

**Required Reading before attending the lecture: “Richard Wagner’s Sources of the Ring Cycle” for the Scandinavian Cultural Center” on January 16, 2021 at 1:00 pm**

**Der Ring des Nibelungen**

4 music dramas by Wagner

**Der Ring des Nibelungen**, (German: “The Ring of the Nibelung”) four music dramas (grand operas) by German composer Richard Wagner, all with German librettos by the composer himself.

The operas are *Das Rheingold* (“The Rhine Gold”), *Die Walküre* (“The Valkyrie”), *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (“The Twilight of the Gods”), first performed in sequence at the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Bavaria, Germany, on August 13, 14, 16, and 17, 1876. Collectively they are often referred to as the *Ring* cycle.

**Background and Context**

Wagner had long been interested in early Norse and German heroic poetry, including the medieval German epic *Nibelungenlied* (“Song of the Nibelung”), when he sketched out a prose version of the Nibelung myth in 1848.

His first libretto to use that version was called *Siegfrieds Tod* (“The Death of Siegfried”), which became the basis of *Götterdämmerung*.

He began composing the music in 1850, but he soon realized that he could not tell of Siegfried’s death without first telling of his life. In 1851 he wrote the libretto for *Der junge Siegfried* (“The Young Siegfried”; later shortened to *Siegfried*). Continuing back toward the beginning of the story, he finished the librettos for *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold*, respectively, in 1852.

After completing the massive text, he composed the operas in the order of the story. The first two were composed by 1856, and then Wagner took a long break to complete *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* before

completing *Siegfried* in 1871 and *Götterdämmerung* in 1874—**26 years** after he started work on the project.

*Der Ring des Nibelungen*, or the *Ring* cycle, is an unsurpassed exaltation of German heritage and mythology. In places, Wagner tells the story with the orchestra, using leitmotifs—fragments of melody that convey emotions and themes as they recur in varying contexts. It is even possible for the orchestra to convey ideas that are hidden from the characters themselves—an idea that later found its way into film scores.

Wagner was perpetually in need of funds, and the *Ring* would be extremely expensive to stage. Faced with a double motivation, Wagner conducted a series of concerts that featured orchestral excerpts from his forthcoming epic. Most famous of those is the *Ride of the Valkyries*, which opens the last act of *Die Walküre*, second of the four operas; other frequently encountered excerpts are the *Entry of the Gods into Valhalla* from *Das Rheingold*; *Magic Fire Music* from *Die Walküre*; *Forest Murmurs* from *Siegfried*; and *Siegfried's Rhine Journey*, *Siegfried's Funeral March*, and *Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene* from *Götterdämmerung*. The concerts provided him with a steady income, and they whetted the public appetite for the operas that would follow.

### **Main Cast of *Der Ring Des Nibelungen***

- Brünnhilde, a Valkyrie (soprano)
- Sieglinde, Wotan's human daughter (soprano)
- Freia, goddess of youth (soprano)
- Guttrune of the Gibichungs (soprano)
- Fricka, Wotan's wife (mezzo-soprano)
- Waltraute, a Valkyrie (mezzo-soprano)
- Erda, goddess of the earth (contralto)
- Siegmund, Wotan's human son (tenor)
- Froh, god of the sun (tenor)
- Loge, god of fire (tenor)
- Mime, a Nibelung (tenor)

- Wotan, king of the gods (bass-baritone)
- Alberich, a Nibelung (bass-baritone)
- Donner, god of thunder (bass-baritone)
- Hunding, Sieglinde's husband (bass)
- Gunther of the Gibichungs (bass)
- Hagen, son of Alberich and half brother to the Gibichungs (bass)
- Fafner, a giant (bass)
- Fasolt, a giant (bass)
- 3 Rhinemaidens, 3 Norns (the Fates), 7 more Valkyries, and the Forest Bird.
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### **Story Summary of *Das Rheingold***

The magical Rhinemaidens possess a horde of gold, which is stolen from them by the dwarflike Nibelung Alberich; having been unlucky in love, he renounces it altogether and determines that he will make do with wealth. The Rhinemaidens lament the loss of their horde.

Meanwhile, the gods await completion of their new palace, Valhalla, which is being built for them by the **giants** Fafner and Fasolt. As payment for the palace, Wotan had promised to hand over to the giants Freia, goddess of youth and beauty. Upon the urging of his wife, Fricka, and the other gods, however, Wotan decides instead to offer the giants a different payment: a magic ring of power that Alberich has fashioned from the Rhinemaidens' gold. Wotan is joined by the fire god Loge, and they set off to seize the ring.

Alberich has enslaved the other Nibelungs, forcing them to dig for more gold. One of the objects that has been fashioned from this gold is the Tarnhelm, a helmet that makes its wearer invisible.

Wotan and Loge arrive. They trick Alberich into demonstrating his magical ability to turn himself into any creature; when, at their request, he transforms into a small toad, they seize and imprison him. The price of his freedom is his gold. Alberich orders his slaves to bring up all the gold. Wotan takes the gold

and seizes the Ring. Alberich places a curse upon the Ring. Loge, meanwhile, steals the Tarnhelm.

The gods and the giants meet to trade gold for Freia. As the discussion proceeds, the Tarnhelm and even the Ring become part of the price.

The Earth Goddess Erda has warned Wotan to give up the Ring so that he can avoid its curse. Freia is back with the gods, but the giants have everything else. Immediately, Alberich's curse takes effect as the giants argue over ownership of the Ring until Fafner slays Fasolt. The survivor departs, and the gods take possession of Valhalla, while the Rhinemaidens again lament their loss.

### **Story Summary of *Die Walküre***

Wotan had fathered twin children with a mortal woman, a male (called Siegmund) and a female (called Sieglinde). Separated early, the twins are now young adults. Siegmund, who has helped a woman being forced into marriage, is fleeing enemies and traveling under the assumed name Wehwalt (meaning "woeful"). In the course of his flight, he loses his weapons. Sieglinde is living with her husband, Hunding, in a forest cabin.

### **Act I**

Siegmund takes shelter in a remote house built around a massive ash tree. The house proves to be that of Sieglinde, who offers the stranger sustenance. The two are strongly attracted to one another. When Hunding returns, it develops that he was one of the men pursuing Siegmund. Rules of hospitality declare that he must offer this wayfarer safe shelter for the night, but he declares that they shall duel in the morning.

Ordered by Hunding to prepare him a drink, Sieglinde brings a sleeping potion. Away from her husband, she tells Siegmund of a mysterious man missing one eye (Wotan) who came to the house and plunged a sword into the ash tree, declaring that only a great hero could remove it. Many had tried, but all had failed. Empowered by destiny and by the passion he and Sieglinde feel for one another, Siegmund easily retrieves the sword, dubbing it "Nothung" (Needful):

the necessary one. Pledging their love, the two flee from Hunding's house before he awakes.

## **Act II**

Knowing of the twins' actions and having himself placed the sword in the tree to await Siegmund, Wotan orders his daughter the Valkyrie Brünnhilde to ensure Siegmund's triumph over Hunding.

Wotan's wife, Fricka, appears. As the goddess of marriage, she demands that Wotan right multiple wrongs—against herself and also Hunding—by letting Siegmund die in the forthcoming contest. Angrily, Wotan changes his order to Brünnhilde, declaring that Siegmund must die.

Brünnhilde brings to Siegmund word of his destiny. Upon hearing that Sieglinde cannot follow him to Valhalla, Siegmund refuses to go, preferring that they die together.

Brünnhilde decides to disobey Wotan's order, not only to save Siegmund but also to satisfy Wotan's true wish. Wotan arrives, as does Hunding. Wotan shatters Siegmund's sword, and Siegmund is slain. Seizing the shards of the sword, Brünnhilde flees with Sieglinde.

## **Act III**

Valkyries carry slain heroes to Valhalla. Brünnhilde arrives with Sieglinde, announcing that Sieglinde is pregnant with Siegmund's child. Because that child will become the greatest of heroes, Sieglinde must be protected. Although the other Valkyries fear Wotan's wrath too much to assist, Brünnhilde gives the sword fragments to Sieglinde and sends her off into the forest, declaring that she must live for the sake of the child.

Wotan arrives in a fury. Knowing that Brünnhilde has acted for his sake, he would rather forgive her, but the laws are clear. As punishment for her disobedience, she will lose her place among the gods and become a mortal woman, and she will be left to sleep upon a rock until a mortal man has claimed her.

Brünnhilde first declares that she would rather die. Then she begs to be surrounded by a fearsome defense so that only the greatest of heroes will be able to reach her. Wotan accedes. Placing Brünnhilde in a magic sleep, he calls upon Loge to ignite a blaze around her. With his parting words, Wotan declares that only one who does not fear the god's spear will be able to pass the fire.

## **Story Summary of *Siegfried***

Some years have passed since the scenes that close *Die Walküre*. Sieglinde had died after giving birth to a son she named Siegfried, who was raised by the Nibelung dwarf Mime. Siegfried has grown to be a strong and bold young man who is disdainful of his foster father.

### **Act I**

Mime is attempting to forge a new sword from the shards of Siegmund's sword, Nothung, hoping that, with such a sword, Siegfried will be able to retrieve the Ring from Fafner the giant, who has taken the form of a dragon. Mime intends thereby to obtain the Ring for himself. Siegfried returns home and argues with Mime, eventually forcing him to tell the young man about his mother. He tells Mime to forge the sword, and he goes back into the forest.

Next to arrive is a mysterious man known as the Wanderer, actually Wotan in disguise. From this visitor, Mime learns that only one who has never experienced fear will be able to forge the sword. After Mime fails in his attempts to teach Siegfried fear, he suggests that the youth should confront the dragon Fafner. To do so, Siegfried will need the sword Nothung, which he merrily and successfully forges himself.

### **Act II**

Wotan comes upon Alberich outside the dragon Fafner's cave and tells him of Siegfried's approach. They awaken Fafner, who is not interested in giving up the Ring simply to avoid a fight. Siegfried and Mime arrive. Undismayed by the prospect of confronting the dragon, Siegfried attempts to understand the speech of birds and, when Fafner awakens, asks for instruction in how to feel fear.

Fafner charges at him, but soon Siegfried plunges his sword Nothung into the dragon's heart.

Siegfried enters the cave and emerges with both the Tarnhelm and the Ring, to the dismay of Alberich and Mime. The voice of the bird, which Siegfried can now understand, warns him not to trust Mime. When Mime attempts to drug Siegfried so as to be able to seize the Ring, Siegfried kills him. As Act II closes, the bird shares with Siegfried word of the sleeping Brünnhilde, who lies awaiting a hero who knows no fear. Siegfried promptly takes off.

### **Act III**

Erda, the goddess of the earth, learns from Wotan that he will be content to face the destruction of the gods, because he is certain that the good-hearted Siegfried will inherit the gods' power.

Siegfried arrives to find Wotan barring the way to Brünnhilde's mountainside. Siegfried shatters Wotan's spear with Nothung, proving his lack of fear. Wotan leaves, and Siegfried plunges through the flames surrounding Brünnhilde.

The sleeping Brünnhilde, lying on the rock in full armor, is the first woman Siegfried has ever seen. Overcome with an emotion that he first believes must be fear, he recognizes that he is feeling passion. He kisses Brünnhilde, awakening her. She quickly realizes who Siegfried must be, for she had asked Wotan to ensure that only the greatest of heroes could reach her. She declares that she had already loved Siegfried by reputation, and he reciprocates. The opera ends with rhapsodic praise of love in the face of all challenges.

### **Story Summary of *Götterdämmerung***

In a prologue, the three Norns (Fates) relate tales of Wotan's past adventures and of the pending consumption of Valhalla and the gods by fire. Siegfried and Brünnhilde appear, pledging their love. He departs to pursue heroic deeds along the Rhine, borrowing Brünnhilde's horse, Grane, and leaving Brünnhilde the Ring for protection.

### **Act I**

Scene 1. At the Gibichungs' hall, Hagen explains to his half-siblings Gunther and Gutrune his plan to find spouses for them. He intends to make Siegfried award Brünnhilde to Gunther by giving Siegfried a potion that will cause him to forget Brünnhilde and fall for Gutrune.

Siegfried arrives and is tricked into drinking the potion. Hagen's plan is immediately under way. Siegfried and Gunther pledge brotherhood and depart to fetch Brünnhilde. Hagen's ultimate goal is to obtain the Ring for himself; he is Alberich's natural son.

Scene 2. Back on the mountainside, Brünnhilde receives her sister Valkyrie Waltraute, who brings news that Valhalla will soon be destroyed unless Brünnhilde allows the Ring to pass to the Rhinemaidens, from whose gold it was crafted.

Brünnhilde refuses to relinquish Siegfried's gift, and Waltraute departs. Siegfried appears, using the Tarnhelm to take on Gunther's appearance. When he declares that he has come to claim her as bride, she defends herself with the Ring, but it has no power over Siegfried. He bests her and seizes the Ring, claiming Brünnhilde as a bride—for Gunther.

## **Act II**

Back at the Gibichungs' hall, Alberich reminds Hagen how crucial it is to obtain the Ring. Siegfried arrives to announce the success of his mission; the rest of the expedition, bringing the captive Brünnhilde, follows.

Now that Siegfried is no longer wearing the Tarnhelm, Brünnhilde recognizes him, sees that he is wearing the Ring, and realizes that she has been deceived. Furiously, she declares that she is Siegfried's bride, not Gunther's.

While Siegfried is out of the hall with Gutrune, Hagen learns from Brünnhilde that Siegfried can be killed only by a wound to the back; knowing that he was too brave to flee from an enemy, she had used her powers to protect all of him except his back. Hagen persuades the reluctant Gunther to assist in murdering Siegfried—and thereby seize the Ring—during a hunt the next day. The act closes with a wedding procession for the two couples: Siegfried and Gutrune and Gunther and Brünnhilde.



## Act III

Scene 1. Having wandered away from the hunt, Siegfried comes upon the Rhinemaidens lamenting their lost gold. They warn him about the curse on the Ring, but he laughs off their concerns. Joined by the rest of the hunting party, Siegfried regales his companions with tales of his past adventures.

A new potion has restored his memory, even of the place Brünnhilde had earned by his side. When Gunther proves reluctant to murder his friend and colleague, Hagen takes matters into his own hands, tricking Siegfried into looking away long enough to allow a sword to be thrust into his back. As he dies, Siegfried calls for Brünnhilde, and his body is borne back to the Gibichung's hall.

Scene 2. Back at the hall, Hagen tells Gutrune that Siegfried has been killed by a wild boar. Conscience-stricken, Gunther tells her that this boar was Hagen. Admitting his action, Hagen declares that the Ring is now his for the taking. When Gunther tries to prevent him from seizing it, Hagen kills Gunther. However, when Hagen reaches for the Ring, the dead Siegfried's arm raises menacingly, and Hagen backs away.

Brünnhilde enters with words of peace and then commands that a funeral pyre be built. She reflects upon Siegfried and upon the tragic failure of Wotan's plan that this great hero would become the earth's salvation. Sending word of events to Valhalla, Brünnhilde mounts her horse and rides determinedly into the flames, joining Siegfried in death.

The flames blaze high, the Rhine rises, and the Rhinemaidens take hold of the Ring. When Hagen attempts to wrest it from them, he drowns.

At last, the flames of Siegfried's funeral pyre reach Valhalla, and it too burns. The prediction of the Norns and of the opera's title — "Twilight of the Gods" — has come to pass. Only the Rhinemaidens remain, at last reunited with their gold.