an audience to grasp its complexity; it is regrettable that Wagner, who was never at a loss for words, did not provide his own full explanation.

We might, like his patron King Ludwig, imagine that Wagner’s myth is just a story about Vikings, Norsemen with cow-horn helmets, gods and heroes. But this is not so: in this sense, it is very different from conventional narrative operas which tell a realistic story, such as *La Bohème* or *Tosca*.

It is more of a lecture to humanity by an revolutionary refugee who is using his myth to make several points which he regarded as important. His messages are much deeper, more philosophical, universal, and timeless,<sup>15</sup> than the relatively straightforward (and topical) political messages, such as the desirability of social change or of ‘home rule’ in a united Italy, which are found (say) in the operas of Verdi. However, as the twenty-eight years of compiling *The Ring* passed by, even Wagner himself was not always quite sure what his points were. The myth is a muddle.

Fortunately, it can be interpreted as meaning all things to all men and thus provides grist to the mill for many a commentator and psychologist to produce alongside the musicologists’ analysis of such matters as Wagner’s key structures.

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<sup>15</sup> The message is timeless, but the story is not: the gods march relentlessly towards their doom. This timelessness and universality have enabled both the Communists and the Fascists to claim that *The Ring* exemplified and supported their own brand of change.

***A simple explanation*** which would account for the continuing relevance of *The Ring*, might be that the gods of *Das Rheingold*, dodgy, ruthless characters, are evident in all generations.

They are far from Olympus or Heaven. Wagner's males are much more grubby than the illustrious, oversexed pantheon which great painters have portrayed, such as the mighty Zeus, Apollo etc. Also, Wagner's shoddy lot are far removed from the God of the Jewish-Christian tradition: their power, which is limited, is incompatible with love; they seem more like self-seeking politicians than gods (even if the former might have difficulty recognising the difference). Wagner's gods might perhaps be found around political corridors of power, or even just in a company boardroom.

Despite their grandiosity, the power of Wagner's gods is severely constrained by their previous actions: the moment Wotan steps forth from innocence, he has to transact dodgy deals, contracts and compromises, which then have to be upheld by force. The gods are fundamentally amoral. Loge, who is not quite a fully-fledged god, realises this: he seems like an accountant-economist reporting the unpleasant truth that the government finances are rotten, and the place is about to go bust.

So, we need not be surprised that the socialist George Bernard Shaw regarded *The Ring* as an allegory about the evils of capitalism, the established Church, the underlying anarchy of modern society, the objectification of human labour. He described Nibelheim as a 'poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism'.

Indeed, a more recent commentator has called *The Ring* a 'frontal attack on middle-class institutions and values': it tells us that middle class life has become enmeshed in a social order which has failed to heal the wounds which it has itself inflicted on society. Because many people in the audience are likely to identify with that prosperous middle class, it is no wonder that Shaw questioned whether it was good taste to exhibit Alberich, the gnome, at Covent Garden on the grand, dressy evenings, attended by the 'great and the good' - evenings which he called 'diamond nights'. Whether the ultimate collapse, the *Götterdämmerung*, turns out to be an accurate prophesy of the future of our society, hopefully we shall never know.

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***A more complex explanation*** more cosmic and metaphysical, might be that the gods (especially Wotan) and the Nibelungs (especially Alberich) represent the eternal alternative faced by humanity on leaving the ‘Garden of Eden’. Either we can, like Wotan, wander in search of self-realisation, subject to the constraints of ‘law’. Or like Alberich we can seek power without law, and exchange love for lust.

Only through love, pure non-carnal love, given entirely freely and without consideration, will we regain the utopia which was lost. Siegfried and Brunnhilde have the qualities to attain this, as they embrace at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, and thereby render redundant the old regime which is portrayed in *Das Rheingold*. Brunnhilde redeems the world from the consequences of its curse (Alberich’s first curse) for lust and power.

So we hear the ‘Redemption through Love’ motive soar aloft in the violins as the flames envelop Valhalla at the end of *Götterdämmerung*; and the Rhine’s waters purify the world. Brunnhilde and Siegfried are engulfed together by flames in their glorious ‘Liebestod’.

Thus the conclusion of Wagner’s original poem ‘Siegfried’s Death’ was optimistic: the old gods would be replaced by the brave new world, based on love.<sup>16</sup>

But, by the early 1870s, his optimism had changed to resignation, as he saw himself as a latter-day Wotan. He felt a kind of death-weariness as he aged and contemplated the decay of the nineteenth century. He was depressed by the ‘final nothingness of the world’ and by his readings of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. So, as it turned out, he concluded his drama with the total destruction of the gods.

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<sup>16</sup> In an earlier draft of *Götterdämmerung*, Brunnhilde was reinstated as a Valkyrie, and she lifted a resurrected Siegfried to Valhalla to live happily ever after.

## THE DISLIKE OF WAGNER

Anyone is entitled to dislike any type of music, and, specifically, the length, intensity and ‘extreme emotional temperatures’ which are evident even from the opening surges at the beginning of *Das Rheingold*.

Yet, on the whole, the arguments of Wagner’s detractors revolve around certain of his personal characteristics. Maybe this is a typically ‘British’ type of dislike of exaggeration, and a nationalistic distaste for the Teutonic. But it has bred the view that his music is ‘unhealthy’, although this complaint surprisingly does not seem to extend to, say, the music of another very emotional German, Beethoven.

The objection that that various of his characterisations, for example the Nibelungs (and, in particular, Alberich the Nibelung and his brother Mime), are anti-Semitic, even that ‘anti-Semitism invades his works’, has more force and has been chewed over by many experts. Wagner’s writings express an extreme form of anti-Semitism which was evident in varying degrees among many of his contemporaries; and the Wagner family friendship with Hitler is a favourite of TV documentaries.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, to identify Nibelungs with Jews seemingly does not make sense. The down-trodden Nibelungs can equally appear like the Germanic people generally, who nineteenth century ‘fat-cat’ capitalists were caricatured as exploiting.<sup>18</sup>

These matters are irrelevant in an assessment of the quality of a person’s art. To aver that the character of the artist has any relevance to an assessment of the quality of that person’s art is to fall into the fallacy of the irrelevant conclusion known as *argumentum ad hominem*, a common fallacy.

This has been recognised by some of the greatest exponents of Wagner who have been Jewish, for example, Solti and Barenboim in modern times, and the conductor Hermann Levi (whom Wagner regarded as ‘the ideal *Parsifal* conductor’) and the sopranos Lilli and Marie Lehmann, earlier.

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<sup>17</sup> It is not clear how Hitler reconciled his love of the operas, to which his aides had to kowtow, with Wagner’s illustration of the futility of political action in dealing with the world’s evils. And the dictator might have been disappointed because Alberich, the chief of the gnomes, is exempt from the curse which destroys any other possessor of the Ring. It seems improbable that Hitler’s notorious enthusiasm for Wagner’s operas (about which other senior Nazis were unenthusiastic) actually caused the racist policies implemented by the Nazi Party.

<sup>18</sup> Someone who suggests that the miserable gnome Mime is a caricature of a Jew can be asked ‘Who is the anti-Semite?’

# DAS RHEINGOLD:

## ACT BY ACT

### ***Prelude and Scene 1: The river bed of the Rhine***

Before the curtain rises there is an orchestral introduction which portrays the undulating and swirling Rhine, the great River, the artery of the German world. It evokes a primeval world, before time and change began. This introduction of over 130 bars, fifteen pages of the score, is entirely (and remarkably) created out of the single kernel, a single chord of E flat, an arpeggio comprising the leitmotive representing the Rhine.

The three Rhinemaidens, Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde, who have been assigned by the Rhine, their father, to guard his Gold, fool around in the water. Alberich, an ugly gnome, comes up from Nibelheim, deep underground in the bowels of the earth. He fancies them. They naughtily and unmercifully lead him on, taunt and mock him. Each one slips away as soon as he, increasingly aroused, tries to catch and assault her. His lust turns to rage.

Wagner insisted that the Rhinemaidens, 'the aquarium of whores' as the 'Bayerische Vaterland' journal was to call them in its review, should appear to swim. So, he designed a swimming machine: each maiden reclined in a container fixed to the top of a pole pivoted on a trolley which was pushed around by stage-hands below. (For the première, one of the maidens got seasick in rehearsal, so it was decided that they should sing from the wings, leaving some ballerinas to cope with the containers.)

The rising sun lights up the Gold, which, to the delight of the maidens, gleams brightly (and is accompanied by the 'Rhinégold' leitmotive). Alberich overhears their foolish chatter in which they reveal its value: a Ring (signified by the 'Ring' leitmotive) forged from the Gold confers omnipotence on its owner, but the Gold from which it is fashioned is only obtainable from them by a person who forswears love. They reckon that the lascivious gnome is unlikely to do this. But Alberich seizes his chance and portentously curses love – *verfluch' ich die Liebe*. He takes the Gold. Without its reflective qualities, the maidens are plunged into darkness.

There follows an orchestral interlude in which we move towards Valhalla. Thus the Valhalla motive evolves out of the Ring leitmotive, and starts the next scene.

***Scene 2. On a mountain top with Valhalla behind.***

On the mountain top, it is also dawn. The chief god, Wotan awakes and admires his acquisition, his splendid new fortress. His wife Fricka is not so sure about it: it is time to pay. The consideration, which he secretly agreed with the giants who constructed it, was to give them her sister Freia. Wotan chides Fricka, because she had asked for the fortress in the first place. She wanted it because a home might keep Wotan from roving around having affairs. He tries to reassure her: after all, he gave up one of his eyes in order to court her. Besides he has no intention of handing over Freia. He will get his fixer, Loge, the demigod of fire<sup>19</sup> to get him out of the quandary he is in.

At this moment, Freia enters, panic-stricken and horrified because the two giants, Fafner and Fasolt are chasing her. We hear a suggestion of the giants' ponderous leitmotive on the cellos and basses. It is heard in full, and unquestionably, when the giants arrive, in order to collect their fee, the beautiful goddess. They are appalled when Wotan, suggests that the contract was just a joke, and tries to renege on it. Fafner reminds his brother of Freia's value: she grows the golden apples, 'Holda's apples', which provided they are eaten, confer eternal youth; he suggests that they should just abduct her.

Freia's brothers Donner and Froh try to intervene. Loge at last arrives. Slippery and unreliable, he beats about the bush.

When Wotan suggests that Loge had promised that the contract with the giants would be unenforceable, Loge replies that he had merely implied that he would think about how it might be evaded. Despite working his backside off to find an alternative form of payment, Loge had not succeeded in doing so: there was nothing equivalent in value to a woman's beauty. Only Alberich, according to the distraught Rhinemaidens, would value anything more than love and women: thereby, he had obtained the Gold. The giants are very unhappy when Loge reveals the power that a Ring forged from it confers. They insist on having the Gold as a substitute for Freia.

The gods realise the importance of getting the Ring for themselves, because otherwise Alberich will be omnipotent over them. Loge suggests they steal it and return it to the Rhinemaidens. Fricka dislikes that idea: the Rhinemaidens are loose women who habitually seduce men. When Wotan demurs, the giants seize Freia hostage and go off with her.

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<sup>19</sup> As well as being a demigod, of fire, Loge is Wotan's evil genius. In mythology, Loki was the god of strife and spirit of evil. George Bernard Shaw called him 'the northern Mephistopheles'. Thomas Mann, the novelist, drew attention to Wagner's unsurpassable characterisation of Loge's 'elemental incalculability and treacherous charm'.

Without Freia's rejuvenating apples, the gods instantly begin to age; eventually they will die. Loge does not mind particularly – Freia never took much notice of him. Wotan, however, realises that he must descend to Nibelheim and get the Gold: he will have it by night-fall. So, with Loge, he descends down a crevice.

We soon know that we are approaching Nibelheim by the sound of the Nibelungs hammering away on their anvils. (The score specifies eighteen real anvils.)

### ***Scene 3. Nibelheim.***

From the Gold, Alberich has made the Ring and has seized power at home in Nibelheim. He has forced his brother Mime to manufacture the 'Tarnhelm'. This is the garment which enables its wearer to become invisible, assume any shape desired, or transport him to any desired place. Mime has been trying to cheat Alberich. But Alberich grabs it and tries it out. He disappears, but is still able to chastise his brother. He knows now that he really can be the Lord of the Nibelungs.

Wotan and Loge arrive down in Nibelheim, they find a bruised Mime, who explains how Alberich now dominates them all and how he forces them to forge the Gold for him. They are Alberich's slaves, whereas formerly they were carefree smiths making fine jewelry for women: *Sorglose Schmiede*. Alberich had forced Mime to make the Tarnhelm. Mime had tried to keep it for himself; Alberich had seized it, and used it to disappear.

Alberich arrives, having removed the Tarnhelm, and whips and drives his slaves to pile up the Gold. He demonstrates the Ring which has made him all-powerful.

For the 1958 Decca recording of the complete *Ring*, the production team wanted to obtain the real sound of clinking. The banks in Vienna were asked if they would provide the real gold bars, but none obliged. As Birgit Nilsson said, 'Even in Vienna, music sometimes has its limits'.

He sees Wotan and Loge and accuses them of being envious. Loge, the god of fire, introduces himself and points out that, without his fire, Alberich would have been unable to work the forge; Alberich should be grateful. Loge flatters Alberich, who says he will use the treasure to defeat the gods and rape their women. (Loge prevents Wotan getting furious.) Alberich is not worried that the Ring might be snatched from him, because, with the Tarnhelm, he will be safe.

Loge invites Alberich to demonstrate how the Tarnhelm works. Alberich suggests that he should turn into a dragon. Immediately, he becomes a dragon. (To facilitate the transformation, Wagner placed along the footlights some jets from which steam was blown. A black curtain was lowered behind it.) Loge pretends to be terrified. But he wonders whether Alberich could equally turn himself into something small, because that might normally be expected to be the best way to avoid danger. He challenges Alberich to turn himself into a toad. When he does so, Wotan immediately stamps his foot on it, catches Alberich and seizes the Tarnhelm. They tie him up and abduct him.

#### ***Scene 4. On a mountain top.***

Loge taunts the captive Alberich who swears revenge. Wotan says that, to take revenge, he must be free. If he wants freedom, he must pay for it; his ransom is the treasure. Alberich himself is not too worried about giving this up, because, provided he keeps the Ring and possesses the power which it confers, the treasure will be replaceable. He calls up the Nibelung and orders them to bring the treasure up to him, even though he is not too happy about his slaves seeing him having to obey the orders of others. When Loge requires the Tarnhelm to be put on the heap, Alberich knows that he can easily replace that as well. But when Wotan demands the Ring, Alberich is appalled and resists. Wotan accuses him of having stolen it from the Rhinemaidens. Alberich accuses Wotan of being hypocritical: he craved the Gold himself. Besides, Alberich paid the price for the Gold: he cursed love in order to obtain it.

Wotan seizes the Ring, whereupon Alberich places the curse on it: everyone shall want it, but it will be disastrous, for whoever wears it shall die having had no joy from it. Then, Alberich disappears down into the crevice.

The gods however rejoice, and the giants come to collect their pay. Fasolt, who has fallen for Freia, rather quaintly orders that the treasure be stacked up at least to her height, so as to prevent him thinking of her. As the gods reluctantly pile it up, Fafner insists that it is piled closely together, and that the Tarnhelm is thrown on top. Finally, he demands that the Ring is included, 'to fill a crack'. Wotan refuses point blank. He also refuses to return the Gold to the Rhinemaidens, which Loge has promised the giants that he will do. Wotan does not care a damn about any promise. With the compromise with the giants threatening to unravel, Wotan digs in.

At this moment, the Earth goddess Erda, omniscient, rises from below and implores Wotan not to take the Ring, otherwise, a dark day dawns for the gods: *Wotan, weiche!* Wotan yields, although he says he must visit Erda and find out more.

The arrival of Erda at this late moment is a throw-back to the use of *deus ex machina*, who, in earlier opera, would appear suddenly and bring the opera to a happy conclusion. If Wotan had had the sense to take Erda's advice, presumably the gods could have used the pile of gold to pay off their debt, and avoided their eventual doom. The remainder of the drama would have been rendered redundant. The long drawn-out gestation of *The Ring* led to inconsistencies such as this. Wagner himself did not know how to resolve them.

Freia is freed. Fafner starts to take the gold, but Fasolt, whom he taunts with being lovesick, intervenes and demands a fair division. Fasolt seizes the Ring, whereupon Fafner strikes him down: he is the first casualty of the curse. (The curse motive is sounded loud and clear by three trombones.)<sup>20</sup> Wotan is horrified and remorseful, but Fricka enjoins him to take possession of his new dwelling.

Donner goes off in a thunderstorm. When the clouds lift, a rainbow provides a bridge over the valley to the magnificent fortress. Wotan picks up a sword. For the first time, we hear the resplendent sword motive. Wotan points it at the fortress which he names 'Valhalla'.

As the gods cross the Rainbow Bridge, Loge observes that, unbeknown to themselves, they are actually heading towards their doom. He decides to turn himself once more into flames. Wotan is irritated to hear the Rhinemaidens wishing for their Gold to be returned to them. They, however, observe that everything to do with the gods is false and cowardly: *falsch und feig*.

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard Shaw called it 'a veritable harmonic and melodic bogey' to nineteenth century ears, although 'time had robbed it of its terrors'. He emphasised that this is no pantomime or Surrey melodrama. 'The spectacle of good-natured ignorance and serviceable brute force, suddenly roused to lust and greed, and falling to fratricidal murder' makes this 'one of the most horrifying of stage duels'.



WAGNER'S  
*Die Walküre*  
(*The Valkyrie*)

A Short Guide To A Great Opera

By

*Michael Steen*



ORIGINAL WRITING

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# DIE WALKÜRE AND BACKGROUND TO THE RING CYCLE

*Die Walküre* by [Richard Wagner](#), is the second component of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, a cycle of three dramas, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, which are preceded by a ‘preliminary evening’, *Das Rheingold*.

*Die Walküre* is generally the most popular opera in the cycle. Although frequently staged as a stand-alone opera, it has to be understood in the context in which it was envisaged, that is, as an integral component of the cycle.

Much of the background to the *Ring* cycle has been given in **DAS RHEINGOLD: WAGNER’S PRELUDE TO THE RING CYCLE**, to which the reader is encouraged to turn, in particular to the information on [its creation](#) which took so exceptionally long: he took at least twenty-eight years to bring the four operas together onto the stage. There, information may also be found on his [myth, style, music and reputation](#), including, among other matters, his very personal concept of music drama and his means of implementing it, his various sources, and his unusual style of poetry.

The première of *Die Walküre* was in Munich on 26 June, 1870. This was a couple of months before Wagner married [Cosima](#), his second wife. The performance was conducted by Franz Wüllner, who was on the staff of the court opera.

Less than a year earlier, [King Ludwig](#) of Bavaria had forced Wagner, against his wishes, to have *Das Rheingold* staged; but it would be a further six years before the first performance of the complete *Ring* cycle between 13-17 August, 1876, in the purpose-built theatre which he constructed above Bayreuth, to the north-east of Nuremberg.

Wagner had completed writing his *Ring* poem in Zurich back in 1851-1852. He had begun to compose the music for *Die Walküre* two years later, when he was still putting the finishing touches to *Das Rheingold*.

During its composition, he was inspired by the wife of his financier, who was soon to be his landlord as well. His fascination with [Mathilde Wesendonck](#) was such that he began imagining himself and her as two of the leading characters, Siegfried’s parents, the incestuous twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. Various annotations on his manuscript indicate his frame of mind. For example, after Siegmund’s cry to Sieglinde ‘*Die Sonne lacht*

*mir nun neu*, 'the sunlight shines on me now', Wagner wrote 'I.l.d.gr', signifying *Ich liebe dich grenzlos*, 'I love you to infinity'. Gustav Kobbé, the great critic and author, wondered whether there was ever 'a love-scene more thrilling than that between Siegmund and Sieglinde'. (Wagner's dalliance was to reach a crescendo and an abrupt halt a couple of years later, when he stopped work on *Siegfried* and turned to compose an opera about the illicit love affair between Tristan, the medieval knight, and Isolde, the Irish Queen.)

Meanwhile, his composition of *Die Walküre* was punctuated by four months spent in London where he was invited to conduct the London Philharmonic Society concerts for the 1855 summer season. There, he pined for Mathilde; and he was unable to progress the opera, even though he was able to obtain a tall standing desk of the variety at which he liked to work. Rather, he exercised his host's dog in Regent's Park, admired the sheep, fed the ducks, and visited the zoo and the other sights.

He was appalled by the high cost of living in London, which resulted in his financial returns being pitiful. He was surprised at the way the English gave a similarly hearty applause to bad music as to good music, and spent hours at oratorios where they listened to fugue after fugue, 'confident that they had done a good deed for which they would reap their reward in heaven, listening to the loveliest Italian arias'. Queen Victoria's suggestion to him that his operas might be performed in London in Italian did not receive an enthusiastic response.

There was then no chance of either *Das Rheingold* or *Die Walküre* (which was completed in the following Spring) being performed. Wagner was still a political refugee on the run from the police in Saxony. By the time that they were staged, the Mathilde relationship, which resulted in his hurried departure from Zurich, was a memory, and Cosima was his mistress.

When King Ludwig rescued Wagner financially in 1864, the rights to *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* became his property. The King commanded the staging of these two operas, despite the delaying tactics of Wagner, who wanted the whole *Ring* project, including the building of a special opera-house, completed first. (The music for act 3 of *Siegfried* still remained to be composed, as did the whole of the score of *Götterdämmerung*.)

The première of *Die Walküre* was attended by the musical 'great and the good', despite Wagner's efforts to keep them away. Liszt, Brahms and Saint-Saëns were at it. It made a great impression. Even hostile journalists conceded that it was a work of 'gigantic talent'. However, the incest caused some eyebrows to be raised.

‘Beautiful and moving as it is,’ wrote one critic, ‘its ethical anarchy is outrageous and provocative, a slap in the face for all religious feeling’.

Musically, the opera is related to the other components of the *Ring* cycle by means of recurring snippets of melody, [leitmotives](#), from within *Die Walküre* and from the other operas. (See [Examples of leitmotives](#).) It would be unwise to try too hard to identify the leitmotives in *Die Walküre*: over four hundred occurrences of them have been counted, ignoring repetitions in the immediate vicinity. It is amazing that, against all odds, Wagner eventually tied together the threads and loose-ends and assembled *The Ring*.

However, it is not surprising that the many years which it took to finalise it, resulted in a work of considerable length and led to ‘long and rambling repetitions’ which are unnecessary to the development of the plot, but are indeed necessary to keep the audience ‘on track’. Thus, the listener should not approach *Die Walküre* expecting the story to unfold as would perhaps a novel or a play. There is much complex detail which the listener cannot realistically be expected to absorb.

*Die Walküre* alone runs for three and a half hours. The length of the cycle and its components has been criticised by eminent composers, such as Tchaikovsky and Scriabin.

Whatever view one may have about the man, the length and a particular production, there is so much to enjoy. There is the rich sound provided by Wagner’s orchestra with its augmented wind section, its new instruments, such as a special contrabass tuba, contrabass trombone and the bass-trumpet. The stierhorn, the cow-horn, is sounded before the fight in act 2.

So, whether it is the opening storm, the love music for Siegmund and Sieglinde, ‘The Ride of the Valkyries’, the fight, the father-versus-daughter row, or Wotan's Farewell, Wagner has provided us with a wonderful experience.

# DIE WALKÜRE:

## WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT

The myth, set in the imaginary past, is based on Wagner's text. As mentioned in [Warning! Recent productions](#) certain directors may amend opera stories to suit their production.

*To pay the giants who built his fortress which he called Valhalla, the chief god **Wotan** stole the **Rhinegold** from **Alberich the Nibelung**. **Alberich**, a gnome, had earlier obtained it from the **Rhinemaidens**, by forswearing love.*

*Wotan settled with the giants, **Fafner** and **Fasolt**, by giving them the golden hoard. Importantly, this included two special items: firstly, the **Ring**<sup>1</sup>, which confers omnipotence, but also carries a **curse** from **Alberich** which dooms its possessor; secondly, the **Tarnhelm**, which **Alberich** forced his brother **Mime** to forge - this was a magic garment whose wearer can become invisible, assume any shape desired, or be transported to any desired place.*

***Alberich's** curse quickly became effective: **Fafner** killed **Fasolt**. Now, having assumed the shape of a dragon, **Fafner** guards his Gold (together with the Ring and the Tarnhelm) in a cave. The omnipotence conferred by the Ring constitutes a threat to the power of the gods. To counter this, the philanderer **Wotan** mated with **Erda**, the Earth goddess, and produced the **nine Valkyries**, to ride into battle and select heroes to take back to Valhalla to defend it. Also, after **Das Rheingold** but before *Die Walküre*, **Wotan** disguised himself as 'Wälse' and sired the twins **Siegmond** and **Sieglinde**, who are also called the 'Wälungs' (Volsungs).*

*To get rid of the curse, the Gold must be returned to the Rhinemaidens. **Wotan** hoped that **Siegmond** would recover the Gold by killing **Fafner** with a sword forged by him. However things did not work out according to plan, as the opera shows.*

**That is all background.** The story of *Die Walküre* itself begins sometime after the twins had grown up and were separated. Enemies had abducted **Sieglinde** and forced her into a marriage with one of their number, **Hunding**. **Siegmond**, subsequently, finds himself escaping from **Hunding's** people, and taking refuge in the worst possible place, **Hunding's** own house. There and then, he and **Sieglinde** fall in love. Thrust into the ash-tree around which the house is built, there is a sword, left there by a stranger. **Siegmond** arms himself with this and he names it **Notung**.<sup>2</sup>

1 The 'Ring of the Nibelung' is the ring belonging to **Alberich the Nibelung**. Nibelung is singular.

2 'Notung' is derived from 'Not', the German word meaning in English, need, emergency, peril, difficulty. It is sometimes translated as 'Needful'.

The twins beget Siegfried, in an incestuous union which Wotan's wife **Fricka** cannot condone: unless punished, this breach of authority would lead to the ruin of the gods. Wotan has to act. Meanwhile, Hunding is out for revenge. In the ensuing fight between him and Siegmund, Wotan intervenes so as to implement what Fricka wants. He shatters Siegmund's sword, and both the opponents are killed.

In the fray, the leading Valkyrie, **Brünnhilde**, attempts to defend Siegmund, contrary to Wotan's orders, and gives Sieglinde to her sisters to take to safety so that she can give birth to Siegfried. She does this because she embodies Wotan's Will. Thus she gives effect to his intentions, that is, what he really would like to happen, as opposed to what Fricka demands shall happen. He has disclosed his intentions to Brünnhilde in a long **Oration**.

**The Ride of the Valkyries** is played as they congregate before Wotan arrives to punish Brünnhilde for her disobedience. In his well-known **Farewell**, he degrades her to a mortal and condemns her to sleep on a rock. Although it is surrounded by fire, she is unprotected from any male brave enough to penetrate it and have her. But this will only be someone who knows no fear.

A **Glossary** of what George Bernard Shaw called 'the curious harlequinade of gods, dwarfs and giants' and **A summary of *The Ring* myth** are also provided.

# DIE WALKÜRE: INTERVAL CHAT

## (AND MORE BACKGROUND)

To provide ‘talking points’, more information on the background generally, and on Wagner, King Ludwig, Cosima and Mathilde in particular, can be found by using the links earlier. In addition the following links from the ‘Interval Chat’ on *Das Rheingold* may be found useful.

[What is \*The Ring\* all about?](#)

[A simple interpretation](#)

[A more complex explanation](#)

[The dislike of Wagner](#)

More detailed information on the following is also available if desired:

[Where did he get these ideas from?](#)

[A complete art-work \(Gesamtkunstwerk\)](#)

[Wagner’s poetry](#)

[Leitmotives](#)

The following additional ‘talking point’ is particularly relevant to *Die Walküre*. After using the selected link, the reader can return here by selecting the next appropriate ‘Back’ link.

### ***The real Who’s who:***

[Mathilde Wesendonck \(1828-1902\)](#)

Mathilde Wesendonck was the wife of Otto Wesendonck (1815-1896), who was a partner in a firm of New York silk importers. The couple both originated from the Rhineland. At the start of the 1850s, they joined the group of Wagner enthusiasts in Zurich. Within just over a year of knowing Otto, Wagner had touched him for cash. Otto tried to straighten out Wagner’s tangled financial affairs and gave him budgeting advice. Wagner’s appetite for lavish furnishings – inspiration was dulled by anything that would remind him of crude reality – led him to run up commitments he could not meet. Otto bailed him out.

At an early stage Mathilde, became Wagner’s confidante, inspiration and diversion. The love music in *Die Walküre* was annotated with abbreviations which indicate that Wagner saw himself and her as Siegmund and Sieglinde, two of the chief characters in it. The manuscript of the Prelude to *Die Walküre* bore the letters ‘G.s.M’ signifying *Gesegnet sei Mathilde*, ‘Blessed be Mathilde’.

Wagner found it difficult to work in some lodgings which were opposite a tinsmith and where he had neighbours who included five pianists and a flautist. Also, the stresses and strains of his personal life weighed down upon him and affected his health. Again, Otto came to the rescue. He invited the Wagners to take the tenancy of a small house on a piece of land next to the large residence he was having built. (He had acquired the land to stop its re-development as a mental institution.) The Wagners moved into the house, known as the 'Asyl', around Easter 1857. A few months later, when the Wesendoncks took up residence in their new home, 'between this Pyramus and this Thisbe, there was not even the trifling difficulty of a wall'.



Otto



Mathilde

During the winter of 1857-58, Wagner set five of Mathilde's poems, subsequently known as the *Wesendonck-Lieder*. In these, there are 'several veiled references to the secret sympathy' between the two of them. One was played under Mathilde's window as a birthday greeting on 23 December, 1857.

The story of Wagner and Mathilde belongs to his *Tristan*, the medieval tale of the hero who cuckolds his best friend and liege lord, rather than to *The Ring*. In early April, 1858, four days after Wagner finished *Tristan* act 1, Minna, his first wife, intercepted a letter from him to Mathilde enclosing the pencil sketch of the *Tristan* Prelude. Wagner unfortunately called it '*Morgenbeichte*, morning confession', although half of it, being a discussion of aspects of Goethe's *Faust*, was hardly romantic.

Time was up; the public flirting had gone on long enough; Wagner had to leave. He went via Geneva to Venice.

There is no certainty that Mathilde ever reciprocated Wagner's passion, let alone consummated it. It was the nineteenth century; and she lost interest in him.

He returned to see her seven years later, accompanied by Cosima, his mistress. On that occasion, Mathilde's black hair disturbed him a little, but 'he grew accustomed to it, and found her well disposed and friendly'. She had sent Cosima a copy of a drama which she had written about King Frederick the Great.<sup>3</sup>

Back to Background:

*Rheingold*

*Die Walküre*

*Siegfried*

*Götterdämmerung*

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<sup>3</sup> This irritated Wagner who did not think that women should 'venture into the market in this way'.

# DIE WALKÜRE:

## ACT BY ACT

### *Act 1. Hunding's hut.*

The opening storm signifies that all is not well on earth. As it subsides, we find ourselves in a hut built around the base of an enormous ash-tree. Siegmund, clearly a fugitive, rushes in. Hunding is out, and his wife Sieglinde<sup>4</sup> assumes that it is he who has returned. So she is surprised to find an exhausted stranger in her house. The stranger needs water, but the sight of her revives him even more than the mead she brings him. He tells her how he had to escape from his foes. Much to her disappointment, he is keen to move on. When he tells her that he is dogged by ill-luck, she answers that the same applies to the house, so he might as well stay. Increasingly attracted to her, he does so.

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Hunding returns. Sullenly, threateningly, he accords Siegmund a minimal welcome, and commands his wife to lay up for dinner. He immediately suspects that the pair look uncannily alike. Siegmund is reluctant to give his name,<sup>5</sup> but eventually concedes that 'Woeful' would be the most appropriate one. His mother had twins, but he never knew either her or his sister: one day when his father, 'Wolf', took him hunting, they returned to find the house burnt down; his mother was dead and his sister had been abducted. He then lived in the forest with his father, like a wolf-cub. Eventually, he lost his father, and made his way on his own, never settling and still dogged by bad luck.

Hence he is Woeful. He tried to rescue a girl who had been abducted. But his enemies slew her and he had to escape. That is why he is not called Peaceful.

Hunding recognises Siegmund as the foe on whom he must wreak vengeance. He allows him to stay the night, but tells him that, next

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4 Birgit Nilsson said that Sieglinde is 'such a grateful part; indeed I think it would be difficult for anyone to fail with this role'. It was as Sieglinde at the Met in 1935 that Flagstad was established as the Wagnerian soprano of the day, two years after Lotte Lehmann had sung it with such success. Nilsson was Flagstad's successor.

5 Wagner annotated his score with the occasional joke. For example, when he was composing the music for the sequence when Sieglinde asks Siegmund who he is, 'Gast, wer du bist wüsst' ich gern?', Wagner was interrupted by having to go elsewhere. He scrawled in the score: 'Answer, when I get back from Sitten on 13-14 July'.

morning, they must fight. Hunding, orders Sieglinde to fetch his drink, and be ready for him. As Sieglinde goes, she secretly indicates to Siegmund a point at the bottom of the tree. Hunding, menacingly calling out that a man needs armour, stalks off to bed.

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Siegmund has no weapons, but recalls his father saying that he would provide him with a sword if he was in distress. He invokes his father, 'Wälse'. And the light of the fire lights up the point where Sieglinde had indicated, where a sword is buried in the tree trunk. (We hear the sword leitmotive.)

When the fire is extinguished, Sieglinde, by whom he is already fascinated, returns quietly. She has spiked the drink she gave Hunding. She tells Siegmund the story of the sword: how, during the feast to celebrate her forced marriage, a stranger, with a hat pulled down over one eye, had arrived from goodness knows where. (The Valhalla motive on the horns tells the audience that he has come from there.) He gave her a fatherly look, and thrust the sword into the tree. The stranger said that the sword would belong to whoever could pull it out. Hunding's robber relatives tried to do so, as did subsequent visitors, but without success.

Siegmund and Sieglinde realise that the sword is intended for him and it is he who will save her. With the Spring moon shining in, they embrace passionately, and glory in the night: For him, winter storms have vanished with the coming of May: *Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond*. For her, he is the springtime for which she longed for in the frosty wintertime, *Du bist der Lenz, nach dem ich verlangte in frostigen Winters Frist*.

They both reckon they have met before: he has seen her in the stream when it reflected his image; she has heard his voice before; she also recognises in him the same the fatherly look of the man who thrust the sword into the tree. He is not Woeful, is he? No, his father was not really 'Wolf', but Volsa ('Wälse'). And they both are his children, the Volsungs.<sup>6</sup> She wants to call him Siegmund, Victor.

Siegmund wrests the sword from the tree, names it Notung, and declares it to be his bridal gift to her. 'You are your brother's wife and sister', he declares 'and let the Volsung blood increase'.

For this, Hunding's revenge is inevitable.

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<sup>6</sup> The name Wälsung is drawn from the Icelandic poem, the *Volsungsga*.

Raked stages are dangerous at this point. On one occasion at La Scala, the Siegmund, who was wearing built-up shoes, lost his balance when he pulled the sword out of the tree, and hurtled back and downwards. Sieglinde, seeing him, coming, 'like a polar bear down a waterfall', opened her legs and let him whizz through. He ended up just short of the orchestra pit.

### ***Act 2. In the mountains.***

The scene opens with Wotan giving Brünnhilde two important orders: firstly and crucially, Siegmund must win in the ensuing battle between him and Hunding; secondly, he does not want her to bring Hunding to Valhalla as a dead hero which, as a Valkyrie, she might otherwise expect to do.

However, Brünnhilde's battle cries of *Hojotoho Heiaha*<sup>7</sup> are interrupted by the arrival of an incensed Fricka, the supreme goddess, riding in her chariot drawn by rams. She, whose role is to preside over marriages, was bound to be upset at Siegmund's incestuous relationship.<sup>8</sup> Even the battle-hardened Valkyrie blanches at the domestic row her father is about to have with his wife.

Fricka has promised to help Hunding: she arrives to the sound of his leitmotive, so we know who she represents! Despite Wotan's attempt to support the lovers, she rants and raves with indignation: this pours forth, not least her dislike of the gang of Valkyries which her husband has fathered, and her disgust at his fathering the Volsungs on a mere human being. The philosopher Schopenhauer called this scene 'Wotan under the slipper'.

Wotan calmly tries to explain a vitally important matter: he needs a hero who, neither dependent on divine protection nor on divine law, can perform a task which the gods themselves are not permitted to do: to get rid of the curse, by returning the Gold to the Rhinemaidens. The intention must be unselfish: therefore, none of the gods can do this.

Fricka points out the fallacy: any actions of Siegmund, who is Wotan's creation, are as a consequence of him; Siegmund's magic sword came from him, indeed Wotan choreographed everything which Siegmund, his 'slave', has done. Besides, a slave must obey his master's wife.

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<sup>7</sup> Much of Brünnhilde's role in *Die Walküre* is suited to the mezzo-soprano, but here she goes up to top C, and has to sing long notes on top B. Some Brünnhildes ask for this to be transposed down.

<sup>8</sup> In Greek and Roman mythology, Hera/Juno was both sister and wife of Zeus/Jupiter.

Fricka insists that neither Wotan nor 'the Valkyrie' (Brünnhilde) should protect Siegmund. He unsuccessfully tries to get Fricka to agree that Brünnhilde may protect him. Beaten down, Wotan swears to let Siegmund die, and Fricka storms off.

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Brünnhilde comforts Wotan as he tells her how impotent he is. He is horrified at his situation: he is not free to do what he wants; it is utterly shameful. At first, he is reluctant to confide in her, because to tell anybody else is to lose control of his own Will. But she and his Will are identical: she is merely his arm. 'What else is she but his blindly approving instrument?' he asks. '*Was bist du, als meines Willens blind wählende Kür?*'

In a passage central to *The Ring*, a virtual soliloquy, Wotan confides his problem to Brünnhilde, his favourite daughter. It is perhaps unfortunate that this, in speech-song, is not the easiest for English speakers, because, in it, he describes the whole crux of the *Ring* cycle. He explains how Alberich cursed love to obtain the Rhinegold; about the contract to build Valhalla; how he tricked Alberich to obtain the gold to pay the debt due to the giants; and Alberich's curse on the Ring. He describes his descent to Erda,<sup>9</sup> the oracle, to obtain her advice what he should do; how he seduced her and she bore him the nine Valkyries; how she foretold the demise of the gods; how he ordered the Valkyries to incite the heroes to battle so that the dead heroes could be brought to Valhalla to defend it. If Alberich recovers the Ring, all will be lost: with his power, Alberich will turn Wotan's heroes against him, and the gods will be destroyed.

Wotan knows that he will have to get the Ring back from Fafner who now guards it. But, since he contracted with him, he cannot attack him: 'I became a ruler through treaties; by my treaties I am now enslaved.' Only one person, Erda has told him, can perform the necessary task which Wotan most wishes, but cannot even suggest: a hero, independent of him, unprompted, of his own free will and with his own weapon.

The predicament Wotan faces is how to find this free, independent, agent whom he has never protected, but who will do what he most wants. It looks impossible, because the free man, if he is to be truly independent, somehow has to create himself: he, Wotan, can only create subjects, *Knechte erknet' ich mir nur!*

He created Siegmund whose protection was only a sword, but, as Fricka quickly had observed, that was a favour bestowed by Wotan

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<sup>9</sup> Wotan also calls Erda, the oracular Earth god, the 'Wala'. Her prophetic ability derives from an Old Norse character, Völva, the origin of whose name perhaps leaves little to the imagination.

himself. Siegmund does not provide the solution: indeed, he will have to let Siegmund go. In total desperation, wringing his hands, he foretells, and indeed desires, the collapse, the end of everything: *das Ende das Ende*. (Two trombones sound the motive of the Rhine). Alberich is working to that end: he has visited a whore and fathered a child (outside love, of course).<sup>10</sup> Erda had predicted that when this happened, the end of the gods would be nigh. With great irony,<sup>11</sup> Wotan wishes that child well.

Brünnhilde is ordered to let Siegmund die. But, from what he has told her, she knows that, in his heart, Wotan really wants Siegmund to be the victor. When she argues with him, the god gets angry. He declares woe on her if she does not do as he commands. (This is reinforced by the leitmotive, the force of law and contract, sounded fortissimo by the brass.) He advises her not to provoke him. Off he goes, leaving the despondent Valkyrie behind. She has never seen him like this. (This is preceded by the leitmotive associated with Wotan's wrath sounded fortissimo on the strings.)

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Meanwhile, Siegmund and Sieglinde escape. (This is preceded by a version of the Love motive.) He implores her to rest, and comforts her. She suddenly turns on him, obsessed with the guilt and disgrace of having disobeyed her husband: she is cursed, and he must flee from her. She hears the horns: Hunding and his clan are pursuing them, and cry out for revenge for the broken marriage vows. Then, almost insanely, after hitting top A as she recalls her vows, *der Ehe gebrochenen Eid*, she turns back to seek Siegmund's love; then she predicts his death, and faints. (We hear the Love leitmotive, first on the cor anglais.)

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Brünnhilde approaches the lovers; she is introduced by the leitmotives of Death and Fate. This passage is sometimes called the *Todesverkündigung*, the Pronouncement of Death. Only those doomed to die may gaze on her, she declares. Siegmund will follow her to Valhalla to join the other dead heroes, his father, and beautiful maidens.

Siegmund is not too interested in this. He wants to take Sieglinde with him. 'No'; he sends his regards, but 'he ain't coming'. 'Tough,' she implies, 'he has seen Brünnhilde and he must follow her': she has come to tell him

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10 The child is Hagen, who plays a central role in *Götterdämmerung*. Alberich having forsworn love could not beget a child through love.

11 Wagner himself drew attention to his combination of leitmotives at this point: the motives used for the Rhinegold and for Valhalla are combined 'by means of strange harmonisation so that the musical image, more than Wotan's words, give an insight into the terribly darkened soul of the suffering god'.

of his impending death at the hands of Hunding. He still argues, and points out that he possesses the magic sword. 'Unfortunately his death has been decreed by the swordmaker,' declares Brünnhilde. Whereupon Siegmund denounces the sword maker, and tells Brünnhilde to be quiet or she will upset the collapsed Sieglinde. Who will protect her? He still refuses to go to Valhalla, and will go to Hell instead. He even refuses to leave Sieglinde in the protection of Brünnhilde, despite her advising him so to do, because she is pregnant with his child. He threatens to take both their lives.

Brünnhilde, totally sympathetic, is won over, and says she will take his part. He must wield his weapon boldly.

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Siegmund encourages Sieglinde to sleep until the battle is won. (We hear the Fate motive and a reminiscence of the motive associated with the force of Law and Contract). He prepares to face the foe. We hear the sound of Hunding's stierhorn. To the sound of the Sword leitmotive on the trumpet, Siegmund reckons that Notung will deal with him, and rushes away to battle.

Sieglinde has a nightmare about the time that she and her mother were caught in the woods, when her father and brother did not return and their home was burnt down. She awakes, calling to Siegmund for help.

Hunding has arrived, and the battle begins. Siegmund defies Hunding to face the sword which he has wrested from the tree. Brünnhilde protects Siegmund and eggs him on. As Siegmund is about to fell Hunding, Wotan suddenly intervenes, and Siegmund's sword shatters on his outstretched spear, leaving him defenceless. Hunding spears him. Brünnhilde rushes to gather up Sieglinde, pulling her onto her saddle.

As Hunding withdraws his spear, Wotan deprecatingly orders him to go and report to Fricka what has been achieved. Hunding falls down dead.<sup>12</sup> Wotan declares that Brünnhilde's misbehaviour will be terribly punished. This is preceded by Wotan's Wrath leitmotive.

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<sup>12</sup> It is not obvious why Hunding had to die. But he had to be disposed of somehow. Wagner inserted this quite late in the drafting of the text.

**Act 3 On a mountain summit.**

In the well-known sequence, the Ride of the Valkyries, the Valkyries assemble.<sup>13</sup> Across their saddles are dead heroes, with evocative names such as Sintolt and Wittig. They notice that one of their number, Brünnhilde, is missing. They cannot go to Valhalla without her. They then notice that she is coming on her horse Grane. They are amazed that instead of there being a dead hero on her saddle, there is a woman on it.

The best-known animal in Wagner's menagerie was Grane, Brünnhilde's horse. Wagner was fond of animals, and was invited to become a patron of an anti-vivisection society. We read of Wagner separating dogs which were fighting in the middle of the railway line, and rescuing one that had fallen into the water near the Lucerne ferry.

Breathlessly, Brünnhilde calls for their help: this time, it is she who is fleeing, chased by the father of battles; he can be seen in a thunder cloud coming from the North. She implores her sisters to take Sieglinde. She tells them how she disobeyed Wotan and tried to protect Siegmund. The other Valkyries are appalled to hear that she has been disobedient. Brünnhilde still implores them to save Sieglinde. But they fear that they too are being incited to disobedience.

Sieglinde at first just wants to die: she should have died with Siegmund; Brünnhilde should not have tried to save her. Brünnhilde declares that she must live for the sake of the child she bears, who will be the noblest hero in the world. (We hear the Siegfried motive.) Then, Sieglinde decides that she does want to be saved: 'save me, save a mother'. Brünnhilde suggests that she seeks refuge in the forest to the East. There, Fafner, the giant, now in the form of a dragon, guards the Gold. It is a fearsome place, and Wotan keeps away from it.

Brünnhilde enjoins Sieglinde to be brave, and gives her the fragments of Siegmund's broken sword: one day, the boy will forge them together and use it. And she tells her to call him Siegfried, joyous in victory. Sieglinde thanks Brünnhilde 'the most glorious of women'. (There is a leitmotive associated with the 'nobility' of Brünnhilde.) She bids her farewell.

Wotan can be heard arriving in a wild rage.

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<sup>13</sup> The Ride was performed first by some of King Ludwig's grooms on horses from the royal stables.

The Valkyries wonder what has provoked him into such a fury. They ask him to moderate his wrath. But, he declares that their very existence depends on his Will, which must not be defied: he did not create them to wail when he punishes one of them for disobedience. Brünnhilde, who knew his innermost thoughts, has disloyally disobeyed his Will.

He demands that Brünnhilde accepts punishment. She comes forward. He announces that as she is no longer agent of his Will, she is cast out, no longer a Valkyrie, banished from his sight. He intends to leave her there on the mountain for any passer-by who will have her as his woman to sit by the fire and spin, and be derided in jokes. When her horrified sisters protest, they are warned that they will share her fate if they are not careful. He dismisses them. We hear the Valkyries departing.

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Brünnhilde asks her father whether what she did was really so shameful: after all, Wotan had originally ordered her to protect Siegmund. Even if Fricka had made him change his mind, Brünnhilde was merely executing his innermost wishes, what he really wanted. She argues that she is so much part of him that her disgrace is his disgrace.

He will not listen. She however persuades him to ensure that the man who finds and takes her is indeed a hero. Indeed he must be the greatest hero, he who is about to be born to the Volsung family: Sieglinde is carrying Siegmund's child and is looking after the fragments of the sword.

Brünnhilde protests that Wotan should not disgrace her: let her be surrounded with fire which will destroy any coward who dares approach. Only a free hero, *ein furchtlos freier Held*, will then be able to claim her.

Wotan yields and gives her his emotional Farewell: *Leb wohl, du kühnes herrliches Kind*. It has been said that 'in all music for bass voice, this scene has no peer. Such tender, mournful beauty has never found expression in music'. We hear the brass trumpeting out the Siegfried motive. Wotan describes how a bridal fire will now burn for her, as has never burnt for any bride. Only one who is freer than him shall win the bride. He gives her a last kiss, a kiss which kisses away the godhead from her. He gently covers her with her shield.

Although he has softened, Time is up: Justice must prevail. Wotan commands Loge, the demigod of Fire, to surround the mountain top with a blaze. And he declares that only he who is fearless (who we may guess will be Siegfried) shall pass through it: one who is not afraid of the point of Wotan's spear. Wotan departs sadly. It has been suggested that this

sequence, with its combination of the slumber, the fire, the fate, and the Siegfried leitmotives, constitutes one of the most beautiful items which Wagner bequeathed us. The opera ends appropriately, *pianissimo*.

Occasionally, the fire has spread too quickly. Once, Wotan found his beard on fire. At the première in Munich, the gas flames were thought to be too pale, so buckets were filled with spirit, which resulted in flames leaping several feet into the air, and intense heat. The audience was so frightened that the end of the work was an anticlimax.



WAGNER'S  
*Siegfried*

A Short Guide To A Great Opera

*By*

*Michael Steen*



ORIGINAL WRITING

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# SIEGFRIED AND BACKGROUND TO THE RING CYCLE

*Siegfried* is the penultimate component of *The Ring of the Nibelung* by [Richard Wagner](#).

Much of the background to the *Ring* cycle has been given in *DAS RHEINGOLD: WAGNER'S PRELUDE TO THE RING CYCLE*, to which the reader is encouraged to turn, in particular to the information on [its creation](#) which took so extraordinarily long: he took at least twenty-eight years to bring the four operas together onto the stage. There, information may also be found on his [myth, style, music and reputation](#), including, among other matters, his very personal concept of music drama and his means of implementing it, his various sources, and his unusual style of poetry.

*Siegfried* is central to the *Ring* cycle of four operas because Wagner wrote it in order to elaborate the background to his version of the story of the death of Siegfried, a character principally drawn from medieval mythology. This story provided the kernel from which the *Ring* cycle grew.

In particular, although the final moments of *Götterdämmerung* provide the dénouement to Wagner's cycle, the dramatic final scenes of *Siegfried* are the pinnacle of the entire drama. After the young Siegfried has successfully defied his father, and broken his spear, and has rushed forth to make love to Brünnhilde, there is no future for ancient gods and 'all the rest of them' other than to be engulfed in flames: the world is indeed a modern world for mortals, male and female united in erotic love.

*Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* had largely been composed in Zurich where Wagner was still a political refugee after his escape from Dresden in 1849. It was not until the late summer of 1856, over five years after he wrote the poem, that he set to work on the music of *Siegfried*. He was 'inspired' by [Mathilde Wesendonck](#), the wife of his financier. His fascination with her was such that he began imagining himself and her as the two characters in the myth, Siegfried's incestuous parents, the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. In the following year, Otto Wesendonck took the fatal step of letting a house to Wagner, 'The Asyl'. It was next door to his own residence.



The Asyl

In that year, when he had drafted almost up to the end of act 2 of *Siegfried*, Wagner stopped work on it: he put down the pen. The boy Siegfried was a tiresome character; it was far more exciting, and apposite, to create an opera about the illicit love affair between Tristan, the medieval knight, and Isolde, the Irish Queen. Tristan cuckolds his best friend and liege lord, the King of Cornwall.

Having tied up a few loose ends of *Siegfried*, Wagner said that he would only resume work on *The Ring* if someone sponsored him, or he had done so well that he could afford to make a present of it to the world.

Wagner's dalliance with Mathilde came to an equally abrupt, if less lethal, halt than that of Tristan and Isolde. The composer was then diverted onto other activities, including trying to earn some money.

In May 1864, with cash running especially low, [King Ludwig](#) of Bavaria (the 'mad king') came to his rescue. Wagner could now spend the King's money and set himself up in fine style in Munich. Thus it was that, in December, over seven years after he put down his pen on Act 2 of *Siegfried*, he resumed work on its orchestration. It would then be more than three years before the completion of act 3. Long before this, he had been expelled from Munich and was resident near Lucerne, in Switzerland. Mathilde was but a distant memory; he had married [Cosima](#) with whom he had been living for several years.

Although he finally finished work on *Siegfried* on the first Sunday in February, 1871, a moment which Cosima recorded in her diaries filled her with rapture, and the King was pressing to have the score (which contractually was his property), Wagner would not release it. His overriding concern was to have the *Ring* operas performed as a complete

cycle in an appropriate venue. Even over a year later, Cosima was egging him on to say that the score was incomplete, a downright lie. Wagner got his way: the première of *Siegfried* only took place on 16 August, 1876, as part of the first complete *Ring* cycle.

The production at Bayreuth was beset with many difficulties. Not least of these was that the dragon, which Siegfried slays, had to be sent over in portions from England where it was manufactured at the then enormous cost of £500.<sup>1</sup> The head and neck were still missing at the time of the dress rehearsal; and, for the performance itself, the dragon was neckless. The neck was very possibly on its way to Beirut ('Beyrouth', then in Syria, now in Lebanon) rather than to Bayreuth. To the merriment of the audience, the head was stitched to the body without a neck.

In retrospect, this absurdity seems to justify Wagner's refusal to make *Siegfried* available for production as a self-standing opera, even if his methods were questionable.

One trenchant critic illustrated the risk associated with *Siegfried*: Tolstoy, the great novelist, called it a 'stupid Punch and Judy show, which is much too poor for children over seven years of age. Moreover', he continued, 'it is not music. And yet thousands of people sit there and pretend to like it.' Although Siegfried's story can indeed be enjoyed as a self-standing drama like that of George killing the dragon and being rewarded with a lady, the extensive and detailed dialogue only makes sense as part of Wagner's *Ring* myth as a whole.

During the opera, Wagner recapitulates his myth, but audiences who are not familiar with German are unlikely to grasp the full story. This is may be found in [A summary of The Ring myth](#).

Apart from being a constituent of the overall myth, the opera is related to the other components of the cycle by Wagner's use of recurring snippets of melody, [leitmotives](#), from within it and from the other operas. (See [Examples of leitmotives](#).)

So, in act 3, when Siegfried ascends Brünnhilde's rock, the 'slumber' or 'sleep' motive from *Die Walküre*, the 'horn call' and 'bird call' from *Siegfried*, and the 'bondage' motive from *Das Rheingold* are woven together in one bar.

It would be unwise to try too hard to identify these leitmotives. In acts 1 and 2 of *Siegfried*, there are over 450 occurrences of leitmotives,

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<sup>1</sup> Prices and values are notoriously difficult to compare: however, Charles Dickens, the novelist, sold Tavistock House in London's West End for £2,100 in 1860.

ignoring repetitions in the immediate vicinity. If repetitions were counted, the figure would be in the thousands. It is amazing that, against all odds, Wagner tied together the threads and loose-ends and assembled the work 'in a prodigious whole' over such an extended period of time.

It is not surprising that the many years it took to finalise *The Ring* resulted in a work of considerable length. Wagner's myth, in places at least, became a bit of a muddle, its text being long and opaque: acts 1 and 3 of *Siegfried* each run for just under an hour and a half; the middle act is about ten minutes shorter. Many reputable critics have criticised the prolonged scenes, the 'long and rambling repetitions' which are unnecessary to development of the plot, but are indeed necessary to keep the audience 'on track'. There is much complex detail which the listener cannot realistically be expected to absorb.

Whatever view one may have about the man and a particular production, there is so much to enjoy. There is the humour, even if it is somewhat Germanic. After Siegfried has penetrated the fire, the scene on Brünnhilde's Rock is surely what Rossini would call 'a good moment'. (Rossini had quipped that 'Wagner has some good moments, but bad quarters of an hour'.) There is the rich sound provided by Wagner's orchestra with its augmented wind section. Indeed his characterisation through the music is noticeably effective. And whether it is the lyrical and eloquent sweep of Wotan's lines, 'the blinking and fawning' of Mime, or the contra-bass tubas, 'lowing like Plutonian bullocks', for the dragon, Wagner provides us with a wonderful evening.

# SIEGFRIED:

## WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT

The myth, set in the imaginary past, is based on Wagner's text. As mentioned in [Warning! Recent productions](#), certain directors may amend opera stories to suit their production.

*To pay two giants who built his fortress Valhalla, the chief god Wotan stole the Rhine Gold from Alberich the Nibelung, a gnome, who had earlier obtained it from the Rhinemaidens by forswearing love.*

*Wotan settled with the giants, Fafner and Fasolt. Importantly, the golden hoard included two special items: firstly, the Ring<sup>2</sup>, which confers omnipotence, but also carries a curse from Alberich which dooms its possessor; secondly, the Tarnhelm, a magic garment whose wearer can become invisible, assume any shape desired, or be transported to any desired place.*

*The curse became effective horrifyingly quickly: Fafner killed Fasolt. Now, having assumed the shape of a dragon, Fafner guards his Gold, including the Ring, in a cave. The omnipotence which the Ring conferred on its possessor constituted a threat to the gods. For 'security reasons' therefore, Wotan mated with Erda, the Earth goddess, and produced the Valkyries, who would ride into battle and select Heroes to take back to Valhalla to defend it.*

*To get rid of the curse, the Gold needed to be returned to the Rhinemaidens. With this in mind, Wotan sired the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, the 'Wälsungs' (Volsungs). Wotan hoped that Siegmund would recover the Gold by killing Fafner with a sword forged by him.*

*However things did not work out according to plan. The twins, having been separated, met and fell in love. They begat Siegfried, in an incestuous union which Wotan's wife could not condone: unless punished, this breach of authority would lead to the ruin of the gods. Wotan had to allow Siegmund to be killed in battle. Siegmund's sword was shattered; Sieglinde escaped into the forest where she gave birth to Siegfried before she died.*

*The leading Valkyrie, Brünnhilde, attempted to defend Siegmund. As punishment for this, Wotan degraded her to a mortal and condemned*

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Ring of the Nibelung' is the ring belonging to Alberich the Nibelung. Nibelung is singular.

*her to sleep on a rock surrounded by fire, unprotected from any male fearless enough to penetrate it and have her.*

**That is all background.** The story of *Siegfried* itself starts in the depths of the forest at the forge of **Mime**, Alberich's brother. Mime has raised the orphan Siegfried, after his mother's death. Mime tries, without success, to repair Siegfried's father's shattered sword, called '**Notung**'. With this, he hopes to kill Fafner, the dragon, and possess the Gold and the Ring, which **Alberich** also wants back. Questioned by Wotan, who has come down to earth disguised as the **Wanderer** or **Traveller**, it is clear that Mime will fail, because only someone who has known no fear can forge the pieces of Notung together again. Siegfried welds the sword together so effectively that the anvil splits when struck by it.

Alberich waits at the mouth of Fafner's cave. He converses with the Wanderer: he reveals the limitations of Wotan's power; and Wotan warns Alberich about Mime. Mime instructs Siegfried about Fafner the dragon, and hopes that they will both kill each other.

As Siegfried awaits the dragon, he wonders about his parents. He hears a **Forest Bird**.<sup>3</sup> If only he could understand it, he would know what his mother was like. A pipe which he makes does not help him do so; and when he blows his horn, he just wakens Fafner, who lurches out. Siegfried is unafraid. When Fafner raises himself up to fall upon and crush Siegfried, he exposes his breast into which Siegfried plunges Notung, his sword. The taste of the Giant's blood enables Siegfried to understand birdsong.

Despite Alberich and Mime both arguing about which of them shall take possession of the Gold, it now belongs to Siegfried. The Forest Bird warns Siegfried to be careful about Mime, whom he now kills.

The Forest Bird leads him to the treasure, and takes him to the foot of Brünnhilde's rock.

Wotan seeks the advice of Erda, the oracular Earth goddess, but without satisfaction. He fails to halt Siegfried who shatters his spear and power. Impelled by love, Siegfried passes through the fire. He finds the sleeping Brünnhilde, with her horse **Grane** tethered nearby. His union with her is sealed with the Ring.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Could this be Siegfried's mother transmogrified? Siegfried is obsessed with his mother, an Oedipus fixation. (Freud, who maintained that we devote our first sexual impulses towards our mother, was only aged twenty when the première of Wagner's *Siegfried* took place.)

4 She is protected from its curse which (we now learn) cannot take effect if it is worn by an innocent.

A [Glossary](#) of what George Bernard Shaw called ‘the curious harlequinade of gods, dwarfs and giants’ and [A summary of \*The Ring\* myth](#) are also provided.

# SIEGFRIED: INTERVAL CHAT

To provide ‘talking points’, more information on the background generally, and on Wagner, King Ludwig, Cosima and Mathilde in particular, can be found by using the links above. In addition the following links to the ‘Interval Chat’ on *Das Rheingold* may be found useful:

[What is \*The Ring\* all about?](#)

[A simple interpretation](#)

[A more complex explanation](#)

[The dislike of Wagner](#)

More detailed information on the following is also available:

[Where did he get these ideas from?](#)

[A complete art-work \(Gesamtkunstwerk\)](#)

[Wagner’s poetry](#)

[Leitmotives](#)

The following additional ‘talking points’ are relevant to *Siegfried*.

After using the selected link, the reader can return here by selecting the next appropriate ‘Back’ link.

## ***The bumptious character of Siegfried***

Wagner named his own son and heir Siegfried after his leading hero, presumably because he considered that he represented an ideal human, a superman of the future who would leave behind the confused darkness of the forest and become a super-achiever reaching the highest pinnacle of light. Not least, he would ‘embody the virtues dear to northern hearts’. (This is in contrast to Wotan who represents state law and the power politics that Wagner hated so much. Siegfried literally cuts through all of that.)

By the time Siegfried Wagner died in 1930, his operatic namesake was identified with ‘the essence of German-ness’, just as the First World War was seen as ‘the Götterdämmerung of the West, and the West was associated with the curse of Gold’.

It may come as a surprise that, in *Siegfried*, this paragon is portrayed as an unattractive, unpleasant, boorish, childish, ungrateful character. His guardian Mime describes him as *Der schmähliche Knabe*, the abusive boy, and *Ein kühnes dummes Kind*, a brave, stupid child. Fafner taunts him for being ‘a bragging child’. Today, he can seem like some young men featured in the sports section of a newspaper.

Of course, neither Mime nor Fafner are objective; and the myth requires that Siegfried is self-propelled and is uninfluenced by Wotan. But Siegfried

cannot logically claim to be brave or heroic in our usual sense of the words, because he has never experienced fear. And even when confronted with it, he has the magic ‘Tarnhelm’ to get him through it unscathed.

Recent productions sometimes portray Siegfried as a buffoon, at the very least deluded. Indeed, many of his characteristics are also possessed by Wagner’s Parsifal, the pure fool (*Der reine Tor*), who was also an agent of Redemption.

Wagner wanted ‘as boyish-looking a singer as possible for his Siegfried’. By the time of the première, the tenor who he had originally envisaged for the role was aged forty-one, and Wagner considered that he was too mature for it.

### ***Siegfried (Sigurd) in the Volsungsgaga.***

Many elements of *Siegfried* are found in the *Volsungsgaga*, a violent saga of blood and guts. ‘Axes are hard-driven, shields cleft, and byrnie torn, helmets shivered, skulls split twain, and many a man felled to the cold earth.’ Although the ancient stories deal with the Creation by the gods, Wagner himself largely conceived his own paraphernalia of gods, giants and underworld gnomes.

In the saga, Sigmund was killed in a battle fought in revenge over a princess he was wooing. In this, a one-eyed person with a slouched hat intervened and Sigmund’s sword shattered on the man’s spear.

Sigmund’s wife gave birth to Sigurd (i.e. Siegfried) ‘the noblest and most famed of our kin’, and she kept the shards of the broken spear.

Regin, the smith, undertook to make Sigurd a spear with which to kill Fafnir, the dragon who was guarding a hoard of gold. But all his efforts were useless until Sigurd supplied the shards of Gram, the spear which shattered when his father was killed. Regin forged them together. When testing the weapon, Sigurd split the anvil.

Sigurd took vengeance on the killers of his father. Then he set about killing Fafnir. By lying in a hole in the ground, Sigurd was able to plunge his spear into the dragon when he crawled over it emerging for his drink. The expiring dragon warned Sigurd that the gold would be his downfall.

The taste of the dragon’s blood enabled Sigurd to understand bird song. The birds advised him to ride over to the rock on which Brynhild slept. Odin had punished her for disobedience. He put her to sleep on a hill surrounded by fire. She vowed never to marry anyone who knew fear.

Sigurd braved the flames and they ‘plighted their troth’.

# SIEGFRIED: ACT BY ACT

## ***Act 1. In the forest, at the forge belonging to Mime, the gnome.***

The overture, with the deep sounds of the contra-bass tuba, conjures up the depths of the forest, as if we are moving through trees and mist. Eventually we come across Mime at his forge. There, he is struggling unsuccessfully to forge a sword for Siegfried. He is trying to weld together the pieces of Notung, Siegmund's shattered sword, with which he plans that Siegfried will kill the dragon and enable him, Mime, to seize the Gold. (We hear the Sword leitmotive.)

The boisterous Siegfried arrives with a bear and sets it onto Mime, before releasing it into the forest. Siegfried seizes the sword on which Mime has been working, and, with one blow, he smashes it on the anvil, and rages at him. Mime upbraids Siegfried for his sulky ungrateful attitude; he describes all he has done for the boy, bringing him up. He may have taught him much, but Siegfried says that he has not taught him how to put up with Mime himself, who he longs to be rid of.

For the 1958 Decca recording of the complete *Ring*, the production team wanted the sound of a real bear. They recorded this at London Zoo using the sound of a male and female bear next each other in separate cages. They gave honey to the female, but not to the male. Unfortunately when the noise was played with the orchestra, it drowned it out. The conductor, Georg Solti, was furious, and the idea had to be dropped.

Siegfried, who has seen the mating of animals, wonders where Mime's wife is. And who is his own mother? When Mime suggests that he is both father and mother, Siegfried accuses him of lying: when he saw his appearance reflected in the stream, he knew Mime could not possibly be his father.

Mime tells Siegfried that he gave shelter to his pregnant mother who died in childbirth. Siegfried asks why he is called Siegfried. The answer is that his mother, called Sieglinde, gave him that name. Mime never saw his father, who had been killed. But his mother left behind the pieces of a broken sword, which his father had used in his last fight. Siegfried orders Mime to weld the pieces together. (We hear the Sword leitmotive.) When Mime asks what he will do with the sword, Siegfried says that he will leave with it and never return. He dashes off into the forest leaving the despairing Mime to try to weld the pieces of the sword together. This he is incapable of doing.

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Wotan, the chief god, appears disguised as the ‘Wanderer’ or ‘Traveller’. Mime is terrified and wants him to move on. When Wotan stakes his life that Mime will learn something useful from him, Mime asks him three questions. Wotan’s answers to these enable Wagner to provide the background to the story of the gods, giants and Nibelung gnomes – the essential features of *Das Rheingold*. In the depths of the Earth are these gnomes, who were once ruled by Alberich, who possessed the Ring and the Gold with which he should have ruled the World. On the Earth, are the giants ruled by Fafner and Fasolt, who fought over the Gold, after which Fasolt was killed; Fafner now guards the treasure. In the cloudy sky, are the gods, who live in Valhalla, ruled over by Wotan who exercises power using a stave hewn from the primeval Ash-tree.

After the Wanderer has successfully answered Mime’s questions, he says that it is now his turn to ask three questions. In the answers, we hear elements of the story of *Die Walküre*, in which Wotan punished Siegmund and Sieglinde, the Volsungs, the wild and desperate twins who sired Siegfried. A Nibelung has adopted Siegfried with the intention of becoming master of the treasure. The sword that is necessary to kill Fafner is called Notung: it is the sword which only the strongest of heroes, Siegmund, could wrest from the tree into which Wotan had thrust it. It had shattered, however, on Wotan’s spear (the symbol of his might) and its fragments are now possessed by a blacksmith; with it, a brave but stupid child will kill the dragon.

Mime is delighted that he can answer the first two questions. The third, however, stumps him: Wotan asks who will weld the pieces of Notung together. It is clearly not Mime, and he does not know who will do so. Wotan tells him the answer: only one who has known no fear shall forge the pieces of Notung together again. Wotan departs, leaving Mime’s head forfeit to him who has never known fear. *Nur wer das Fürchten nicht erfuhr, schmiedet Notung neu.*

Mime is horrified. To protect himself, he must ensure that Siegfried knows about fear. At this moment, Siegfried rushes back from the forest and demands to know how Mime has got on welding the sword. Mime asks him whether he has ever felt fear in the depth of the forest. Siegfried asks how a coward like Mime can teach him fear. Mime suggests that if he introduces him to Fafner the dragon, who lives in Neidhöhle (Hate Cave), he will learn about it.

When Siegfried orders him to weld the sword, Mime suggests that someone who has never known fear will do it better. Siegfried shoves him out of the way, and gets to work. While Siegfried files down the sword fragments into a melting pot and blows the bellows to forge it, Mime ponders how he can turn the situation to his own advantage: he will give

Siegfried a spiked drink to refresh him after he has killed the dragon, and then kill him. He goes to prepare the drink, and gleefully anticipates his ultimate success, while Siegfried continues to work away, moulding the hot liquid, and then forging it. Mime fantasises that he, Prince of the Gnomes, will soon be Ruler of the World. Siegfried brandishes the sword, and tests it by splitting the anvil.

The sword and splitting the anvil have often caused problems. The Covent Garden property manager provided Wolfgang Windgassen with the fragments, but forgot to give him a complete sword with which to split the anvil. Windgassen managed to edge his way into the wings and pick up a sword. In a performance with Melchior, the anvil fell apart three seconds before Siegfried hit it. Remedios had a similar experience when he trod too soon on the foot pedal mechanism, designed to make the anvil fall apart. On another occasion, the anvil had already fallen to pieces because Mime sat on it.

***Act 2. Deep in the forest, in front of Fafner's cave, at first at night.***<sup>5</sup>

Alberich guards the entrance to Fafner's cave. He sees someone coming who he recognises as Wotan, who stole his Gold. He tells him to 'buzz off'. But he also recognises Wotan's weakness: he cannot get the Gold back from the giants; his contract with them (to build Valhalla) is inscribed on his spear, the symbol and structure of his power, which would shatter and fall apart if he did.

Alberich suggests that the Wanderer, Wotan, is scared of someone else acquiring the Gold, particularly him, because he will immediately use the Ring to rule the world. Alberich knows that Wotan is relying on Siegfried to recover it. Wotan ignores this and suggests that Alberich should really be worrying about the ambitions of his brother Mime, because he is bringing along a boy, who knows nothing of the power of the Ring, to seize it.

The Wanderer playfully suggests that Alberich should do a deal with the dragon, and calls out to Fafner that he can save his life if he hands over the treasure. (To conjure up the dragon, Wagner uses the deep sound of the contra-bass tuba which is sounded down as far as the E flat, the pitch that one finds at the very bottom of the piano.) But Fafner, singing through a loudspeaker from the depths of his lair, intends to gobble up the boy, and just wants to go back to sleep. Wotan is loftily amused by this, and confidentially tells him that everything is predestined and unalterable, *Alles is nach seiner Art: an ihr wirst du nichts ändern*. He

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<sup>5</sup> The playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw regarded this scene as 'The dullest moment in *Siegfried*'.

can try his luck with Mime. As the Wanderer leaves, Alberich is confident of triumphing in the end, and slips away into a crevice in the rocks.

At day-break, Mime arrives with Siegfried bearing the sword. He looks to see if anyone else is there. He tells Siegfried that if today he does not learn fear, he never will. He warns him of the savage dragon who lives in the cave who will gobble him up; alternatively perhaps, his poisonous venom will make him wither away, or he will crush him with his tail.

This does not faze Siegfried who just wants to know if the dragon has a heart. If so, he will plunge his sword, Notung, into it. Mime says that he will quake when he sees the beast; then he will learn fear. They abuse each other: Mime tells him that the dragon will come out to drink from the stream; Siegfried warns Mime not to hang around or the dragon will slurp him up with his drink. In the end, Mime hobbles off, hoping that Siegfried and the dragon will both kill each other.

Siegfried relaxes under the lime tree, and declares, 'He's not my father, thank heavens,' *'Das der mein Vater nicht ist'*. (This, the first time Siegfried relaxes under the Lindenbaum, has been identified as the point at which Wagner first put down his pen, and stopped work on *Siegfried*. He took it up again after a fortnight and finished up to the end of act 2. Twelve years elapsed before he began again. He was proud that an interruption of this length was unprecedented in the history of arts. )

Siegfried wonders what his own father looked like, presumably just like him. He longs for his mother. What was she like? Perhaps she was more beautiful than a doe. He then hears a forest bird, and thinks that, if he could understand its twittering, he would find out what his mother was like.

Mime had told him that a bird's voice can be understood. Siegfried rushes to the stream, cuts a reed and makes a pipe, and tries unsuccessfully to talk to the bird with it. He next tries to communicate with it by using his horn. But, the horn-call raises Fafner, who lurches out. Siegfried asks him if he will teach him about fear.

Fafner bares his fangs and then swishes his tail. Siegfried is unafraid: he just laughs and tells the dragon that the best thing he can do is to drop dead. He goes for the dragon, and wounds him in the tail. When Fafner raises himself up to fall on Siegfried and crush him, he exposes his breast giving Siegfried the opportunity to plunge Notung into his heart.

As Fafner expires, he tells Siegfried that he killed his brother Fasolt; now, he also is to die, as will Siegfried himself, in his turn. Fafner dies with his last word being 'Siegfried'.

When Siegfried withdraws his sword, his hand is covered with Fafner's blood which he licks. This enables him to understand what the Forest Bird is singing: in the cave, he will find the treasure which includes the Ring, which confers omnipotence, and the Tarnhelm, the magic garment whose wearer can become invisible, assume any shape desired, or be transported to any desired place. He can be master of the World.

While Siegfried goes into the cave, Mime and Alberich bicker over the spoils and hurl abuse at each other, a moment of great comedy, which Wagner portrays with some very evocative music: Alberich claimed that he obtained the Ring; Mime claims he had the brains to design the Tarnhelm. Alberich rejects outright Mime's suggestion that Alberich have the Ring and he takes the Tarnhelm. Siegfried appears with both items whose attributes he has no idea of. The two gnomes both run away.

The Forest Bird tells Siegfried not to trust Mime, who returns, hoping with his cunning to fool the boy. Mime asks Siegfried if he has learnt about fear. No. Mime cunningly tells himself that the boy has outlived his usefulness and he must do away with him.<sup>6</sup> He offers a refreshing drink, actually a drug, and keeps offering it, while talking to himself about how he will kill him and chop off his head.

He underestimates Siegfried who simply despatches Mime with a blow of the sword. At this, Alberich's laughter can be heard in the background. Siegfried throws the corpse into the cave, and blocks its mouth with the dragon's body.

By now it is midday. Siegfried relaxes again under a Lindenbaum, a lime tree. He muses how lonely he is and calls on the forest bird to find him a companion. She tells him of Brünnhilde, the marvellous woman who sleeps on a high rock surrounded by fire. If, knowing no fear, he can penetrate it, he can have her. Siegfried feels the first emotions of love and calls on the bird to lead him to the mountain.

### ***Act 3. A wild landscape at the foot of the mountains.***

Wotan, the Wanderer, consults Erda, the oracular Earth goddess, the World's wisest woman, who mainly sleeps. She it was who, at the end of *Das Rheingold*, warned him that the curse which Alberich had placed on holders of the Ring would result in the downfall of the gods. Wotan wishes to know how to stop the revolving wheel which he has set in motion.

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<sup>6</sup> This is curious, but seems to make sense if one assumes that Siegfried is hearing the gnome's inner thoughts, rather than the gnome really uttering them himself.

Erda is peeved that Wotan has not asked her daughters, the Norns. They spin a thread of Past, Present and Future while she is asleep. Alternatively, why does he not ask the child Wotan sired on her, Brünnhilde? Erda is shocked to hear that, while she has slept, Wotan has condemned Brünnhilde who merely did for him what he himself wanted to do.

She tries to go; but Wotan is determined to know how he can conquer his anxiety. They argue: to his fury, she admonishes him for being a fraud, something other than that which he calls himself, *Du bist nicht was du dich nennst*. His power is already constrained by his earlier dodgy deals, and he is on the slippery slope towards inevitable destruction.

He tells her that she will yield to his will and her wisdom will come to an end. He is resigned to the downfall of the gods, because it is for that that he now wishes. He is going to bequeath his inheritance to a glorious Wälsung (i.e. Siegfried), who does not as yet know this. The purity of his motives will remove Alberich's curse. Siegfried will fall in love with Brünnhilde, who, with her knowledge, will redeem the World. Erda should return to everlasting sleep and observe his own downfall.

Siegfried appears, and the bird, frightened by the sight of Wotan, the King of the Ravens,<sup>7</sup> flutters away. Siegfried asks Wotan for directions to the rock surrounded by fire on which a woman sleeps. He tells Wotan that he was told about it by a bird, whose voice he understood as a result of tasting a dragon's blood. He had been taken to the cave, 'Neidhöhle', by Mime the spiteful gnome. He killed the dragon with the sword which he had forged, and which would not have been much use unless he had forged it anew.

The Wanderer is amused by all this, and by his truculence. The loutish Siegfried shows him no respect and demands just to be given directions. He has had enough of old men, and warns him to watch out. He asks the Wanderer why he wears a big hat which droops over his face. Presumably someone took his eye, because he had got in his way. He will lose the other one if he is not careful.

This is too much for Wotan, who rebukes him: Siegfried would be more polite if he knew who he was talking to. But Wotan really loves him.

Wotan suggests that Siegfried should stop. Whoever wakes the sleeping girl will make him (Wotan) powerless, and he points to the fearsome fire on the mountain. Siegfried pushes him aside. Wotan tries to bar his way with the spear. (We are reminded of the leitmotives of Wotan's upholding

<sup>7</sup> In the saga, Odin (Wotan) had two black ravens, Huginn and Muninn, Mind and Memory, which sat on his shoulder. They scoured the whole world at dawn, returning to him at breakfast time, and kept him up-to-date with the latest news.

of the law, and his wrath; Siegfried's sword motive prevails.) But, this time, Notung is not shattered.

On one occasion when Wotan was about to bar Siegfried's way, he was standing on a 'rock'. He was slightly unbalanced, and the rock keeled over. When he presented his spear to be shattered, the release catch disengaged too soon, and it fell apart early.

With a single blow, to the sound of a thunder machine, a 'Donnermaschine', Siegfried breaks Wotan's spear in two. Wotan declares: Go on, I cannot stop you: *Zieh hin! Ich kann dich nicht halten*, and he disappears. Siegfried plunges through the flames.<sup>8</sup>

***Brünnhilde's Rock, the scene at the end of Die Walküre.***

Having passed through the fire, Siegfried gazes in astonishment at the object in shining armour, and at the horse (Grane) sleeping nearby. (We hear the motive of the sleeping Brünnhilde from the end of *Die Walküre*.) Siegfried thinks the vision is a man. He removes the breastplate. 'It is no man': *Das ist kein Mann!*

This often raises an inappropriate laugh. One performer of Siegfried was a bit surprised to see beneath the breastplate a note with the message: 'Do not disturb, early morning tea and *The Times*, please, 7.30 am'.

He calls on his mother for help. He wonders whether the emotion he is feeling could be fear. Has a sleeping woman taught him to be afraid? He must wake her, with a kiss.

We now hear glorious music which recurs in *Götterdämmerung* when the dying Siegfried sings his paean to Brünnhilde. She awakens and greets the sun and the day. *Heil dir Sonne, Heil dir Licht*. Siegfried explains that he has gone through the fire. And his name is Siegfried. Both Brünnhilde and Siegfried are ecstatic. Brünnhilde declares that they are destined for each other: she has loved him since before he was conceived. Not surprisingly, this confuses Siegfried who still thinks he must be seeing his mother.<sup>9</sup> Brünnhilde has to explain that this is not the case: his mother will not return.

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<sup>8</sup> In act 3 of *Siegfried*, as he ascends Brünnhilde's rock, Siegfried's horn call and the bird-song from *Siegfried*, the slumber motive from *Die Walküre*, and the bondage motive from *Das Rheingold* are combined in a single bar.

<sup>9</sup> Wagner preceded Freud.

Their ardour increases. But when Siegfried moves to embrace her she rushes away. She is very coy: the gods or heroes in Valhalla had not dared to do that. But now she is defenceless. To music which we recognise from Wagner's birthday present to his wife Cosima, the *Siegfried Idyll*, her resistance is gradually broken. He wants her. 'Be mine', he declares, *Sei mein! Sei mein! Sei mein!*

They embrace passionately; he recovers. Bowled over and irresponsible, deflowered and deconsecrated, she realises that this marks the end of the old order, the destruction of Valhalla, the gods: the Norn's rope will break (as it indeed will in the next day's Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*). They both hail radiant love, laughing death, *Leuchtende Liebe, lachender Tod*.<sup>10</sup>

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10 The role of Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* can be a nightmare for heavier voices. In those cases, the C for *lachender Tod* at the end is often taken an octave down. Birgit Nilsson has noted the difficulty in bringing out the many-sided character in the short, intense time of this scene. 'The Siegfried Brünnhilde always cost me more in nerves and stress than the two other Brünnhildes, in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*, put together', she wrote.



WAGNER'S  
*Götterdämmerung*  
*The Twilight of the Gods*

A Short Guide To A Great Opera

By

*Michael Steen*



ORIGINAL WRITING

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# GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG AND BACKGROUND TO THE RING CYCLE

*Götterdämmerung* by [Richard Wagner](#) is the final component of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, a cycle of three dramas, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, which are preceded by an introductory prelude, a ‘preliminary evening’, *Das Rheingold*. *The Ring* was first staged as complete ‘cycle’ on four evenings between 13-17 August, 1876.

*Götterdämmerung* is integral to the cycle and vice versa: back in mid-century, Wagner planned to compose a single opera about Siegfried’s death, but he subsequently accepted that, if his myth and its message were to be clear, not only did it need an explanatory prologue, but also the work required to be preceded by other explanatory operas. So, although *Götterdämmerung* is frequently staged and enjoyed as a stand-alone opera, Wagner himself believed that it needed to be understood in the overall context of the full cycle.

Much of the background to the *Ring* cycle has been given in *DAS RHEINGOLD: WAGNER’S PRELUDE TO THE RING CYCLE*, to which the reader is encouraged to turn, in particular to the information on [its creation](#) which took so extraordinarily long: he took at least twenty-eight years to bring the four operas together onto the stage. There, information may also be found on his [myth, style, music and reputation](#), including, among other matters, his very personal concept of music drama and his means of implementing it, his various sources, and his unusual style of poetry.

In August 1857, Wagner had composed almost up to the end of act 2 of *Siegfried*, the third opera, when he stopped work on it. It was far more exciting to create an opera with himself as Tristan and [Mathilde Wesendonck](#) as Isolde. So, having tied up a few loose ends, he said that he would only resume work on *The Ring* if someone sponsored him, or he had done so well that he could afford to make a present of it to the world. He diverted onto other activities, including trying to earn some money.

In 1864, with cash running especially low, [King Ludwig](#) of Bavaria (the ‘mad king’) came to his rescue. Wagner could now spend the King’s money and set himself up in fine style in Munich. Thus it was that, over seven years after he put down his pen on act 2 of *Siegfried*, Wagner resumed work on its orchestration. After spending a year on that, it would then be more than three years before the completion of act 3. Long before this, he had been expelled from Munich and was resident near Lucerne, in

Switzerland; his passion for Mathilde was but a memory; he had married [Cosima](#) von Bülow with whom he had been cohabiting for several years.

Wagner wanted the whole *Ring* project, including the building of a special opera-house, to be completed before component parts of the cycle were staged. But his attempt to stop the staging of the completed operas, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, was overridden by the King. The premières of these took place, by royal command, in September 1869 and June 1870 respectively.

Wagner was afraid that, then, the King would also force the premature production of *Siegfried*. (Most of the music for *Götterdämmerung* still remained to be composed.) So with 'a good deal of chicanery and one or two downright lies', he managed to delay the production of the last two operas until that historic moment in 1876 when the first complete *Ring* cycle was premièred and culminated with the first performance of *Götterdämmerung* on 17 August.

Although Wagner had completed some work on the text and music of *Siegfried's Death* back in 1850, the music for *Götterdämmerung* was essentially composed twenty years later, between October 1869 and November 1874. It is indeed amazing that he then managed to draw together all the threads of *The Ring* 'in a prodigious whole'.

Musically, the opera is related to the other components of the *Ring* cycle by means of recurring snippets of melody, [leitmotives](#), from within it and from the other operas. (See [Examples of leitmotives](#).) It would be unwise to try too hard to identify them. Nearly twenty occur in the scene with the Norns which opens *Götterdämmerung*, and over a thousand (ignoring immediate repetitions in the immediate vicinity) in the opera as whole.

But, for example, towards the end of the prologue, when Brünnhilde presents Siegfried with her horse, we hear echoes of the Ride of the Valkyries from *Die Walküre*, as we also do when one of her sister Valkyries visits her, and when, mounted on her horse, she finally leaps on the funeral pyre.<sup>1</sup>

It is however not surprising that the long drawn-out gestation of *The Ring* led to a work of considerable length and some opaqueness: act 1 of *Götterdämmerung*, extended as it is with its prologue, runs for two

<sup>1</sup> Of course, the leitmotives, their metamorphosis and their combination is much more subtle than this simplistic example may appear. The leitmotive associated with Valhalla and the leitmotive associated with the Ring are the same chord sequence. And an upward motive associated with creation is reversed downwards when reference is made to destruction.

hours; act 2 for an hour and act 3 for an hour and a quarter. Many reputable critics have criticised Wagner for his prolonged scenes, and the ‘long and rambling repetitions’ which are unnecessary to the development of the plot, but are indeed necessary to keep the audience ‘on track’. There is much complex detail which the listener cannot realistically be expected to absorb.

So, the listener should not approach any of the components of *The Ring* expecting the story to unfold as would perhaps a novel or a play.

Wagner spent the summer months before the *Ring* première rehearsing, dealing with the builders of his purpose-built opera-house at Bayreuth (the Festspielhaus), receiving and entertaining visitors and VIPs, even inspecting Brünnhilde’s horse. Cosima was deeply worried and despondent, and Wagner was driving himself forward relentlessly despite insomnia and a gum abscess. There was a tremendous amount of coming and going. The Wagners had to deal with tantrums, ‘floods of ugly talk’, squabbling servants. He even had to replace the Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* when she found that she was pregnant. There were disappointments and moments of elation.

But the performances went off well. After the first cycle, there was a farewell party for more than two hundred people at the Wagners’ house, ‘Wahnfried’. Shortly thereafter, following a second cycle, the Wagners went away to recover in Italy, and to contemplate raising the finance to liquidate the enormous losses which had been sustained.

But on that August evening at the end of the first *Ring* cycle, as the great river flooded the stage at the dénouement, and Hagen called out ‘Keep back from the Ring’, surely its composer must have thought of the moment, so many years before, when he first saw the Rhine. He was on his way to Dresden for the première of *Rienzi*, his early opera. ‘With tears swelling in my eyes,’ he subsequently recorded, ‘I, a poor artist, swore eternal loyalty to my German fatherland.’<sup>2</sup>

Whatever view one may have about the man and his opinions, or a particular production, and despite the length and complexity, there is so much to enjoy in *Götterdämmerung*: for example, Siegfried’s journey to the Rhine; the magnificent ‘Hoiho chorus’ in which Hagen blows the Cowhorn, the ‘Stierhorn’, to summon the vassals to the wedding feast; the blistering row when Brünnhilde discovers Siegfried’s infidelity. There is a magnificent culmination, with Siegfried’s paean to Brünnhilde, and her final oration: she mounts Grane, the horse, and both leap into the flames

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<sup>2</sup> He had written: ‘I no longer write operas. I am calling it a drama, because this describes most clearly the viewpoint from which my work must be received.’

which engulf Valhalla. Thus, she joins Siegfried in the ultimate *Liebestod*, love-death. The Rhine overflows, the Rhinemaidens recover the Ring and the curse attaching to its ownership is lifted. With the water engulfing the stage, both metaphorically and musically, the world is cleansed of the gods, leaving humans behind. Siegfried's act of Redemption has destroyed their power.

This is humbug, as is the myth, as was Wagner himself. But the end is artistically stupendous, befitting a cycle of four operas written and composed by one of the most extraordinary persons in the millenium. The audience, almost satiated, leaves overwhelmed, gasping, yet none the wiser, except knowing that it has had a profoundly moving experience. That indeed is Wagner's astonishing, enduring, legacy.

# GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG:

## WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT

The myth, set in the imaginary past, is based on Wagner's text. As mentioned in [Warning! Recent productions](#), certain directors may amend opera stories to suit their production.

*The opera starts with a Prologue. In the first part, three Norns, women who spin a golden thread, a time-line, past, present and future, remind us of aspects of the tale so far. It began with the building of Valhalla, the gods' costly fortress. To pay for it, the chief god Wotan stole the Gold from Alberich the Nibelung, a gnome, who had earlier obtained it from the Rhinemaidens. The Norns also recall that Wotan punished his daughter Brünnhilde the Valkyrie for her disobedience: he degraded her from her demi-god status, and condemned her to sleep on a rock surrounded by fire, unprotected from any brave male who might find her. Although the Norns have a premonition that Valhalla will go up in flames, the future is uncertain: the thread breaks.*

*By now, Siegfried, Wotan's grandchild, has obtained the hoard of Gold, by slaying the dragon who guarded it. Importantly, the hoard contained two items. Firstly, the Ring<sup>3</sup> which confers omnipotence, but also carries a curse placed on it by Alberich after it was stolen from him: its possessor would be doomed, as the dragon itself discovered. Secondly, the Tarnhelm, a magic garment whose wearer can become invisible, assume any shape desired, or be transported to any desired place. With these, Siegfried has penetrated the fire surrounding Brünnhilde's rock.*

*In the second part of the Prologue, Siegfried ends his honeymoon with Brünnhilde. Having given her the Ring as a pledge, he departs for heroic exploits, and she envelops him with magic to protect him, the fearless hero, on his way. Because it should be unnecessary, her magic does not extend to his back.*

*His departure is followed by an orchestral interlude, called Siegfried's Journey to the Rhine.*

**That is all 'prologue'.** The story of *Götterdämmerung* itself starts on the banks of the Rhine, with Alberich's son Hagen plotting with his half-brother Gunther and his sister Guttrune. Hagen is determined to recover the Ring, thus making the Nibelungs omnipotent, exactly what Wotan

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<sup>3</sup> The 'Ring of the Nibelung' is the ring belonging to Alberich the Nibelung. Nibelung is singular.

feared. A marriage between Gunther and Brünnhilde should enable Hagen to obtain it. However, they need to use Siegfried to return through the flames which envelop her, and bring her to them. Gunther is no hero, and could not do this himself.

Siegfried arrives on the Rhine at the end of his journey. With a welcome drink, he is drugged into forgetting Brünnhilde. Then, having sworn blood-brotherhood with Gunther, he uses the magic garment, the **Tarnhelm**, to assume Gunther's shape, and be transported to the rock whence he abducts Brünnhilde. This happens just after she has rejected a plea of from sister **Waltraute** that she should return the Ring (and the curse associated with it) to the Rhinemaidens.

Hagen, driven on by the spectre of his father, the cheated Alberich, progresses his scheme. In the rousing '**Hoiho**' chorus, with the cowhorn, the stierhorn, he calls Gunther's **vassals** to celebrate the nuptials. Siegfried arrives with the dejected, shocked and astonished Brünnhilde. To her horror and fury, her Siegfried, still under the influence of the drug, marries Gutrune. He does this after swearing, on the point of his sword, that he has never possessed Brünnhilde. There is a monumental row. Revenge is inevitable. Brünnhilde reveals that Siegfried's back is not protected. They plan Siegfried's death.

The men go on a hunt, during which Siegfried takes a rest on the bank of the Rhine. There, the Rhinemaidens fail to persuade him to surrender the Ring. When the huntsmen have break for a drink, Hagen gives Siegfried an antidote which makes him recall what actually happened with Brünnhilde. His infidelity is obvious. Hagen immediately stabs him in the back, the only unprotected part of his body. Siegfried dies singing a glorious paeon to Brünnhilde with whom he will be united in death (Liebestod). Before joining him on his funeral pyre, she explains how Siegfried was the innocent victim of Wotan's machinations. Valhalla, like Siegfried's funeral pyre, goes up in flames.

A [Glossary](#) of what George Bernard Shaw called 'the curious harlequinade of gods, dwarfs and giants' and [A summary of \*The Ring\* myth](#) are also provided.

# GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG: INTERVAL CHAT

To provide ‘talking points’, more information on the background generally, and on Wagner, King Ludwig, Cosima and Mathilde in particular, can be found by using the links above. In addition the following links from the ‘Interval Chat’ on *Das Rheingold* may be found useful:

[What is \*The Ring\* all about?](#)

[A simple interpretation](#)

[A more complex explanation](#)

[The dislike of Wagner](#)

More detailed information on the following is also available:

[Where did he get these ideas from?](#)

[A complete art-work \(Gesamtkunstwerk\)](#)

[Wagner’s poetry](#)

[Leitmotives](#)

The following additional ‘talking points’ are relevant to *Götterdämmerung*:  
After using the selected link, the reader can return here by selecting the next appropriate ‘Back’ link.

## ***The Nibelungenlied***

The version of the story told in the first half of *The Nibelungenlied* dates from around 1200AD, in the Danube area upstream from Vienna. Wagner has been criticised ‘for introducing reckless distortions’ of it.

From some quarrelling dragons, Siegfried son of Siegmund, the Lord of the Netherlands and Norway, seized the Nibelung’s mighty sword, the cloak of invisibility, a hundred baggage-wagons of jewels, together with an even greater quantity of gold.

He swore to assist Gunther of Burgundy to win Brunhild of Iceland, in return for the hand of his beautiful, pure and virginal sister, Kriemhild, who plays a much more prominent role than Wagner’s Gutrune. Suitors for Brunhild, a lady of ‘vast strength and surpassing beauty’, had to beat her at three tests, throwing the javelin, hurling a weight, and at the long-jump. Like Puccini’s Chinese Princess Turandot, whose origins were in a Persian tradition, failure at even one test would cost the suitor his life.

Wearing his magic cloak, Siegfried, on behalf of Gunther, won Brunhild. But Gunther's nuptials were a disaster: using her girdle, Brunhild tied him to a nail in the wall. Siegfried came to the rescue in his magic cloak again, and having had a very rough tumble, tamed the lady, who duly submitted to Gunther. Siegfried wed Kriemhild.

Brunhild had a flaming row with Kriemhild about precedence. In this, Kriemhild called Brunhild 'a vassal's paramour'. More unfortunately, she 'spilt the beans' about Gunther's nuptials. Hagen swore to kill Siegfried for 'boasting' that he had enjoyed Brunhild. Kriemhild also unfortunately revealed to Hagen, her brother, that Siegfried was vulnerable to a stab in the back.

After Hagen killed Siegfried, his vast treasure, including a tiny wand of gold whose possession would confer lordship of mankind, and which now was Kriemhild's by right, was seized by Gunther and Hagen, and was hidden in the Rhine. It had formerly been in the care of Alberich, the gnome.

### ***Liebestod***

The term *Liebestod* (Love-Death) is more particularly associated with Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in which it is used to describe the love music in act 2 and also Isolde's oration at the end of the opera. *Liebestod* is not 'romantic' suicide, nor is it physical or sensual: it is more like passing into Eternity, completely unified, 'united, undivided', (words sung by Tristan and Isolde), for the sake of love. Brünnhilde and Siegfried were together engulfed by the flames in a *Liebestod*.

Both Wagner and Schopenhauer (in his tome *The World as Will and Representation*) built a complex edifice of thought upon the notion. That is of more significance to *Tristan und Isolde*, and this need not distract the audience of *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

# GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG:

## ACT BY ACT

### *Prologue, part one: The Norns recall past and present, and fear the future.*

Beneath Brünnhilde's rock, there are three 'Norns', mythical women equivalent to Past, Present and Future, who record or predict, but do not determine, Fate. They attempt to spin their golden thread, a time-line from past through present and to the future. They tell us about the past, but they find the future very confused and tangled. The thread is too short. In stretching it, the thread snaps. To their horror, the time-line ends. The Norn's eternal knowledge has ceased, and they descend to the earth.

Meanwhile, the first Norn describes Wotan coming to the spring, one-eyed because the acquisition of knowledge cost him his other one. He broke a branch from the World Ash-tree and made a spear, the symbol of authority, on which he carved the contracts, essential to the rule of law and the avoidance of anarchy. As a consequence the tree died, and the spring dried up. The Norn now must tie her thread to a fir tree and to jagged rocks which tear into it.

We also hear how Wotan recorded his deals on the spear-shaft, carved in the runic alphabet. A hero (Siegfried) shattered the spear, so Wotan told the Valhalla heroes to cut up the World Ash-tree. The logs are piled up in Valhalla, the stronghold which the giants built. One day, Wotan will plunge the remains of the spear into the logs and set Valhalla on fire, destroying it.

The Norns wonder what happened to the fire around Brünnhilde's rock; they wonder what has happened to Alberich who took the Rhinegold. But they find no answers.

After the thread snaps, there is an orchestral interlude.

***Prologue, part two: The end of the honey-moon, the parting of Siegfried and Brünnhilde.***

On Brünnhilde's rock, surrounded by flames, we return to the scene which concluded *Siegfried*. Although the 'honeymoon' was obviously a rip-roaring success, Siegfried is impelled to leave and resume his exploits,<sup>4</sup> fortified by the knowledge, the runes, which Brünnhilde has imparted to him. Brünnhilde recalls how he fearlessly forced his way through the blazing fire to possess her. They pledge themselves to each other: he gives Brünnhilde the golden Ring which he obtained by slaying the dragon; she gives him her horse 'Grane' which will take him anywhere. She envelops him with magic to protect him: but, being a hero, his back needs no protection.

Siegfried leaves, and makes his Journey to the Rhine.

***Act I. By the Rhine, in the stately home of Gunter, head of the Gibich family.***

Gunter, the legitimate heir of the Gibich family,<sup>5</sup> has 'no brains'; they went to Hagen his illegitimate half-brother.

Gunter, conceited and shallow, is mainly concerned about his image. Hagen explains that to improve it, Gunter and his sister Gutrune must find suitable marriage partners. Hagen knows just the bride for Gunter. Unfortunately she is on a high rock surrounded by fire, and the only person who can get through it is Siegfried. Besides, Siegfried, the hero who slew the dragon, would be the ideal mate for Gutrune.

Gunter is disconcerted by this, because he lacks the courage and ability to brave the fire. But Hagen reckons that, if Gutrune seduces Siegfried, he could win Brünnhilde for Gunter. Gutrune wonders how she could seduce such a hero. The answer lies in a potion which will make Siegfried forget the woman he once possessed and fall for her who gives it to him.

Just as they are wondering how they could get hold of Siegfried, a horn is heard, a warrior and a horse are seen in a boat on the Rhine. It is Siegfried! They invite him in. Hagen takes Grane, the horse, off to the stable, while Gutrune goes to fetch a welcome drink.

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4 The reason why he has to leave his love-eyrie is not specified, except that a hero should be undertaking exploits and not dallying too long.

5 The 'Gibich' family is a tribe living on the banks of the Rhine. Gunter and Gutrune are referred to as Gibichs, or the Gibichung. The *Lex Burgundionum* from around 500AD refers to four Kings, one of which was Gibica. In the *Nibelungenlied*, King Gunther's residence was said to be in Worms, then the capital of Burgundy. Later Worms was associated with Luther who was condemned at the Diet of Worms of 1521.

Gunther cordially welcomes Siegfried and encourages him to partake of his hospitality, his wealth. Siegfried says that his sword is his only possession. He tells him that he slew the dragon but he left the treasure behind in the cave. He only took two things, the Ring which he left with Brünnhilde, and another object, the Tarnhelm, whose magic properties Hagen explains.

Gutrune brings the welcome drink, with which Siegfried toasts Brünnhilde. However, immediately on quaffing it, he forgets her and, spellbound, falls passionately for Gutrune. Gunther explains his own ambitions: he cannot get the woman he desires, because she is enveloped in fire. Siegfried promises to get Brünnhilde for Gunther, if he can have Gutrune. He will use the magic Tarnhelm to trick Brünnhilde by changing his shape in to that of Gunther.

Potions are a standard prop in Wagner's operas. For example, at the climactic end of act 1 of *Tristan*, Tristan and Isolde drink a love potion and fall into each others' arms as the ship comes into harbour. Here in *Götterdämmerung*, not only does the drink make Siegfried forget Brünnhilde, but it also makes him fall for Gutrune. The requirement for the potion to perform two functions perhaps is expecting too much of it.

They swear an oath, blood-brotherhood: if either betrays his trust, rivers of blood will flow. Hagen excuses himself from joining in because his impure blood would taint the mixture.

They rush to set off in the boat to go to Brünnhilde's rock. Hagen stays behind to guard the palace. He tells Gutrune that she will be Siegfried's wife. Left to himself, Hagen rejoices that all this will enable him to get the Ring.

### ***Brünnhilde's rock.***

After an orchestral interlude, we are again on Brünnhilde's mountain eyrie. She hears someone coming, it is her sister Waltraute, another Valkyrie. She wonders if this means that Wotan has relented on the punishment he has inflicted on her. It would be great if Waltraute could have the same fun as she has just had with Siegfried!

Waltraute is however desperate: she tells of the horrifying fate that has befallen the gods in Valhalla. After consigning Brünnhilde to the rock, Wotan roamed the world as a Wanderer. His spear had been shattered. He told the heroes to bring the logs of the dead World Ash-tree to Valhalla and pile them up in the great hall where they now sit, surrounding Wotan, scared and horrified. They wait and grow old.

Wotan told Waltraute that if only Brünnhilde would return the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, the daughters of the Rhine, the curse would be lifted. Waltraute implores Brünnhilde to let her have the accursed Ring: the world's woes flow from it! get rid of it! throw it into the water!

But Brünnhilde cannot imagine why she should give up the ring which Siegfried gave her as a pledge of their love. No, she will not, not even if Valhalla collapses in ruins. Waltraute rides off in desperation.

Brünnhilde remains. The fire flares up. She is thrilled to hear Siegfried's horn. When the man arrives, she is appalled to see, not Siegfried, but someone, wearing the Tarnhelm, in Gunther's shape.

Siegfried, in the guise of Gunther, tells her that he is abducting her. Distraught, she tries to ward him off with the magic Ring. Siegfried says that it will belong to 'him', that is Gunther, by husband's right. They fight for it, and he violently wrests it from her. They enter the cave and Siegfried draws his sword, Notung, and declares that it will separate him from her: their meeting will thus be chaste.

***Act 2. By the Rhine, in front of the stately home of Gunter.***

It is night-time and Hagen sleeps, spear in hand. He dreams that Alberich, his father, admonishes him for sleeping. Hagen says that he is prematurely aged, and never happy, always joyless.<sup>6</sup> Alberich urges him on: Wotan who stole the Ring from him has been superseded by his own offspring, Siegfried the Wälsung, who shattered the spear and slew the dragon Fafner. With the Ring, Siegfried is omnipotent, but the curse on it is, as yet, ineffective, because Siegfried does not know its power or worth.

Alberich urges Hagen to obtain the Ring. If Brünnhilde advises Siegfried to return it to the Rhinemaidens, then the Gold, and the omnipotence which it confers, will be lost for ever. Alberich makes Hagen swear to recover the Ring. He leaves with the admonishment: 'Be true'.

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<sup>6</sup> The listener may observe how Wagner uses music to draw the different characters of Hagen and Gunther

As dawn comes up, Siegfried, having used the Tarnhelm to resume his own shape and to transport himself instantly back to Gunter's palace, reappears with a heartiness which would be out of place at most people's breakfast table. He tells Hagen that Brünnhilde and Gunther are coming by boat. Hagen calls Gutrune.

Siegfried explains how, using the Tarnhelm to disguising himself as Gunther, he passed through the fire. Brünnhilde has yielded to 'Gunther', so now he has won Gutrune. Gutrune is highly impressed, but is concerned that Siegfried and Brünnhilde might have misbehaved. No, the sword was between them. It was all very proper.

Hagen sees the boat in the distance. And Gutrune asks Hagen to call the vassals for the wedding.

In the magnificent '*Hoibo* chorus', redolent of grand opera, Hagen calls the vassals together. He blows the cowhorn, the 'stierhorn', and the others answer with theirs. They wonder why they are being assembled. Hagen describes how, with Siegfried's help, Gunther has won his bride. He orders them to welcome the bridal couple, and celebrate. They must sacrifice animals and drink till they are drunk, all in honour of the gods so that they bless the marriage. The vassals think that everything must be well if grim Hagen can be so happy.

Gunther leads Brünnhilde 'up the aisle': the crowd is shocked by her utterly dejected appearance. PR matters; so Gunther pompously presents, as a success-story, his trophy bride. He rejoices at the double wedding, Brünnhilde and him, and Siegfried and Gutrune.

When Brünnhilde notices Siegfried 'in the congregation' she is astounded, and everyone is taken aback by her reaction. The music tells it all. Siegfried professes not to know her and advises Gunther to look to his wife, who is manifestly unwell. When she sees the Ring on Siegfried's hand, she accuses him of theft: it was snatched from her by Gunther. She insists that Gunther demand it back from Siegfried. Siegfried (surprisingly) and Gunther are a bit confused by all this, but Siegfried gathers himself together and says that he won it when he slew the dragon.

There is a 'hell of a row' – it must be the most effective row in all opera. Everything is thrown into it: 'get your wife under control', sexist stuff about how women behave, and so forth. Hagen, who knows exactly what to do, intervenes and says that if Brünnhilde gave the Ring to Gunther then it is his. Siegfried must have filched it and should atone for his trickery.

Brünnhilde is enraged at the deception and betrayal. She calls on the gods for vengeance. Gunther tries to calm her when she declares that

she is already married to Siegfried. Siegfried protests that he honoured the blood-brotherhood which he swore with Gunther. His sword divided him from Brünnhilde. She now accuses him of lying, hitting top B as she shrieks and points to him: 'There's the man I am married to!' The vassals get uneasy about the breach of faith.

And, not surprisingly, Gunther is very concerned about the effect of all this on his image. Siegfried denies Brünnhilde's accusation, on Hagen's sword. May the sword kill him if the accusation is true. Brünnhilde strides forward and herself dedicates the sword to destroy the perjured Siegfried. He calls on Gunther to control his wife; perhaps give her time to cool down. Maybe the Tarnhelm had not worked fully? Besides, it is best for men to get out of the way when women are squabbling. So he cheerfully invites the vassals to join him in the palace at the wedding festivities of himself and Gutrune.

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By contrast, Gunther, who has been made to look a fool in front of his vassals, hangs his head in shame. Wretched Brünnhilde despairs that she has given away all her powers to Siegfried. (She reaches B flat again.) When Hagen reassures her that he will take revenge, she pours scorn on him for thinking he can possibly destroy the invincible Siegfried.

Hagen however asks her advice, and establishes from her that when she enveloped Siegfried with magic to protect him, she did not protect his back, because she knew he would never flee. Hagen now knows what to do. Brünnhilde meanwhile derides the contemptible Gunther, who obtained her by deception. He admits that he was fraudulent, a cheat and cheated, and he calls on Hagen to restore his honour. Hagen says that only Siegfried's death can do this because Siegfried has broken his bond of blood-brotherhood. Brünnhilde denounces them all, including the unfortunate Gutrune, for luring Siegfried away.

Hagen plots Siegfried's destruction with Gunther: they will go hunting on the next day; and a boar will bring him down. While Brünnhilde and Gunther rejoice in Siegfried's impending fall, Hagen relishes obtaining the Ring. In a trio, the three decide to kill Siegfried.<sup>7</sup> The bridal procession of Siegfried and Gutrune emerges. Hagen gives Brünnhilde an unceremonious shove in the direction of Gunther.

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<sup>7</sup> People do not all speak at the same time, so Wagner did not compose ensembles in his later works. This ensemble, which adds considerably to the dramatic effectiveness, and the *Hoiho* chorus (in which a crowd is assembling) are both good examples of exceptions which prove the rule.

**Act 3. At first, by a steep cliff on the Rhine.**

The three Rhinemaidens, Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde, swim in the river and long for a hero who will return the Rhinegold to them. They then seductively attract Siegfried who has been hunting and is on the bank. They ask him for his gold ring. But he does not intend to hand it over. His wife would scold him if he lost it. He will never give it to them. They regret he is a miser.

Wagner designed the swimming machine for the Rhinemaidens: each maiden reclined in a container fixed to the top of a pole pivoted on a trolley which was pushed around by stage-hands below. (As already mentioned in connection with the *Rheingold* première, one of the maidens got seasick in rehearsal so it was decided that the maidens should sing from the wings, with ballerinas in the containers.) In a 20<sup>th</sup> century production at the London Coliseum, the effect of the river was made by strips of coloured ribbon, rather like spaghetti, weaving up and down. The motor which agitated the ribbons blew up. Alberto Remedios, the Siegfried, found himself trying to see conductor and Rhinemaidens through a fog of smoke. He had to get from one side of the stage to the other through the pile of inert 'spaghetti'.

Siegfried is tickled by all this and goes down to the water's edge where he tempts them with the Ring. They warn him that it is cursed: whoever wears it is doomed to death. Just as he slew the dragon, he too will die, that day, if he does not return the Ring to them. Only the waters of the Rhine can wash away the curse.

He dismisses their idle gossip. They say that the Norns have woven the curse into their thread. Don't worry, explains Siegfried: his sword has shattered a spear and can cope with thread. A dragon indeed told him of the curse, but did not survive to persuade him to fear it. Threats will not get the Ring off him, although he would surrender it for love. The Rhinemaidens despair at his stubbornness, breaking oaths and not heeding what he is told. They give him up. Siegfried says he is learning women's ways: if threats do not work, they scold. Yet, if he had not already married Guttrune, he would not mind having one of them.

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Hagen appears, having been searching for Siegfried. They settle down for a meal and to share stories of the chase. Siegfried says that he caught nothing, but could have had the three water-fowl who said he would be slain that day. Hagen tells Siegfried that he has heard that he understands birdsong. They drink together. To cheer the despondent Gunther, Siegfried tells him stories of his youth.

He describes how he was raised by the gnome Mime who was unable to weld together the shattered spear, which he forged anew. This was before he went to slay the dragon, Fafner, who guarded the treasure. His fingers were covered with blood: when he put them into his mouth, he found he could understand birdsong. A Forest Bird told him about the treasure in the cave, and that he would find the Tarnhelm and the Ring which would make him ruler of the world. He took the Ring and the Tarnhelm. The bird then warned him that Mime was going to poison him to get the treasure. With 'Notung', his sword, he finished off Mime.

Before he continues, Hagen offers him a drink into which he has squeezed an antidote. Siegfried then describes how the bird told him of the wonderful woman on a rocky height surrounded by fire. He went to the rock and found her in shining armour. He awoke her with a kiss and was enfolded in her arms. At this, Gunther expresses horror. Two ravens<sup>8</sup> flying out of a tree distract Siegfried's attention. As he turns towards them, he exposes his back to Hagen who spears him. (Brünnhilde had left Siegfried's back unprotected by her magic: the back of a hero does not need protection.)

As he dies, Siegfried sings a paean to Brünnhilde. The funeral procession takes his body away.

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Back in the stately home, the wretched Gutrune hears the horn and longs for Siegfried to return. She has had a bad dream, and is worried by Brünnhilde who has disappeared down to the river. When Hagen comes, bringing Siegfried's body, she faints. Gunther revives her and blames Hagen for killing him.

Hagen says that Siegfried broke his oath, and he claims the Ring. But Gunther demands this as Gutrune's right. Hagen kills him and is about to seize the Ring off the dead Siegfried's hand when his hand raises itself menacingly. Brünnhilde appears and declares that she, his wife, was betrayed. Gutrune goes for her, but Brünnhilde dismisses her.

Brünnhilde orders the pyre to be built and lit, and then delivers the oration, which like the Liebestod in *Tristan*, is a magnificent culmination to the opera and the cycle. Wotan had sacrificed Siegfried, a mere pawn, to the curse which had fallen on the god. She takes the Ring, her inheritance. The fire will cleanse it of its curse, and Wotan can find rest.

She lights the pyre. She mounts Grane, her horse, and both leap into the

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8 In the Norse saga, Odin had two black ravens, Thought and Memory, Huginn and Muninn.

flames where, in the ultimate Liebestod, Love-Death, she joins Siegfried in Love: *Siegfried, Sieh, Selig grüsst dich dein Weib*, Siegfried, how joyfully your wife greets you!

The Rhine overflows and the Rhinemaidens enfold Hagen who tries to snatch back the Ring: in vain, and he cries out ‘Keep back from the Ring’, *Zurück vom Ring*, as he is dragged down into the water by the Rhinemaidens. They now joyfully possess it. Valhalla can be seen burning in the distance. The world is cleansed of the gods; humans are now in charge of it. Siegfried’s act of Redemption has destroyed the power of the gods.

In order to keep her horse under control, Birgit Nilsson in rehearsal at Stockholm, stuffed it with sugar lumps. At the première, she forgot the lumps. After nibbling her, the disappointed Grane resorted to pushing her with his hindquarters in the direction of the orchestra pit. To distract him, she had to leap around the stage, while singing the most difficult passages in the opera.

At Covent Garden, Grane used to be played by an old cab-horse, who grazed on the scenery, possibly to keep his mind off the fire which he loathed. The same cab-horse also used to star in *Carmen*. Once he turned his back on the audience and performed the ‘ultimate indiscretion’. In the stunned silence, the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was heard to exclaim ‘A critic, by God!’



# WHERE DID WAGNER GET THESE IDEAS FROM?

Although his parable was a myth of his own creation, Wagner wove it closely around recorded Norse, Icelandic and German myths into which he had done an immense amount of research. These had been transmitted orally over many centuries and written down around the twelfth century and more recently.

After finishing *Lohengrin* in April 1848, Wagner wrote virtually no music for five years until he began composing *Das Rheingold* at the end of 1853. Some work on a drama about the red-bearded Holy Roman Emperor of the twelfth century, Frederick Barbarossa led him to write a long essay on the 'Wibelungen'. These he identified with the Ghibelins, a warring faction in that century, who supported the Emperor, and who opposed the Guelfs, who took the side of the Pope.

His work on the Wibelungen led to his conception of the drama about Siegfried's death. Wagner created his own myth about this out of many sources, principally the Icelandic Eddic poems of Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241), the *Volsungasaga*, and, to a lesser extent, the *Nibelungenlied*, which since its discovery in the middle of the eighteenth century had been regarded as the German national epic. More recent sources included German mythological work by the Brothers Grimm, who are widely known as the collectors of many of our fairytales.

Siegfried, and the outline of the story, is easily traceable to the saga's **Sigurd the Volsung**, who was traditionally an ancestor of Olaf the White, the first King of Dublin. The earliest extant representations for Sigurd's legend come in pictorial form from Swedish runestones, stones with carvings on them, from around the end of the first millennium, 1000AD.

In the *Volsungasaga*, the gnome Andvari lived in a waterfall in the likeness of a pike. Loki killed an otter, a sacred animal, and, as punishment, is required to fill the otter's skin with gold. To do this, he catches Andvari and seizes his gold. Andvari lays a curse on a ring made from the gold. Sigurd is the posthumous son of Sigmund, who died in battle when he fought Odin (who was in disguise). Odin shattered Sigmund's sword, and Sigmund bequeathed the fragments to his unborn son.

Wagner overlaid his myth with his own 'philosophy'. He was an avid reader and a controversial author. His library at Wahnfried, his house in Bayreuth, contains over 2,300 books and scores.

As a young man, he was greatly influenced by the leading political and philosophical thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Kant, Hegel, Proudhon etc. His revolutionary connections, which were 'utopian socialist' in character, were fostered particularly in Dresden in the 1840s where he met the anarchist Michael Bakunin<sup>1</sup> and participated in the abortive uprising in 1849.

One of the most influential thinkers in the early part of the century, who also influenced Wagner, was Ludwig Feuerbach. He maintained that because people know that life is out of their control, they create god(s). A 'god' is a larger-than-life human, to whom they attribute the supreme power and control and the other attributes (values) which they lack but which they most desire, e.g. love. They then worship the god(s) which they have created. So, for Feuerbach, the god(s) did not create mankind; mankind created the god(s). And all significant assertions we make about the god(s) are just assertions which we desire to make about ourselves.

As the years went by, and Wagner's ideas matured, a thinker for whom he had a great regard was Schopenhauer, the author of *The World as Will and Representation*. Wagner's later operas, most obviously *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, propounded and developed similar (and equally difficult) concepts, such as Love-Death (in *Tristan*) and Redemption (in *Parsifal*).

Fortunately, audiences for *The Ring* can pay virtually no attention to Schopenhauer's highly complex and pessimistic treatise, because Wagner had completed and printed the poem of *The Ring* a year before he directly encountered Schopenhauer's work. So the die was already cast. He did make some changes to *The Ring* as he composed – especially to the first act of *Siegfried* and the very end of *Götterdämmerung* – but the bulk of his myth had gone to press.

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<sup>1</sup> For George Bernard Shaw, 'Bakoonin' and Siegfried were virtually synonymous.

# WAGNER'S STYLE

## *His complete art-work (Gesamtkunstwerk )*

Wagner believed that his role as an artist was to be didactic, to preach, to teach and illuminate people about the true nature of themselves and their lives. This was in contrast to Verdi who was far more sensitive to the response of his market, his audience, and its demand for entertainment and brevity. Indeed Verdi generally required his librettist to 'keep it short, beware long recitatives' and to make each act shorter than the previous one. Not so, Wagner. For him, the audience may have been there for pleasure, but thereby, to learn. From him.

Wagner emulated the Greek dramatists, such as Aeschylus and Euripides, who, to communicate the message they wished to get across, used a mixture of all the arts, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of words, music, mime and dance. Thereby, the Greeks (in Wagner's view) had provided something richer than an 'artist' exemplifying any one of the separate arts would have been able to do on his own.

### The Greek influence

Plays were central to life in ancient Greece: everyone went to them, with a public holiday usually declared for the occasion. Bayreuth, the festival, the performance there of his drama about the Ring, would be Wagner's 'Athens'.

By 'drama', Wagner meant something better than Greek drama: he considered Shakespeare's work superior, because it generally has no chorus. Shakespeare integrated the comments that would have come from a Greek chorus into the words spoken by the cast on the stage. Wagner's comments are in his music.

The influence of Greek tragedy on classical opera was not novel: the librettists of most of Handel's, and predecessor composers', secular operas had been inspired by Greek drama, although not with the same consequences.

Wagner's theory is humbug: a combination of the arts is not necessarily more effective than one of the arts on its own. As the twentieth century novelist and Wagner enthusiast Thomas Mann observed, it is ludicrous to suggest that an 'amalgam of music, words, painting and gesture' could be 'the one and only truth, and the fulfillment of all artistic tradition'; that *Siegfried* is somehow greater than one of Goethe's poems. What matters is quality, and, in that respect, one might even suggest that the poetry in Wagner's works was not always of the highest order.

Besides, Wagner's art work was not complete: what about painting? He was unmoved by painting; the Impressionist movement, which was contemporary with him, passed him by.

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#### Wagner's poetry

Up until *Lohengrin*, Wagner had usually written 'conventional' rhyming poetry. He then saw the opportunity provided by the distinctive Nordic poetry in which lines are linked together by alliteration or 'Stabreim'. This provided an alternative to the rhyming or blank verse, which suited the arias and recitatives of conventional operas, but which Wagner found constricted the rhythms of his particular style, which was more in the nature of free flowing conversation.

So, to take an example, the first four half-lines of Brünnhilde's final oration in *Götterdämmerung*, 'Like sunlight his radiance shines on me, he was the purest and yet he betrayed me': in Wagner's German, this reads as 'Wie Sonne lauter /strahlt mir sein Licht, // der Reinste war er, / der mich verriet'; the words 'Sonne' and 'strahlt' alliterate. 'Lauter and Licht' also alliterate, as does 'Reinste' with the second stressed syllable of 'verriet'. Wagner's musical rhythm gives effect to this emphasis.

Another example: when Alberich nearly slips on the slippery rocks trying to catch one of the Rhinemaidens at the start of *Das Rheingold*, he sings 'Garstig glatter glitschriger Glimmer! Wie gleit' ich aus!' (Nasty, smooth, slippery rocks, How I slip.)

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# LEITMOTIVES

Once Wagner had jettisoned the traditional recitative-aria structure used in opera to portray action and mood respectively, some structural alternative to bind together his lengthy rambling poem became imperative. By means of leitmotives, he unifies each opera, and the *Ring* cycle as a whole, thereby preventing it becoming diffuse and un-coordinated.

Leitmotives are snippets of melody, each 'a sort of musical label' associated with a particular person, thing or emotion. The leitmotive is sounded at the first appearance of the item, for example, Valhalla, the Nibelung slaves, or Siegfried's sword, and is repeated when it recurs or is relevant. (See [Examples of leitmotives.](#)) But Wagner was far from rigid in his application of leitmotives, and, by the time he got around to composing act 3 of *Siegfried*, he had become somewhat careless in his use of them. Musicologists have found many instances where the leitmotive appears unrelated to the original connotation.

Wagner's systematic use of leitmotives in *The Ring* differs from 'Reminiscence' motives, the sounding, at a decisive point in the drama, of a melody which has already been heard in connection with the same subject matter. Earlier composers, such as Weber, had used these; and they had been used by Wagner himself in earlier operas, such as *Der Fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman).

Wagner's leitmotives in *The Ring*, their metamorphosis and their combination, was more subtle, like a 'subject' in a symphony which is restated, developed and woven into the fabric of the music. They express mood, as well as denoting things such as the spear, a contract or individuals. A simple example: the motive associated with Valhalla and the motive associated with the Ring are the same structure. And an upward motive associated with basic elemental creation, the Rhine, and thus the goddess Erda, is reversed downwards when reference is made to extinction, the destruction of the gods.

Wagner's leitmotive is not so much a means of describing things, but of 'subjecting them to a process of musical development'. Leitmotives had to be expressive in themselves, they had to relate to each other in all sorts of subtle musical and psychological ways. They had to be capable of infinite transformation according to the part that they would be called to play in the drama at any given moment; they had to be susceptible to contrapuntal treatment. The technique greatly enhanced the role of the orchestra, which commented on the action. Wagner said that 'hardly a bar in the orchestra does not develop out of preceding leitmotives'.

Wagner's use of leitmotives distinguishes his music from his earlier works and Romantic opera, and marks a turning point in the history of music. The technique has however attracted some uncomplimentary criticism. With his focus firmly on the simple use of leitmotives, George Bernard Shaw described one as 'a single fixed theme attached to a character like a name plate to an umbrella...being blared unaltered from the orchestra whenever the character steps on the stage, and recognisable like God Save the Queen.' Stravinsky also seems to have found the language of the cloakroom apt: he referred to 'the monumental absurdity' of giving every accessory, every feeling and every character the equivalent of a number on a ticket.

These criticisms are misplaced because Wagner's unique skill was to compose leitmotives which are sufficiently flexible and plastic that his characters do not become 'imprisoned' by a single characteristic, mood, feeling or circumstance. Thus a specific leitmotive remains suitable for a range of different circumstances or situations; characters and moods are not inhibited from developing or changing. The cloakroom attendant given Stravinsky's ticket might hand back a different item to the one originally handed in.

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## WARNING! RECENT PRODUCTIONS

In the Preface to the compendium *Great Operas – A Guide to 25 of the World's Finest Musical Experiences*, the author warned that the Guides cannot anticipate a particular production which does not conform to the composer's intentions. Composers, from Berlioz to Debussy to Britten, have long deplored the attempts of those purporting to 'improve' on their work.

Especially recently, some operas have been hijacked by their producers. Sometimes, it is considered that the work, even just the overture, needs 'modernising' or sensationalising to attract and retain an audience's attention. So, time, place and story are adapted, perhaps to make some political or social point not intended by the composer. Wagner's operas have been particularly prone to such cavalier treatment.

Often all this makes artistic nonsense of both music and text. Stage action may be crassly juxtaposed with music or specific musical themes, seemingly ignoring the composer's laboriously-worked musical design and intention. An inherent weakness of opera is exploited, in that many in the audience may not be proficient in the German in which it is being performed.

Conductors have been 'complicit'; other artists have, perhaps understandably and pragmatically, been unable to stand up for artistic integrity.



Wagner's widow and Edouard De Reszke as Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*

The first performances of *The Ring*, under Wagner's direction at Bayreuth, were designed in Viking-style animal skin clothes, helmets and shields. And Brünnhilde's horse 'Grane' appeared on stage. Wagner himself gave detailed stage directions.

Wagner's widow Cosima survived him by forty-seven years, during the majority of which she ran the Bayreuth Festival in the 'traditional' style, following Wagner's instructions. Recent productions are far removed from this design. This disappoints those who want the presentation of a story in the old Nordic style. But Wagner had written a timeless myth.

Cosima Wagner took the view that since Wagner himself had produced and directed *The Ring* in 1876, that was that: there was no scope for significant change. She totally disapproved of tampering with the 'sacred texts upon which the eyes of the Master had reposed'. And indeed the Master had said 'No one (however gifted and thorough) who has not learnt all these things under me here in Bayreuth, can carry out my plans with absolute fidelity', adding 'I must beg you to follow my scenic arrangements in Bayreuth as closely as possible.'

The end of Wagner's life coincided with a new electro-technical-cinematic age: in particular, the introduction of electric light revolutionised stage presentation. While an attempt at pictorial realism worked quite well under the soft glow of gas lighting, it was less convincing under electric light. Progress was essential and inevitable. There was considerable attraction in ditching the painted scenery 'flats', and to use recently developed technology to 'paint with light'.

This enabled a move towards symbolic representation, cautiously supported by the Director of the Imperial Opera in Vienna, Gustav Mahler, the great composer. He welcomed a stage on which 'everything is only intimated'. He appointed Alfred Roller, whose skill at lighting provided the breakthrough. He was followed in style by Adolphe Appia, for whom 'the designer's task was to paint with light in an empty space', and who valued the power of suggestion rather than literal depiction.

Mahler may have opened the floodgates, but his was certainly not a licence for anarchy: his overriding concern was to achieve unity between music and its visual manifestation on the stage. His dictum that 'it is all in the score', '*Steht alles in der Partitur*' suggests that, for him, the music came first. Mahler only gave consent for the 'revolutionary' designs for *Don Giovanni* after he was completely convinced of their relevance to the work's musical shape. He certainly was not prepared to abdicate his own powers to any producer other than himself. And his successor in his endeavour, Otto Klemperer, was concerned to make good theatre, 'not avant garde theatre but good theatre'.

So, while the Bayreuth Festival productions, controlled by Cosima Wagner, continued in the traditional Wagner style, elsewhere productions increasingly diverged. The subsequent appropriation of Wagner by the Nazis, and the representation of the Nibelungs as Jews, finally discredited his original productions.

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After Cosima Wagner died in 1930, there was scope for change. Under her grandson Wieland, who became director of the Bayreuth Festival following the Second World War, the new style of production, as described, received the family imprimatur. For Wieland Wagner, 'the conductor in the pit was to have his counterpart in the man at the lighting console, orchestrating the stage picture in accord with the music'.

Richard Wagner had wanted stage gesture carefully coordinated with his music: for example, when the spear leitmotive was played, the spear would be raised or lowered as appropriate. (Probably this helped the audience to follow the use of leitmotives more easily than is possible today.)

However, his grandson held that both music and gesture should be driven by the state of mind of the character, the psychological situation. Indeed the singers should convey this, usually by addressing the audience rather than each other, and generally avoid the distraction caused by attempts at realism.

In concentrating on the mythic essence, Wieland Wagner restored the sense of timelessness proper to the work. But, since his productions, his grandfather's works have been 'open season' for producers around the world. (With hindsight, Wieland's decision looks very astute, commercially.)

We should not underestimate the courage and nerve of these producers. They were effectively saying that they knew better than Wagner what his myth should be about and how his works should be staged, an attitude which lies uneasily with the line taken by modern devotees of authentic performance. While the common ground would appear to be that both are striving for the most effective realisation of a composer's blueprint, there is a suspicion, in the case of Wagner's operas, that the objections would have been more vocal, had it not been the Wagner family which was leading the charge.

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The recent approach means that the audience is attending as much the producer's production, as Richard Wagner's opera: the audience is attending, say, 'Katharina Wagner' as much as 'Richard Wagner'. The approach relies on the principle that no single interpretation of a great work, including that of the composer himself, can be definitive: all are a product of the taste of their time. This can seem surprisingly arrogant. We hear statements such as 'Wagner's visual imagination was of a far lower creative order than his way with music and words.' And, 'We'll accept his music but not his visual taste'.

What if we took the view that we could improve on Richard Wagner's music? Wieland Wagner almost did: he edited out anything that did not fit the vision. He slashed away: because he found it 'boring', he took out the Guttrune scene in act 3 of *Götterdämmerung*, so human, and so important dramatically (almost Shakespearean), in providing a contrast after the drama of Siegfried's death.

The apologists cite Wagner's own dissatisfaction with the productions of his works, and 'his ceaselessly inventive spirit', his striving for a closer approximation of his own vision. Wagner did not want to stand still, and would not have done so himself.

This implies that Wagner's works were somehow never finished but were just 'Work-in-Progress'. There is circularity in the contention that the diversity of Wagner stage productions at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and their provocativeness, confirm the capacity of his operas for self-renewal.

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Anyway, the floodgates were opened. We have gone a long way down a slippery slope. And the fashion has leeches into operas other than Wagner's where the underlying justification may be less rational. Of course, recent productions - for example, *The Ring* presented as an anticipation of man's exploitation of the environment, and environmental catastrophe - are here to stay. They do make for interesting theatre, if not authentic Wagner. The myths and metaphors supposedly benefit from being 'refracted through a modern lens'.

Plácido Domingo has warned that that directors 'would do well to avoid interpretations that are so intellectualised and abstruse that members of the audience need a book if they are to understand what is happening'. He continued: 'The art of interpretation in the theatre is the art of clarification; and, if any detail of a production has confused rather than elucidated the substance of a work for a reasonably intelligent person, it has failed in its function.'

A normal audience is entitled to an explanation of what is being presented, unless it is obvious. Even if (unusually) there is a coherent explanation in the programme, that is probably read too late for the average attendee to benefit from. Given the lack of explanation and preparation, it is no wonder so many productions get a bad press, and Wagner a bad name.

The opera is not the producer's opera, it is Wagner's opera. That balance must be maintained. To present it otherwise is a misrepresentation. It will be Wagner's opera, provided that the audience fairly judges that the production is one which he would approve of, if present to experience it.

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## GLOSSARY

### 'THE CURIOUS HARLEQUINADE OF GODS, DWARFS AND GIANTS'

**Alberich**, the Nibelung, who renounces love to win the Gold which gives him power. His Ring is stolen and it is he who places the curse upon its possessor.

**Brünnhilde**, one of the nine Valkyries, Wotan's favourite.

**Donner**, god of thunder, brother of Freia.

**Erda**, goddess, the world's wisest woman, an oracle who mainly sleeps. While asleep, the Norns are awake and innocently spin what Erda knows. Also called the 'Wala', the oracle or seer, who Wotan consults, and on whom (a Wagner invention) he sires the Valkyries.

**Fafner**, the dragon, who kills Fasolt, the first victim of the Ring's curse. Originally a giant, he took the shape of a dragon and guarded the hoard of gold, which included both the Ring and Tarnhelm.

**Fasolt**, the dragon killed by Fafner.

**Freia**, the Venus of the North, the goddess of love, youth and beauty, whom Wotan has pledged to the giants as consideration for building Valhalla. In Scandinavian mythology, she is drawn in a car yoked with cats. In her garden are the golden apples which the gods eat to give them eternal youth. She is also called 'Holda'.

**Fricka**, (Frigga), Wotan's wife, the supreme goddess. Equivalent to Jupiter's wife Juno, and Zeus's wife Hera, she was the patroness and guardian of women. She presides over marriages. Freia is not always distinguishable, in mythology, from Fricka. Our Friday, the sixth day of the week, is called after her.

**Froh**, god, brother of Freia; rain and sunshine depend on him, so Wagner used him to summon up the Rainbow Bridge to Valhalla. (Insignificant in *The Ring*, he was one of the most important gods in mythology.)

**Gibichung**, the 'Gibich' family is a tribe living on the banks of the Rhine. Gunther and Gutrune are referred to as Gibichs, or the Gibichung.

**Grane**, Brünnhilde's horse.

**Gunther and Gutrune** (= good runes), children of Gibich and Grimhilde, from whom Alberich bought sex which resulted in the birth of Hagen.

**Hagen**, son of Alberich, born to 'inexorable hate'; halfbrother of Gunther and Gutrune.

**Hero**, Siegfried's killing the dragon was such an exceptional deed that it secured his fame as a hero.

**Holda**, see Freia.

**Hunding**, husband of Sieglinde; they were married in a forced marriage.

**Loge**, demi-god of Fire, Wotan's adviser and fixer. In mythology, Loki was the god of strife and spirit of evil: for his misdeeds, he was chained up and (according to the Rev. Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, the author of the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*) 'will so continue until the twilight of the gods, when he will break his bonds; then will the heavens disappear, the

earth be swallowed up by the sea, fire shall consume the elements, and even Odin [Wotan], with all his kindred deities shall perish'. George Bernard Shaw called Loge 'the northern Mephistopheles'.

**Mime**, a Nibelung, Alberich's brother, the gnome who raised Siegfried.

**Neidhöhle**, the cave where the dragon (Fafner) guarded the gold.

**Nibelungs**, gnomes who dwell in the depths of the earth and work at the anvil for Alberich.

**Nibelheim**, the underworld where the Nibelungs live.

**Norns**, three mythical women, Past, Present and Future, who sit at a well beneath the World Ash-tree. They weave the thread of time, but they cannot reverse or alter events or determine Fate.

**Notung**, the name given to Siegfried's sword, which was originally thrust into an ash-tree by Wotan so that it would be available to him when he needed it. ('Notung' is derived from 'Not', meaning in English, need, emergency, peril, difficulty.) Siegmund alone was able to pull it out. Notung snapped on Wotan's spear, which, until Siegfried inherited it, was the stronger weapon.

**Ravens**, Odin (Wotan), also called Raven's-god, had two black ravens, Huginn and **Muninn**, Mind and Memory, which sat on his shoulder. In the saga, they scoured the whole world at dawn, returning to him at breakfast time, and kept him up-to-date.

**Rhinemaidens**, Woglinde, Flosshilde and Wellgunde, the daughters of the Rhine, who originally guard the Rhinegold. They appear in the Nibelungenlied, where they prophesy disaster; but their custodial role is Wagner's invention.

**Ring**, Alberich purchases his freedom with the hoard of gold. He had hoped to hold on to the Tarnhelm and the Ring, but Wotan wrested it from him. This led to Alberich's curse. The Ring confers omnipotence on its possessor.

**Runes** appear on memorial stones, rings, coins etc. They are the solemn covenants, treaties, contracts carved on the shaft of the spear by which Wotan controls the world. He had fashioned it from a stave cut from the primeval ash-tree. The tree-trunk may wither, but the spear will never deteriorate. The ancient writing, runes, were inscribed on smoothed ash-boughs. The Anglo-Saxon word 'runes' also denotes the magical: the knowledge of the runes and their implications was confined to a small élite. (Hence our expression 'reading the runes'.)

**Siegfried**, the child of the twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde. A Wälsung.

**Siegmund and Sieglinde**, children of Wotan (disguised as a human, Wälse) by a human. Wotan intended them to be the means whereby, with a sword of Wotan's own forging, Fafner would be slain and the Gold would be returned to the Rhinemaidens.

**Tarnhelm**, made of Rhinegold, a garment which enables its wearer to become invisible, assume any shape desired, or transport him to any desired place.

**Valhalla**, the abode of the gods and heroes, the warrior's heaven.

**Valkyries**, nine daughters of Wotan and Erda: Brünnhilde, Gerhilde, Ortlinde, Waltraute, Schwertleite, Helmwige, Siegrune, Grimgerde and Rossweisse. They are the horsewomen of the air who bring the dead heroes to Valhalla.

**Wala**, the oracular Earth god Erda. Her prophetic ability derives from an Old Norse character, Völva.

**Walsungs**, the Volsungs, children of Volsa, the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, the parents of Siegfried. The name is drawn from the Icelandic Eddic poem, the *Volsungsaga*.

**Waltraute**, a Valkyrie, sister of Brünnhilde.

**Wanderer**, Wotan in disguise.

**Wotan**, chief of the gods, equivalent to the Norse god Odin.

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## A SUMMARY OF *The Ring* MYTH

In the imaginary past, before time began, Wisdom lay deep in the waters of a well beneath the World Ash-tree. The three roots of the tree ran to Heaven (the abode of gods), to the land of the giants, and to the depths of the earth, an underworld called Nibelheim. Wotan gave one of his eyes to drink at the well, thus acquiring Wisdom and thereby becoming the chief of the gods. In this role, he found that a spear hewn from the ash-tree was insufficient to maintain world order. He had to enter into deals and compromises which were inscribed on his spear in the ancient writing of the Teutonic tribes, called runes. He soon discovered the consequences: 'since by my treaties I rule, by those treaties I am enslaved.' He was already in a fix, on the slippery slope.

In particular, Wotan needed to pay for Valhalla, a splendid fortress which he got the giants to build in order to impress and satisfy both his wife and his arrogant colleagues. It was also needed to secure their immortality by defending them from the Nibelungs (gnomes who dwell in the underworld). His building contractors were two giants, Fafner and Fasolt. As barter for Valhalla, the contract required him to hand over Freia, the goddess of love, youth and beauty. The consequence was to deprive the gods of immortality; so they grew old and their fortress became imperilled. Wotan needed to renegotiate and settle up with money, gold, instead.

In *Das Rheingold*, to get the money, Wotan stole the Rhinegold from Alberich, a Nibelung, who had obtained it from the Rhinemaidens at the cost of forswearing love. Alberich had learnt that a Ring fashioned from the Gold would confer omnipotence. After the Ring had been wrongfully wrested from him by Wotan, Alberich placed a curse on it and its possessors, condemning them to certain death. To lift the curse, the Ring had to be restored to the Rhinemaidens for unselfish motives. (The gods themselves were precluded from doing this because of a conflict of interest: the treasure had been used to pay for their home, Valhalla. Their intentions could not be unselfish.)

Alberich's curse had instantly become effective: one of the giants Fafner killed the other, Fasolt. By this stage, the hoard of Gold included a magic garment called the Tarnhelm which would enable its wearer to become invisible, assume any shape desired, or transport him to any desired place. Between *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, Fafner uses the Tarnhelm to assume the shape of a dragon and guard the Gold in a cave. There, although doomed by the curse, he represented a very real threat to Wotan and his gods.

So Wotan took two steps to secure the safety of Valhalla from the depredations of whoever possessed the Ring.

(1) He mated with Erda, the Earth goddess and sired the Valkyries, the nymphs of Valhalla, who, mounted on horseback, ride into the *melée* of battle and select those destined to die. The Valkyries transport them to Valhalla where they serve them with mead and ale. The heroes' role is to defend the fortress.

(2) Having learnt from Erda that the Ring can only be returned by somebody independent of the gods, self-motivated but unselfish, unprompted, unwitting, he set about finding this person. (It was impermissible for him to kill Fafner, because he had covenanted with him.) He disguised himself as 'Wälse' and mated with a human, Grimhilde. She bore twins called the 'Wälsungs' (Volsungs), Siegmund and Sieglinde, who he naively thought would have no vested interest in the return of the Gold.<sup>2</sup> Wotan hoped that Siegmund would recover the Gold by killing Fafner with a sword forged by him, which was thrust so deep into an ash-tree that only the most powerful of persons could pull it out.

In *Die Walküre*, this plan goes awry. Siegmund abducts his sister from her mate Hunding, and they beget Siegfried. Wotan's wife cannot allow such an incestuous breach of the sanctity of marriage: unless punished, it would lead to the ruin of the gods. Wotan is deeply saddened, but he must act. In the ensuing fight between Hunding and Siegmund, he shatters Siegmund's sword, and both protagonists are killed. The leading Valkyrie, Brünnhilde, attempts to defend Siegmund and is punished for her disobedience: Wotan condemns her to be mortal, to sleep on a high rock surrounded by fire. The first man who penetrates the fire will have her. So only one who knows no fear will succeed.

In *Siegfried*, Mime, Alberich's brother and one of the Nibelungs, raises the twins' son Siegfried in the forest, after his mother's death. Siegfried is stupid and fearless, and a braggart: 'ein prahlendes Kind'. Mime tries, without success, to repair Siegmund's shattered sword, Notung, so that he can kill Fafner and possess the Gold. Siegfried however welds the sword together and kills Fafner.

The taste of the giant's blood enables him to understand birdsong. A bird leads him to the treasure, to kill the treacherous Mime and to Brünnhilde's rock. Wotan tries to intervene but Siegfried shatters Wotan's spear and power. Impelled by love, Siegfried passes through the fire. His union with Brünnhilde is sealed with the Ring.<sup>3</sup>

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2 There is a muddle here which Wagner himself identified: Wotan's progeny, including Siegfried, are necessarily dependent on him, being a product of him. This is stingingly observed by the goddess Fricka in Act 2 of *Die Walküre*. Heroes only act by the favour of the gods. What can heroes possibly achieve that gods cannot?

3 She is protected from its curse which cannot take effect if it is worn by an innocent.

In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried, after ending his honeymoon with Brünnhilde, journeys to the Rhine. There, Alberich's son Hagen, whom he sired on a whore (i.e. not for love), is determined to recover the Ring, and thus omnipotence, by getting his half-brother Gunther to marry Brünnhilde. For this, he needs Siegfried to return through the flames which envelop her, and fetch her.

Siegfried is drugged into forgetting Brünnhilde and falling in love with Gunther's sister, Gutrune. With the magic garment, the Tarnhelm, he assumes Gunther's shape, abducts Brünnhilde and brings her back for Gunther to have. Siegfried swears that he has never possessed Brünnhilde.

During a hunt, he is given an antidote which makes him recall his union with Brünnhilde. For his infidelity, Hagen kills him. Siegfried dies singing a glorious paean to Brünnhilde with whom he will be united in death (Liebestod). Before joining him on his funeral pyre, she explains how Siegfried was the innocent victim of Wotan's machinations. Valhalla, like Siegfried's funeral pyre, goes up in flames.

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# A SHORT GUIDE TO A GREAT OPERA

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Handel's *Rinaldo*  
Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*  
Mascagni's & Leoncavallo's *Cav & Pag*  
Massenet's *Don Quichotte*  
Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni*,  
*Idomeneo*, *La Finta Gardiniera*,  
*The Marriage of Figaro*, *The  
Magic Flute*  
Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*,  
*The Queen of Spades*  
Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*  
Puccini's *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*,  
*Manon Lescaut*, *Tosca*, *Turandot*  
Rossini's *La Cenerentola*,  
*The Barber of Seville*  
Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*  
Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*  
Verdi's *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Aida*,  
*Il Trovatore*, *I Due Foscari*, *Nabucco*  
Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, *The  
Flying Dutchman*

## FOR PUBLICATION IN 2014

Mozart's *Die Entführung*  
Ravel's *L'heure espagnole* and  
*L'enfant et les sortilèges*  
Verdi's *Otello*  
Verdi's *Falstaff*  
Verdi's *Macbeth*  
Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*:  
*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*

## INCLUDED IN THE EBOOK GREAT OPERAS

Gounod's *Faust*  
Handel's *Giulio Cesare*  
Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*  
Wagner's *Tannhäuser*