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OPERA

MAGYAR ÁLLAMI OPERAHÁZ  
HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA




*Richard Wagner*

# Der Ring des Nibelungen



# Tartalom

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# Classical, yet modern

– in conversation with director Géza M. Tóth

**The Hungarian State Opera began producing its new *Ring* cycle in 2015. To realise the production, Béla Balázs Award recipient and Oscar nominee animation film director, Géza M. Tóth was commissioned, who staged the first three instalments of Wagner's music drama year after year. Following the reopening of the Opera House in 2022, the production of *Götterdämmerung*, the concluding piece of the tetralogy put an end to the large-scale enterprise.**

**How do you regard the popularity of Wagner's magnum opus as a director?**

Friendship, love, loyalty, the ability to be satisfied, and to forgive: these are fundamental, eternal human values essential to a healthy society, the importance of which might still fade or disappear – especially at times of crisis. Richard Wagner's monumental, romantic *Ring* tetralogy, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*, is not merely a distant legend of mythological heroes, but a fine reflection of the economic, social and ecological changes and crises of the past two centuries. A parable warning us that it necessarily leads to global catastrophe if people give in to the insatiable desire to possess, and keep exploiting others and their environment at an ever-increasing degree. The tightly woven unit of Wagner's text, music and stage directions is so exact that following it as closely as possible may in itself be helpful in the creation of a modern production.

**Nevertheless, directors often struggle with implementation on stage. What approach did you adopt?**

I approach each work analytically, I try to uncover the solution from the given work. In the case of *The Ring*, two directions seemed obvious: either I take the mythological approach, or social criticism. I felt that by the mythological fabric, Wagner created an opportunity to present his social criticism to the public. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by making friends with many great philosophers and theoretical historians, Wagner became increasingly sensitive to the social changes in Europe at the time. The basic question of *The Ring* is how the individual's social position can be maintained or increased through the power of money. Maybe not everyone wants to move up a notch because they would feel more comfortable there, but because of being afraid of slipping down. *The Ring* is essentially a presentation of social hierarchical levels. Wagner uses mythological figures to talk about

the system created by money and power, in which the desire for more money and more power will be the driving principle that keeps it all alive. At the same time, of course, it raises the question of whether it works in the long term. Is this hierarchical system sustainable? Is there, can there be continuous development?

**You try to capture the tetralogy as a whole, instead of dividing it into the individual works.**

This is the Wagnerian concept. The composer's intentions are the most important thing, but it must also be taken into consideration that the production – or, rather, four productions over the course of four years – are created with the singers and musicians we have. I concluded that the logic of the construction of the overall production, that is, its dramaturgy, is fundamental in this approach. In order to achieve both complexity and unity in this direction, I had to accept that an overarching system suitable for all of the settings, no matter how complex and sophisticated, will inevitably become boring and static, and no spatial organisation or set design can be appropriate for every scene while still maintaining the same level of intensity.

This is why I decided to find a logic for arranging the set in a way that is not solely based on form. And it was also clear to me that this opera would not allow the reorganisation of the stage between the scenes, which would break it up into parts too forcefully. As it is a coherent and seamless piece of mythology, the scenes, acts and parts of the tetralogy are all linked to one another with many threads. This should also appear in the logic of the set design and the use of material and space. This was one of the starting points. The other issue is that Wagner included many aspects in the story that are difficult to resolve using conventional stage techniques. (Nymphs swim under the water, fire appears from out of nowhere, two giants enter, someone turns into a dragon before our eyes...) So, I had to find a medium that is suitable for this kind of magic.

Earlier, when I staged *St. Matthew Passion*, I already experimented with semi-transparent surfaces for projection, which caused the changes in the distribution of light before and behind the materials to result in dream-like effects, and even allowed for the characters to be highlighted or hidden. The overall style combines projected images, lights of various colours and semiotic set elements.

The projected images are, of course, elements of the spectacle, but the lights, the set, the costumes and especially the singers' performances, movement and presence on stage are equally important. The images will be projected from two points (front and back). It is important to note that this is not a film, but rather a continuously moving visual presence. It



would be a mistake to overemphasise this element, as no technique in terms of form should simply be art for art's sake, and everything should really be about the opera and Wagner. He is the one who heads off on this path from the first note, and continues on it until the closing measure. The projection follows this concept. Of course, we are not going to project images exactly "to the music", as this would result in a strange illustration that would soon lose its meaning, but the overall visual spectacle will follow the music. So the images do not have to correspond to the specific melodies, but rather to the given musical passage.

**What changes have taken place in the visual concept since the premiere of *Das Rheingold*? How have you and your team built on the lessons sifted from that?**

Our production of *Rheingold* was preceded by several similar productions merging traditional theatre visual design and state-of-art projection technology. This meant that we did not have to make substantial conceptional alterations in *Die Walküre* relative to *Rheingold*. We are using slightly richer projected visuals in *Die Walküre*, but the character of the movement in the projections has remained very similar. The starting point for the visual concept, which hasn't changed, is for there constantly to be a moving visual presence on the stage. While developing it, we took note that using our technical possibilities as a basis, this would be a horizontal, rectangular image, but it is actually positioned in the space, and not on a film screen or on a monitor. We had to make sure that every shape within the boundaries of the image would be an independent, rational unit.

The other substantive criterion was that in a theatre, due to the lack of light, the primary colour is black, and therefore during the projection black equals nothingness. Only visual elements that are not black show on the projection foils. This way, the process of developing the moving visual materials is completely different from when one is making a film, where black is one of the components within the image. We put more emphasis on using this know-how when developing the visual materials for *Die Walküre*. At the same time, we also re-used and further developed those visual motifs that we had already created for the previous work. For example, for Wotan's world plan, we used the same form of universal digital system, suggesting totality, as we did last year. The motif – akin to this – assigned to Siegmund is similarly monumental, without being artificial. Instead, it is composed of constellations of stars, suggesting some kind of order existing since eternity. It evokes the primal, undifferentiated substance that we attempted to depict in the river Rhine.

The fire will appear later in a similar form, another primal element that can have its impact in the visual language of indivisibility and dimensionlessness. For all of this, obviously, the

opposite and visual antithesis also appears. Expressed as a horizontal and vertical grid-structure is the endlessly structured, strictly hierarchical world of Hunding, which Fricka, in opposition to Wotan, also represents.

**How does the story of Siegfried fit into the thread of your *Ring* cycle productions which both criticise consumer society in a coherent fashion?**

It fits into it perfectly, although "social criticism" is perhaps not the best expression to describe what we are doing. In any case, it was never my aim to interpret the work in a way that would be alien to the author's original intent. We too relate to the tetralogy as a mythological story, but its visual world is not the primeval Germanic stereotype, prehistoric and shrouded in mist, but rather a similarly fictional and exaggerated world of stories in which the audience can find associations that are generally related to the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. And what emerges within this framework is not a social criticism as such, but an important question that was so characteristic of Wagner and his era: how will the new world order stand the test of time as a universal system in terms of human and traditional social values? And this new order is the consumer society itself, although it was not called that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If we interpret the question in this way, it is no great feat to develop the idea further from there, as Wagner provides a summary of the previous two operas in *Siegfried*. It's interesting that one often feels that the tetralogy could actually conclude at the end of *Siegfried*. The story has been fully rounded out and could really stand on its own two feet as a trilogy without *Götterdämmerung*.

**It does stand on its own nicely. However, without *Götterdämmerung*, what we would get would be a Hollywood adventure tale with a happy ending. Wouldn't this interpretation be too optimistic?**

It would be a fine, self-contained story this way too, one with a powerful and beautiful message. That in this utterly corrupt world, only love can offer some hope. A love in which the self is dissolved, experiencing total unity with another person instead of one's own desires, fears (or fearlessness) and identity.

**At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, this same fusion actually takes place...**

With the not-negligible difference that this second union entails no hope for the world or the Wotanian world order. But when Brünnhilde and Siegfried meet for the first time, there is a pronouncedly optimistic return to the same primeval dimensionlessness represented by the Rhinemaidens. Here, however, we can see the same thing at an even more elevated





level, because the lovers represent not only playfulness and freedom, but also the dual unity I mentioned earlier. Then, along comes a strange and contrasting Tristan-like story in the last part of the tetralogy, where Wagner gives the final answer that the order created by Wotan and then destroyed by Wotan buries everything underneath itself when it collapses.

**Due to the restoration of the Opera House, the staging of *Götterdämmerung* had to be postponed to May 2022. Did the world events that took place during this break influenced you? Did you change anything about the “actualities” of the concept?**

We thought in a logical unit, so in 2014 we already knew what how we wanted to present *Götterdämmerung*, the last instalment of the *The Ring*. The scenery and set designs, the “graphs” making up the structure of the performance had already been envisaged. The final visual designs, of course, weren't ready at the time, but the concept of the stage design and the projection were all outlined as well as whether certain elements should be factual or suitable for associations instead. These visual leitmotifs see the tetralogy through, just like the musical leitmotifs. We tried to achieve the pictorial iconography to as diverse as Wagner's music. All this needed dramaturgical accuracy and consistency. Apart from the aforementioned social criticism aspect, I refrained from including any current social phenomenon directly in *The Ring*. I had no intention of alluding to the coronavirus epidemic with figures in face masks or gas masks; I didn't want to depict bored, selfie-chatting gods or drifting refugees looking for a new homeland. It would have been obvious, but I also declined turning the end of *Götterdämmerung* into some burnt-out or flooded world which we could associate with an ecological disaster. It would have been a trap, a dead end, which I consciously avoided. This kind of “language” is foreign to my theatrical ethos, but more importantly, I believe it is also foreign to Wagner.

**Returning to *The Ring*'s message for today: the tragedy of mankind – or humanity. Do you believe that wanting more instead of enough is the main cause of our “twilight”, our end on earth?**

Wagner's tetralogy presents an experiment: what happens when the material needs and the domination achieved by them over others becomes the measure of value? Or, when it is becomes a model for society. It turns out that almost everything is in this system fails: work is unpaid, the miserable are even more exploited, guest right is no longer sacred, the outlawed are not entitled to legal remedy, friendship hallowed by blood-brotherhood is mocked, love is manipulated, the possible saviours, the “redemptive redeemed” – such

as Siegmund, Siegfried, Brünnhilde – are betrayed, and no one is interested in the sage's advice either... Our archaic, fundamentally essential values are neglected one by one in the model where the main value of “enough” is replaced by “more and more”. For me, it the most interesting, most important message of this great work.

*The interviews were conducted by  
Diána Eszter Mátrai, Eszter Orbán, Tamás Pallós, and Viktória V. Nagy*

## *The Ring* – the realisation of the impossible

*The Ring* took Wagner twenty-six years altogether to create, and during that period his ideas changed. Perhaps this was inevitable. Even so, the libretto which he produced complete at the outset comes closer to embodying his conscious intentions than anything else he produced when he was at the height of his powers, at least in the first three of the four operas.

It is often said of Wagner's writing of *The Ring* that only a megalomaniac would have embarked on such an extravagantly large and impossible-to-stage project that was to take him over a quarter of a century to complete, and then require him to build his own opera house to put it on in. Seen from the point of view of its dimensions and as a single individual's achievement (especially if that individual also created *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Mastersingers*, *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*), it is without parallel in the history of great art. But it is not the case that Wagner conceived *The Ring* from the beginning as the vast undertaking it became. He backed into it, one step at a time, and was pushed into each succeeding step by the requirements of the work itself. (...)

This huge extension backward in time of his original story radically altered the internal balance of interest as regards its content and its characters. At an early stage in its gestation



the entire work was to have been devoted to the life story of Siegfried spread across two evenings. (...) Wagner's expansion of his original dramatic conception has had the effect of (...) replacing [Siegfried] with Wotan [as the main character]. To this day the role of Wotan remains the longest, heaviest and most demanding in the entire operatic repertoire – followed by that of Siegfried. (...)

It is essential to an understanding of *The Ring* that it be perceived as an organic whole, a single work of art consisting of four operas, and not just as four operas. Looked at in the latter way it is bound to be unsatisfying and not even properly comprehensible, as when one listens to isolated movements of a symphony. (...)

One of the many awe-inspiring things about the finished work is the completeness with which so many and such amazingly diverse ingredients are metabolized into the living tissue of one and the same complex organism – complex, indeed, almost beyond grasping – and yet with a single, all-integrating, unmistakably authentic life of its own. Wagner himself would not have been able, at the level of conscious thought, to analyse it all out again into its constituent elements. And he knew this. All this must be true, of course, of every great artist in relation to his work. Even so, the difference in scale here is so great as to constitute a difference in kind, and there will always remain something about *The Ring* that is, in something close to a literal sense, incredible. It is like the realization of the impossible.

*Bryan Magee: Wagner and Philosophy*



Krisztián Cser, Erika Gál



# Der Ring des Nibelungen at the Opera House

Richard Wagner's unparalleled opera tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, presented unprecedented challenges to theatres at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Previously, Verdi's and Meyerbeer's grand operas, *Aida*, *Don Carlo*, *Les vêpres siciliennes*, *Le prophète* and *Les Huguenots* had been regarded as works that were difficult to stage. Compared to these, the enormous orchestra of the *Ring*, and, in the case of *Das Rheingold*, the three changes at the open scenes and tricks of stage technique – e. g. swimming Rhinemaidens and the appearance of a rainbow bridge – posed incredible challenges to the opera houses of the 1880s.

Four years after its inauguration, the Budapest Opera staged *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* on two consecutive days, 26 and 27 January 1889. In order to be able to carry out such a large-scale project, the small Central European opera house needed an enthusiastic music director, which it had found in the person of the 28-year-old Gustav Mahler. The greatest successes of the composer-conductor's tenure in Pest, which lasted only two and a half years, were the Hungarian premiere of *Cavalleria rusticana* and the two Wagner operas. He planned to stage the second half of the cycle in 1891, but by then his tenure was over. The Opera, of course, could not give up on the *Ring* after *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. The management attempted to replace Mahler with Josef Řebíček. The forgotten Czech conductor was regarded as a devoted interpreter of Wagner's works in Wiesbaden in the 1860s, and later became the head of the Berlin Philharmonic. He conducted the Budapest premieres of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* on 9 April and 10 December 1892, respectively. Although the playbills in those years did not include the name of the directors, it was most likely Kálmán Alszeghy who staged the operas.

The complete *Ring* was first performed in Budapest from 30 January to 4 February 1893 under the baton of Řebíček. The following two occasions when the entire cycle was performed took place at the time of the Millenary Exhibition in June and August of 1896. It is interesting to note that the tetralogy was shared between two conductors: Rezső Máder (*Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried*) and István Kellner (*Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*). The four operas remained more or less on the repertoire, with hiatuses of varying lengths, and after the turn of the century the performances were revived. In the mid-1920s, László Márkus staged the entire cycle again (interestingly, *Das Rheingold* was the

last one he completed), and the operas were rehearsed by Bernhard Tittel. The 1930s saw not only the entire *Ring* being performed repeatedly, but all of Wagner's works, often featuring world-renowned singers.

Kálmán Nádasdy was already a well-known artist when he began to stage his own *Ring*, with the set and costumes designed by Zoltán Fülöp. *Das Rheingold* was performed under the baton of János Ferencsik, and *Die Walküre*, which was revived in 1942, was conducted by Miklós Lukács. Nádasdy finished *Siegfried* only after World War II, in 1947, but it ran only for two nights. Due to political pressure, the number of Wagner performances had to be reduced, and therefore, of the four operas, only *Die Walküre* remained on the repertoire for the following two decades.

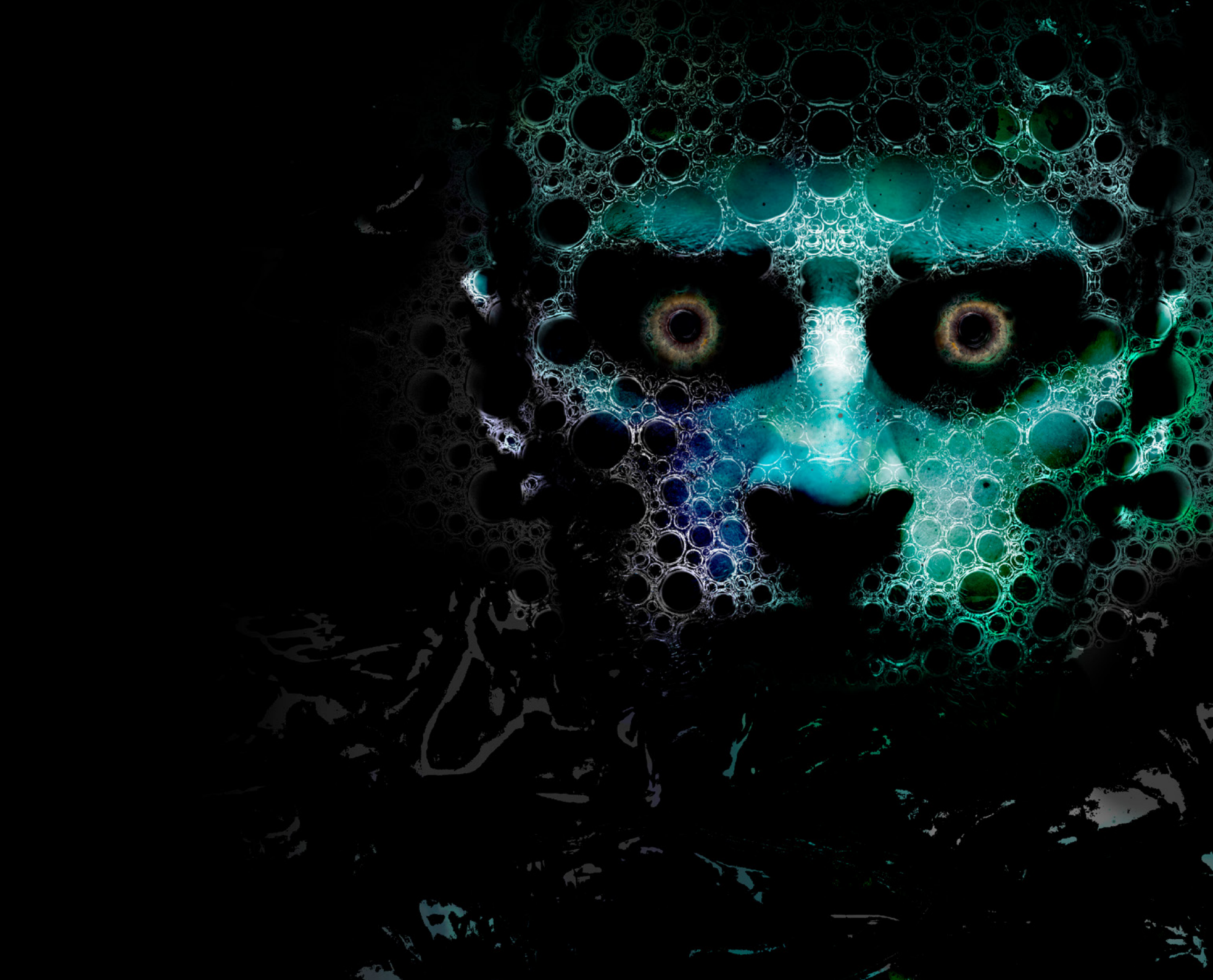
There was huge interest in the revival of the *Ring* that began in 1969 based on a new translation by Tamás Blum, with Miklós Lukács teaching the operas and András Kórodi conducting the second cast. The cycle was directed by András Békés, who used the Bayreuth performances as a basis, in a collaboration with set designer Gábor Forray and costume designer Gizella Szeitz. (After Békés fell ill, *Siegfried* was eventually staged by András Mikó.) The tetralogy, which was finished in 1974, remained on the Opera's programme until it was shut down in 1980. *Die Walküre* was taken to the Erkel Theatre as well.

The next *Ring* cycle began on the 110th anniversary of Wagner's death in February 1993. Following Kálmán Alszeghy and László Márkus, Viktor Nagy became the third director to stage all four operas together. The set was designed by Attila Csikós, and the costumes by Nelly Vágó. Ádám Medveczky and János Kovács conducted *Das Rheingold*, with Yuri Simonov conducting the other operas. After the completion of *Götterdämmerung*, the tetralogy would be performed in its entirety once or twice a year until January 2007. In 2015, Géza M. Tóth began his production of the tetralogy with a completely different approach and visual style, and from 2022, the OPERA awaits once again its audience with a complete *Ring* cycle.

Márton Karczag









*Richard Wagner*

# Das Rheingold

*Das Rheingold*

Music drama in one act, in German, with Hungarian, English and German subtitles

Libretto **RICHARD WAGNER**

Director **GÉZA M. TÓTH**

Set designer **ILDI TIHANYI**

Costume designer **IBOLYA BÁRDOSI**

Projected scenery **KEDD ANIMATION STUDIO**

Dramaturg, Hungarian subtitles **ESZTER ORBÁN**

English subtitles **ARTHUR ROGER CRANE**

Conductor **JÁNOS KOVÁCS**

Wotan **KRISZTIÁN CSER**

Donner **KÁROLY SZEMERÉDY**

Froh **PÉTER BALCZÓ**

Loge **ADRIAN ERÖD**

Alberich **PÉTER KÁLMÁN**

Mime **TIVADAR KISS**

Fasolt **ANDRÁS PALERDI**

Fafner **ISTVÁN RÁCZ**

Fricka **ERIKA GÁL**

Freia **LILLA HORTI**

Erda **ATALA SCHÖCK**

Woglinde **ZITA VÁRAD**

Wellgunde **NATÁLIA TUZNIK**

Flosshilde **VIKTÓRIA MESTER**

Featuring the Hungarian State Opera Orchestra

Premiere: 21 March 2015, Opera House



Adrian Eröd, Péter Kálmán



# Synopsis

## Scene 1

At the bottom of the River Rhine, three Rhinemaidens guard an invaluable treasure: the Rhinegold. Alberich, the Nibelung dwarf, is enchanted by the girls' beauty, but after they mock him, his interest shifts to the glittering gold. The girls carelessly reveal the gold's secret: whoever forges it into a ring can use its power to rule the entire world. In order to do this, however, he must also renounce love forever. Alberich curses love and seizes the gold.

## Scene 2

Wotan, ruler of the gods, finds himself being scolded by his wife, Fricka: earlier he had offered Fricka's beautiful sister, Freia, to the two giants, Fasolt and Fafner, in exchange for building the gods' castle. The castle is now ready, and the giants are ready to claim their fee. Loge, the god of fire and Wotan's counsellor, suggests a different form of payment: the ring that Alberich has made from the Rhinegold and all the treasure that the ring's power has given him. The giants take Freia away in pledge, and in her absence, the gods must do without her golden apples, which they require in order to preserve their youth and strength.

## Scene 3

In order to find and obtain the ring, Wotan and Loge set off to Nibelheim, home of the Nibelungs, in the depths of the Earth. There they meet Mime, Alberich's brother. Under Alberich's control, Mime, has crafted the Tarnhelm, a magical helmet which enables the wearer to take on any shape, and even to become invisible. He tells Wotan how Alberich has subjugated the Nibelungs, forcing them to serve him. Alberich arrives and mocks the gods. Loge cleverly asks him to show how the Tarnhelm works: Alberich first changes into a dragon, and then into a toad, whereupon the gods seize him. After being led up to the earth's surface from Nibelheim and forced to turn over his treasure to the gods, Alberich watches Wotan take the ring as well. Alberich curses it: its bearer can look forward to eternal woe and death!

## Scene 4

The giants return for the gold. The gods are compelled to give them the Tarnhelm as well, but Wotan is unwilling to part with the ring. Erda, goddess of the Earth, appears and warns him that the ring will cause the downfall of the gods. Wotan reluctantly hands over the ring, and Alberich's curse claims its first victim: Fafner kills his brother while arguing over

the treasure. While the Rhinemaidens lament the lost treasure, the gods enter their new home, Valhalla.

## La Spezia – legend and reality

In his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, Wagner wrote that the long-awaited impetus, an almost tangible inspiration came to him in an inn in Spezia, on the afternoon of 5 September 1848, as he lay waiting in a state of exhaustion for the redemption of sleep to arrive. "...I suddenly got the feeling that I was sinking into a strong current of water. Its rushing soon developed into a musical sound as the chord of E flat major, surging incessantly in broken chords; these presented themselves as melodic figurations of increasing motion, but the pure chord of E flat major never altered... With the sensation that the waves were now flowing high above me I woke with violent start from my half-sleep. I recognized immediately that the orchestral prelude to *Das Rheingold* had come to me..."

Wagner: *Mein Leben*

This dramatic story fits very well into the image of the natural genius that Wagner wished to present for himself: the creative ideas occur to him spontaneously from his subconscious. "A pity to spoil the story but the fact is that the evidence, while clinching the matter conclusively in neither direction, tends to suggest that the actual genesis of the *Ring* occurred earlier and rather more prosaically. (...) Wagner's first continuous setting of the texts was on the whole an impressively fluent affair; large passages were set down in a form that was not to change radically or even at all before the final score. The first complete draft of *Das Rheingold* was made between 1 November 1853 and 14 January 1854, that is about ten weeks, less ten days' illness – an astonishingly short space of time in view of the new ground that was being broken in terms of word-setting and motifs. On the other hand, contrary to the belief encouraged by generations of Wagner scholars – following Wagner himself – the act of composition was at the same time a painstaking process of self-correction and improvement."

Barry Millington: Wagner



# The music dramas

The *Ring* took more than a quarter of a century to write, from 1848 to 1874. More amazing than the inconsistencies throughout the work is the degree of unity it displays, a unity less dramatic than epic and symphonic. According to classical tradition, dramatic form had to avoid epic traits. (...)

The Nibelung myth, as Wagner sketched it early in October 1848, contains a large number of stories. Finding the medieval Nibelungenlied too diluted, Wagner had turned to the Edda, linked the heroic tragedy of the death of Siegfried with the myths of the Germanic gods, and so elevated the events to a drama about the beginning and end of the world. His prose draft of October 1848, *Die Nibelungensage (Mythus)*, later published with the title *Der Nibelungen-Mythus als Entwurf zu einem Drama*, included the whole myth with all its narrative strands, from the theft of the gold and the building of Valhalla to the deaths of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, whereby the curse laid on the gold is lifted. (...)

The recognition that *Siegfrieds Tod* was not self-sufficient forced itself on Wagner two years later in Zurich, after his flight from Dresden, when he attempted to set his text and failed. In May and June 1851 he amplified *Siegfrieds Tod* with *Der junge Siegfried* (later Siegfried), for partly dramaturgic and partly musical reasons. In November of the same year he told Theodor Uhlig of his plan to enlarge the two-part drama to a four-part one, and the texts of *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold* were written in 1852. In the letter to Uhlig he had written:

“When I came to the complete musical realization and was at last obliged to think about theatrical practicalities, I recognized that what I had in mind was incomplete: the characters owe their immense, striking significance to the wider context, and that context was presented only to the mind, in the epic narratives. To make *Siegfrieds Tod* work, I therefore wrote *Der junge Siegfried*; but the very effect that had, of giving the whole far greater meaning, made it clear to me, as I dwelt on its realization in terms of musical theatre, that it was more than ever necessary to present the whole tale and its background in a directly perceptible form. I see now that to be perfectly understood in the theatre I must have the whole myth performed on the stage.”

His argument that only what is actually seen and enacted on the stage will work in the theatre is based on his experience as an operatic composer; it would not apply to non-musical drama, where the epic narrative has a long-standing tradition. But the dramaturgic difficulty that drove Wagner to expand the tragedy of Siegfried into the four-part *Ring* was

closely bound up with a musical and compositional problem. One might well speak of the birth of leitmotif technique out of the dialectic of the epic element in Wagner's drama. (...) In Wagner's view, if a musico-dramatic motif was to be fully understood it had to be introduced in association with both words and an event on the stage. In the theatre the visual correlative of what is expressed in the music carries even more weight than the verbal commentary. It is only when a musical motif has been the symbol of something seen on the stage, which establishes an association with the gold, the ring, Valhalla and so on, then it can become a motif of reminiscence or a leitmotif: a means, that is, of linking what is seen and spoken with what is not seen and not spoken.

*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*













*Richard Wagner*  
**Die Walküre**

*The Valkyrie*

Music drama in three acts, in German, with Hungarian, English and German subtitles

Libretto **RICHARD WAGNER**

Director **GÉZA M. TÓTH**

Set designer **GERGELY ZÖLDY Z**

Costume designer **IBOLYA BÁRDOSI**

Projected scenery **KEDD ANIMATION STUDIO**

Choreographer **MARIANNA VENEKEI**

Dramaturg, Hungarian subtitles **ESZTER ORBÁN**

English subtitles **ARTHUR ROGER CRANE**

Conductor **JÁNOS KOVÁCS**

Siegmund **ISTVÁN KOVÁCSHÁZI**

Hunding **GÉZA GÁBOR**

Wotan **RENATUS MÉSZÁR**

Sieglinde **ESZTER SÜMEGI**

Brünnhilde **SZILVIA RÁLIK**

Fricka **ERIKA GÁL**

Helmwige **ILDIKÓ MEGYIMÓRE CZ**

Gerhilde **ZITA VÁRADI**

Ortlinde **ANDREA BRASSÓI-JÖRÖS**

Waltraute **ANDREA SZÁNTÓ**

Siegrune **ANNA CSENGE FÜRJES**

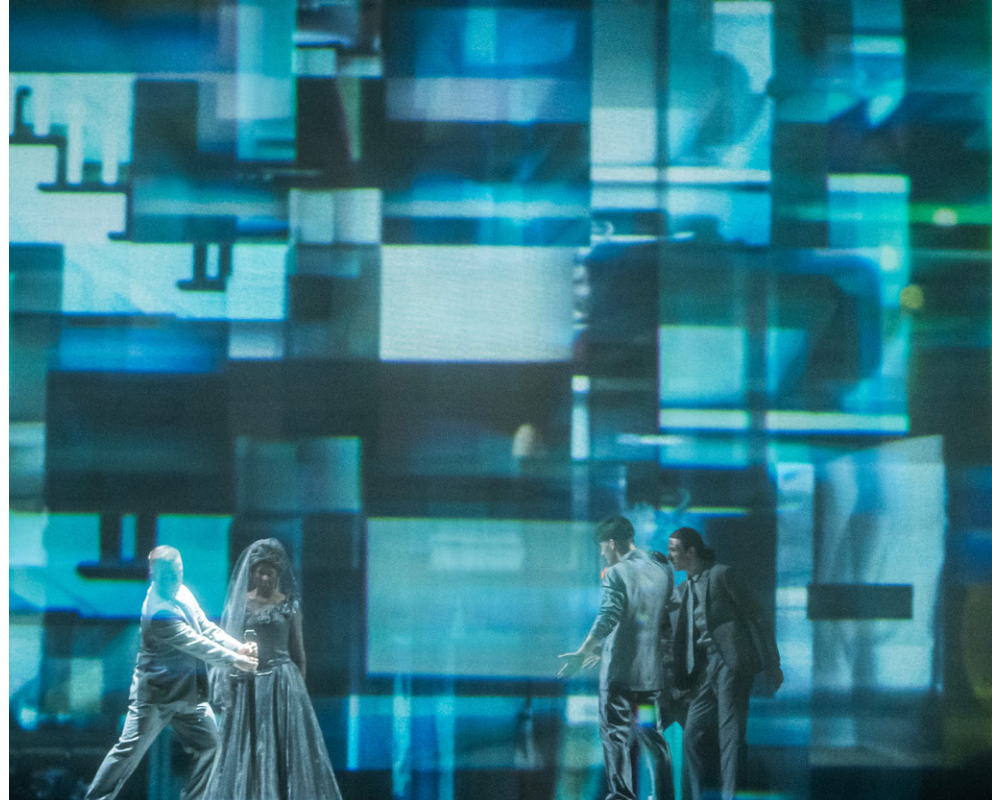
Rosswesse **KLÁRA VINCZE**

Grimgerde **DIÁNA IVETT KISS**

Schwertleite **VIKTÓRIA MESTER**

Featuring the Hungarian State Opera Orchestra, as well as the Hungarian National Ballet and students of the Hungarian Dance University

Premiere: 6 March 2016, Opera House



István Kovácsházi, Eszter Sümegi



# Synopsis

## Act I

Exhausted from fleeing his pursuers through a storm, Siegmund bursts into the door of a strange house and collapses. Sieglinde finds him slumped beside the hearth, and the two feel an immediate attraction toward each other. Their discussion is interrupted by Sieglinde's husband, Hunding, who asks Siegmund who he is. Siegmund, saying his name is "Wehwalt" (Woeful), describes his life of adversity, the death of his mother and the loss of his sister. Eventually everyone realises that Hunding is in fact kin to Siegmund's enemies. In observance of the law of hospitality, the host will not take Siegmund's life right away, but states that when morning comes, the two must meet in mortal combat.

Left by himself, Siegmund addresses his father, Wälse – who is really Wotan, the ruler of the gods in human form – to give him the sword that he once promised him. Sieglinde returns and tells him that she has given Hunding a sleeping draught, and the two can speak without fear. She relates the story of how she became Hunding's wife, and of the one-eyed stranger who thrust a sword into the stump of the ash tree at the centre of the house, and how nobody has ever been able to pry it out. Sieglinde also reveals to the visitor how unhappy she is. Siegmund embraces her and promises to free her from her forced marriage with Hunding. As moonlight floods into the room, Siegmund compares the feelings welling up inside them to the union of love and springtime. Sieglinde, addressing Siegmund as "Spring", asks if his father truly is "Wolfe", as he had claimed earlier. When Siegmund reveals that his father is really Wälse, Sieglinde recognises that the man she is facing is her twin brother. Siegmund draws the sword from the tree trunk and declares Sieglinde to be his bride. The two Wälungs are united in happiness.

## Act II

On a high mountain ridge, Wotan is speaking with his favourite warrior daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde. He asks her to help his mortal son, Siegmund, in his battle with Hunding. Brünnhilde is about to happily depart to accomplish her mission when Fricka, Wotan's wife and the goddess of marriage and the hearth, arrives and insists that the adulterous – not to mention incestuous – siblings be punished, meaning that Wotan must protect Hunding's marriage rights against Siegmund. She pays no heed to Wotan's argument that Siegmund might be able to save the gods by regaining the Nibelung Alberich's all-powerful ring from Fafner, the giant who has changed himself into a dragon. Wotan realises that he has fallen into his own trap: if

he does not enforce the law, then his own power will also vanish. He gives in and accepts his wife's demands. After Fricka's departure, the chief god, angry and feeling his own impotence, tells the returning Brünnhilde the story of the theft of the Rheingold, and how Alberich placed a curse on the ring he had made from the gold. Brünnhilde listens to her father in astonishment as he relates the story of the plan, now in ashes, he had devised to save the gods, and how she must now fight on Hunding's side in the deadly encounter.

Meanwhile, in the forest, Siegmund is attempting to calm Sieglinde, who has nearly lost her mind from fear and shame and watches over her when she finally falls asleep. Brünnhilde appears to Siegmund as if in a vision and informs him that he will soon die and go to Valhalla. Siegmund replies that he will not go without Sieglinde and threatens to kill both himself and his love if his sword is certain to have no power against Hunding. Moved by his tenacity, Brünnhilde elects to be guided by her father's innermost desires and – despite the god's decision and express order to the contrary – aid Siegmund, who upon hearing Hunding approaching, bids farewell to Sieglinde. As the two men do battle, Siegmund – thanks to Brünnhilde's protective shield – is about to triumph when Wotan appears and shatters Siegmund's sword, Nothung, into fragments with his spear. The now weaponless lad is quickly slain by Hunding, while Brünnhilde, fearing her father's vengeance, flees clutching both Sieglinde and the splintered shards of Nothung to her. With a single gesture, Wotan kills Hunding as he stands triumphantly over Siegmund's body, and then heads off after Brünnhilde in order to punish his favourite child for her grave disobedience.

## Act III

Brünnhilde's eight warrior sisters, the Valkyries, gather on a mountaintop: this is where they gather on their way to Valhalla, the place where they take fallen heroes in order for them to guard the home of the gods for all eternity. They are surprised to see Brünnhilde arrive on her horse bearing not a hero, but a woman: Sieglinde. When her sisters learn that she is fleeing from Wotan's wrath, they do not dare to hide her. Despairing and powerless, Sieglinde is resigned to die until Brünnhilde informs her that she is carrying Siegmund's child underneath her heart. Sieglinde then asks the Valkyries for assistance and guidance, takes the pieces of Nothung from Brünnhilde and, thanking the brave Valkyrie for her aid, sets off for what Brünnhilde's sisters have told her is the one place safe from Wotan: the forest guarded by Fafner. The ruler of the gods arrives, casts Brünnhilde out of the ranks of the Valkyries and announces his intention to turn her into a mortal woman as punishment. Brünnhilde's sisters rush to her defence, but he warns them that they will share her same fate if they offer her their protection.



Left alone with her father, Brünnhilde argues that she was actually following Wotan's true will when she defied him. Unswayed, her father will not alter the punishment: Brünnhilde will lie in a deep sleep on the mountaintop and will belong to the first man who happens to find her. The girl asks her father to surround her with a wall of fire that only the bravest hero would dare to cross. Both of them hope and feel that this hero will be the child soon to be born to Sieglinde. Wotan bids a sad farewell to his dearest child, and with a paternal kiss sends Brünnhilde into a deep sleep and mortal existence before summoning Loge, the god of fire, to encircle the high crag, Brünnhilde's resting place. As the flames rise, Wotan casts an enchantment on the fire that will deter anyone who fears the power of Wotan's spear from entering.

## Wotan's law – the social order and the struggle of nature

Wotan's law is the first law, the beginnings of law as such. In other words, his rule constitutes the first step out of a state of Nature and towards civilization. It is based entirely on peaceful consent, agreements, contracts and treaties. The symbol of this power is Wotan's spear. He always carries it, not because he stabs people with it (he never does), but because the contracts and treaties that constitute the world-order that he has established are carved on its shaft, and he is their guardian. As their upholder he has literally only to hold them up, to brandish the spear aloft, if he wants to restore order in any disordered situation. But of course this symbolism tells us that even the most consensual and minimal order can obtain only if it is backed by the possibility and the show of force. (...)

In fact, how destructive this new order is to spontaneous perception and spontaneous life is implicit from the start. The first wrong step was taken when Wotan as the aboriginal father (which is to say the aboriginal benign authority-figure and author of life – it is somehow easy to forget that he is the father or grandfather of Siegfried, Brünnhilde, Siegmund, Sieglinde, and many other characters, including probably the eight other Valkyries; and also the mate of Erda, Fricka, and many other wives and mothers) went to drink at the spring of

wisdom. (...) Wotan's acquisition of knowledge costs him an eye. Never again does he quite see anything straight. That the acquisition of knowledge involves the loss of innocence is shown by the fact that the very first thing he does after drinking at the spring of wisdom is to seek power. He breaks a branch from the world ash-tree, in whose shade the spring bubbles, and turns it into a spear – the spear which he thenceforward holds as his grip on the world. But in direct response to that very first violation of Nature, everything surrounding it that is living begins to wither and die. (...)

The idea expressed here is the one that lies at the heart of philosophical anarchism: that the exercise of political power as such, socialization, law, are incompatible with the natural order of things, and are inherently anti-life. There can be no such thing as innocent politics. (...) The fact that the first step toward civilization is at the same time the first repression of natural feeling, the first repression of instinct, is a matter of profoundest importance in the psychology and life of human beings. (...) The idea that the pursuit or exercise of power is incompatible with love and the capacity for love is basic to *The Ring*. (...)

Repeatedly throughout Wagner's work – not only in *The Ring*, and not only with regard to sexual relationships – two value systems are placed in opposition to one another. On one side are the values of the human heart, of honest, spontaneous feeling, which, precisely because it is spontaneous, we want to live by. These values are approved by the composer but seen as shocking and unacceptable by society. On the other side are the values embodied in such basic social institutions as property and marriage, which are taken for granted by society as elementary to civilization, but seen as shocking and unacceptable by the composer. The collision between the two is always cataclysmic; and those who live by the heart must expect to be crushed by society. I believe that this conflict reflects the feeling Wagner had for most of his life about his personal position in the world – he actually used to say that the world would not allow him to live, and he meant this not only financially. It could even be that at a psycho-dynamic as distinct from artistic or intellectual level the most fundamental drive behind Wagner's work was a need to assuage an intolerable conflict between himself and social reality.

Bryan Magee: Wagner and Philosophy













*Richard Wagner*  
**Siegfried**

Music drama in three acts, in German, with Hungarian, English and German subtitles

Libretto **RICHARD WAGNER**  
Director **GÉZA M. TÓTH**  
Set designer **GERGELY ZÖLDY Z**  
Costume designer **IBOLYA BÁRDOSI**  
Projected scenery **KEDD ANIMATION STUDIO**  
Choreographer **MARIANNA VENEKEI**  
Dramaturg **ESZTER ORBÁN**  
Hungarian subtitles **LÍDIA NÁDORI**  
English subtitles **ARTHUR ROGER CRANE**

Conductor **JÁNOS KOVÁCS**

Siegfried **ZOLTÁN NYÁRI**  
Mime **TIVADAR KISS**  
The Wanderer **KRISZTIÁN CSER**  
Alberich **PÉTER KÁLMÁN**  
Fafner **ISTVÁN RÁCZ**  
Erda **ATALA SCHÖCK**  
Brünnhilde **SZILVIA RÁLIK**  
Forest bird **ZITA SZEMERE**

Featuring the Hungarian State Opera Orchestra, as well as pupils of the Hungarian Dance University

Premiere: 19 March 2017, Opera House



Zoltán Nyári, Tivadar Kiss



# Synopsis

## Act I

Deep in his cave, the dwarf Mime is forging a sword for Siegfried, the foster son he has raised. He despises the boy but hopes that Siegfried will use the sword to slay Fafner, who, having transformed himself into a dragon, now guards the Nibelung hoard. In this way, he plans to obtain the ring that will give him the power to rule the world. Siegfried arrives and angrily shatters the inferior weapon. Watching the beasts in the forest, the boy has realised that the dwarf cannot be his father, since there is no resemblance at all between them, and so he demands that Mime tell him who his parents are. Terrified by Siegfried's threats, Mime finally reveals to him how he found Sieglinde in the forest and how she died while giving birth to the boy. He then shows Siegfried the fragments of Nothung, the sword that once belonged to the young lad's father. Siegfried orders Mime to forge the pieces together and then departs. The despairing dwarf knows that he is incapable of doing what the boy demands. After a while, a stranger arrives: it is Wotan, the chief of the gods, disguised as the Wanderer. He challenges Mime to a game: each will ask the other three questions, and the loser will pay with his head. The Wanderer easily solves Mime's puzzles, to which the answers are "the Nibelungs", "the giants" and "the gods". Now it is Mime's turn. He has no difficulty answering the Wanderer's first two questions, but gives up in terror when asked who it is who will restore the shattered Nothung. The Wanderer upbraids Mime for his interest in distant matters when he knows nothing about things that concern him personally. Wotan departs without taking the dwarf's life, entrusting it instead to the one without fear who will reforge the magical blade. When Siegfried returns to claim his father's sword, Mime confesses that he doesn't know how to repair it. After unsuccessfully attempting to explain the concept of fear to the lad, he suggests that Siegfried go to Fafner's cave, where he will experience what fear is. Siegfried agrees, and then enthusiastically goes about reforging Nothung himself. In the meantime, Mime brews a sleeping potion that he plans to give to Siegfried after the boy has slain the dragon. With the newly reforged sword flashing in his hands, Siegfried splits the anvil in two with one blow and races off into the forest.

## Act II

That night, Mime's brother Alberich is waiting in concealment by the entrance to Fafner's cave. The dwarf is obsessed with regaining the ring that was once taken from him. The Wanderer arrives and informs him of Mime's plans. He also awakens Fafner to warn him

that a young hero is approaching to kill him. Unperturbed by the news, the dragon returns to his slumber.

As dawn is breaking, Mime and Siegfried reach the cave. Siegfried is enchanted by the peaceful beauty of the forest and thinks of his parents. On a reed flute, he attempts to imitate the singing of the birds, but to no avail. He then blows his horn, which awakens Fafner. In the battle that ensues, Siegfried slays the dragon. With his dying breath, Fafner warns the youth of the corrupting power of the treasure. After Siegfried accidentally tastes a drop of Fafner's blood, he suddenly finds that he can understand the singing of the Forest Bird, who gives him advice regarding the hoard.

Alberich and Mime are interrupted from their quarrelling by the approaching of Siegfried, who has brought the ring and the Tarnhelm with him out of the cave. The birds cautions him not to trust Mime, so when the dwarf offers Siegfried the sleeping potion, the youth kills him. The bird then tells him of a beautiful woman named Brünnhilde who is sleeping high on a rock surrounded by fire. Siegfried heads off to find her.

## Act III

At the foot of a craggy mountain, Wotan summons Erda, the goddess of the earth in order to ask her what the fate of the gods will be. Erda avoids answering and returns to her eternal sleep, while Wotan is resigned to the inevitable destiny of the gods. There is no hope left other than Brünnhilde and Siegfried. When the passing Siegfried encounters the chief god, he takes him for an ordinary old man and mocks him. The Wanderer attempts to block his path, but with one blow of his sword, Siegfried splinters the god's spear: the same spear that shattered Nothung years earlier. Having lost the battle, the Wanderer/Wotan withdraws.

Siegfried reaches the rock outcropping where Brünnhilde lies sleeping. As he has never seen a woman in his life, he believes that it is a man he has found. Upon removing Brünnhilde's armour, he is completely enchanted by her beauty and finally understands what fear is. Conquering his emotions, he awakens Brünnhilde with a kiss. The former Valkyrie greets the sunlight and is overjoyed to learn that Siegfried is the one who has freed her. However, aware that earthly love will mean the end of the life she has known as an immortal, she attempts to resist his passionate declarations of love. Eventually, however, she surrenders to her feelings, and together Brünnhilde and Siegfried deliver a paean to love.





# The Alpha and the Omega: Siegfried

The character of Siegfried embodies Wagner's wish to present a person in a state of complete happiness, one who lets himself be freely carried away by the flow of the joy of life and on whom he bestows all of the richness of life: "I saw in him a man in the most natural and unclouded abundance of his sensually vivid manifestation, unobstructed by historical conventions and with no outside relationships to hinder his movement... (...) For me, Siegfried is the eternally, uniquely and involuntarily inseminating masculine spirit, the performer of real deeds, and the spirit of the fullest kind of direct force and, beyond doubt, lovableness. In his movements, this man was not only influenced by the thought of yearning for love, but love itself dwelt in his physical existence and inspired all of this unclouded man's power and muscles to captivating action..."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the avalanche of events leading to a global catastrophe settle down into a fairytale idyll in two of the acts of *Siegfried* and then seem to halt is just as strange as Wagner's other idea of placing alongside his titular protagonist a character who is purely episodic in nature. Mime's role within the tremendous events of the *Ring* are in fact completely incidental. His value is indisputably merely thanks to a musical idea: Mime is Siegfried's grotesque counterpoint, the parody of the creative and heroic element. His function is to place in the poet/composer's hands the tools needed to be able to treat the development of the character – by contrasting it with its opposite – of his favourite hero.

Erich Rapp: *Wagner Opera Guide*

No character in Wagner enters a drama with such expectations as Siegfried and none seems to have engaged the feelings of his creator so warmly. Siegfried for Wagner was a paragon of self-confidence, an "inwardly secure being" living "for his own calling." Ever since, Siegfried has found his champions among Wagner's critics. In his own time, for those familiar with *Nibelungenlied*, he was the acme of the epic hero, a paragon of courage and strength. His blond hair, rubicund complexion, and imposing stature, as well as his centrality to a work that was acquiring the status of a national poem, made Siegfried into a German national hero. He could dissolve the uncertainties arising from modern civilization. Siegfried was an embodiment of Feuerbach's idea of man's self-projection as god. Frie-

drich Engels saw him as "the crown of life" for German youth, while George Bernard Shaw considered him a born anarchist, a Bakunin, or a foreshadowing of the Nietzschean Übermensch. But Siegfried fulfils neither the nationalist ambitions nor the high ideals that are placed in him. He does not become the "free hero" Wotan had imagined, nor, when he fails to live up to expectations, is he a particularly compelling tragic hero. He begins his career in the *Ring* as the most complete incarnation of early romantic naturalism. He grows up in the forest, in the company of animals, he understands parental love through watching the birds, and he knows himself through seeing his reflection in water. He is boisterous and full of energy, akin to several of the fictional manifestations of Rousseau's "natural man". Bound by nothing, he has neither knowledge of the past nor fear of the future. His life follows a pattern characteristic of the epic hero. He is by birth semi-divine, he grows up in the wilderness, close to nature, under the nominal care of a guardian, who parallels the figure of a shepherd who often discovers the infant hero. When young he reveals both strength and courage, his advance into the world of adulthood is symbolized by the slaying of a dragon, and, as a result of this deed, he wins the hand of a maiden and so achieves sexual maturity. His advance indicates he might successfully embody Wotan's ideal of the free hero.

But even in Act 1 of *Siegfried* doubts arise about the integrity of his mission. The essence of free heroism is the capacity to act without regard for the past or fear of the future, but as soon as Siegfried commits himself to action by the forging of Nothung, he is, unknowingly, tying himself to the past. (...) Is Siegfried really setting out on new paths or will he repeat the patterns of the past?

Simon Williams: *Wagner and the Romantic Hero*

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wagner: *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde (A Communication to my Friends)* - excerpt



# Changes of emphasis in the composition of *Siegfried*

Wagner's dramaturgy remains centred around declamation; the melodies of the vocal parts, the musical stresses and the harmonic background that can be felt or heard behind them all serve the verse, and indirectly, following the principles of *Oper und Drama*, the action. But the weight of the expression and description has imperceptibly been shifted to the orchestra. The orchestral tools that are, properly speaking, there to create an atmosphere – its harmonies and tonal colours – have taken over the main role in the music drama. The orchestra is no longer the background, the backdrop or a commentator, but an at least equal partner in the declamation, if not an even greater one. The orchestral sounds begin to cover and absorb the vocal parts. The fidelity to the text, emotional passion and power of expression of the latter is not diminished. How, for example, could the enormous leaps of octaves and ninths at the climax of Wotan and Alberich's dialogue go wrong in their effect? Nevertheless, the harmony, instrumental motifs and orchestral colours played simultaneously with them – or perhaps slightly earlier or later and thus playing an introductory or concluding role – gain more importance. Unsatisfied with its previous functions, the orchestra in *Siegfried* penetrates everywhere, interweaves itself into everything and begins to transform the score into a veritable primeval forest with instrumental parts like climbing vines and motifs like hanging boughs. Instead of monumental symphonic tableaux, the score is filled with shorter, intensely descriptive and characteristic interludes surrounding the vocal parts, such as the forest murmurs, the smith's hammering, the musical description of Fafner's cave and the visions of fear that Mime conveys to Siegfried; and Wagner even exploits the colour and visual content of each word and each line in his illustrations. (...)

The majority of the motifs in *Siegfried* are orchestral themes that become independent from their dramatic functions for a while, merely taking on roles as elements and threads (or, as will be shown later, as the adhesive material for the musical forms) of the polyphonic texture of the orchestra's symphonic sound. The new motifs, imbued with musical roles, undulate throughout the scenes, acts and the entire opera. These are present always and everywhere, creating a feeling of continuity, linking together, reaching a climax and then diverging, with their texture stretching through the scenes like tendrils, creating the "endless melody" of the orchestra. (...)

In *Das Rheingold*, Wagner made an attempt to compose the whole drama as a single scene and based the enormous edifice solely on the structural rhythm of expansive symphonic tableaux. *Die Walküre*, however, he organised into acts, dividing the second and the third of these even further into clearly differentiable scenes (which are universally agreed to include the announcement of Siegmund's death, the musical depiction of the ride of the Valkyries, and the independently closed form of the "finale" comprising Wotan's farewell and the magic fire music). Even in the revised Act One, following his heart, he often surrendered to the melodies' longings for form and, as we have seen, constructed the seemingly seamless act from minute musical forms. The allure of musical form becomes even stronger in *Siegfried*. The tonal independence of the individual structural elements becomes more powerful than ever before, and the new, musical functions of the orchestral motifs make it possible

György Kroó: Wagner











*Richard Wagner*

# Götterdämmerung

*Twilight of the Gods*

Music drama in three acts, in German, with Hungarian, English and German subtitles

Librettist **RICHARD WAGNER**

Director, visual concept **GÉZA M. TÓTH**

Set designer **GERGELY ZÖLDY Z**

Costume designer **IBOLYA BÁRDOSI**

Dramaturg, Hungarian subtitles **ESZTER ORBÁN**

English subtitles **ARTHUR ROGER CRANE**

Projected scenery **KEDD ANIMATION STUDIO**

Choreographer **MARIANNA VENEKEI**

Chorus director **GÁBOR CSIKI**

Conductor **JÁNOS KOVÁCS**

Siegfried **ISTVÁN KOVÁCSHÁZI**

Brünnhilde **SZILVIA RÁLIK**

Gunther **CSABA SZEGEDI**

Gutrune **POLINA PASZTIRCSAK**

Hagen **GÉZA GÁBOR**

Alberich **PÉTER KÁLMÁN**

Waltraute **ANDREA SZANTO**

First Norn **BERNADETT WIEDEMANN**

Second Norn **GABRIELLA BALGA**

Third Norn **ANNA CSENGE FÜRJES**

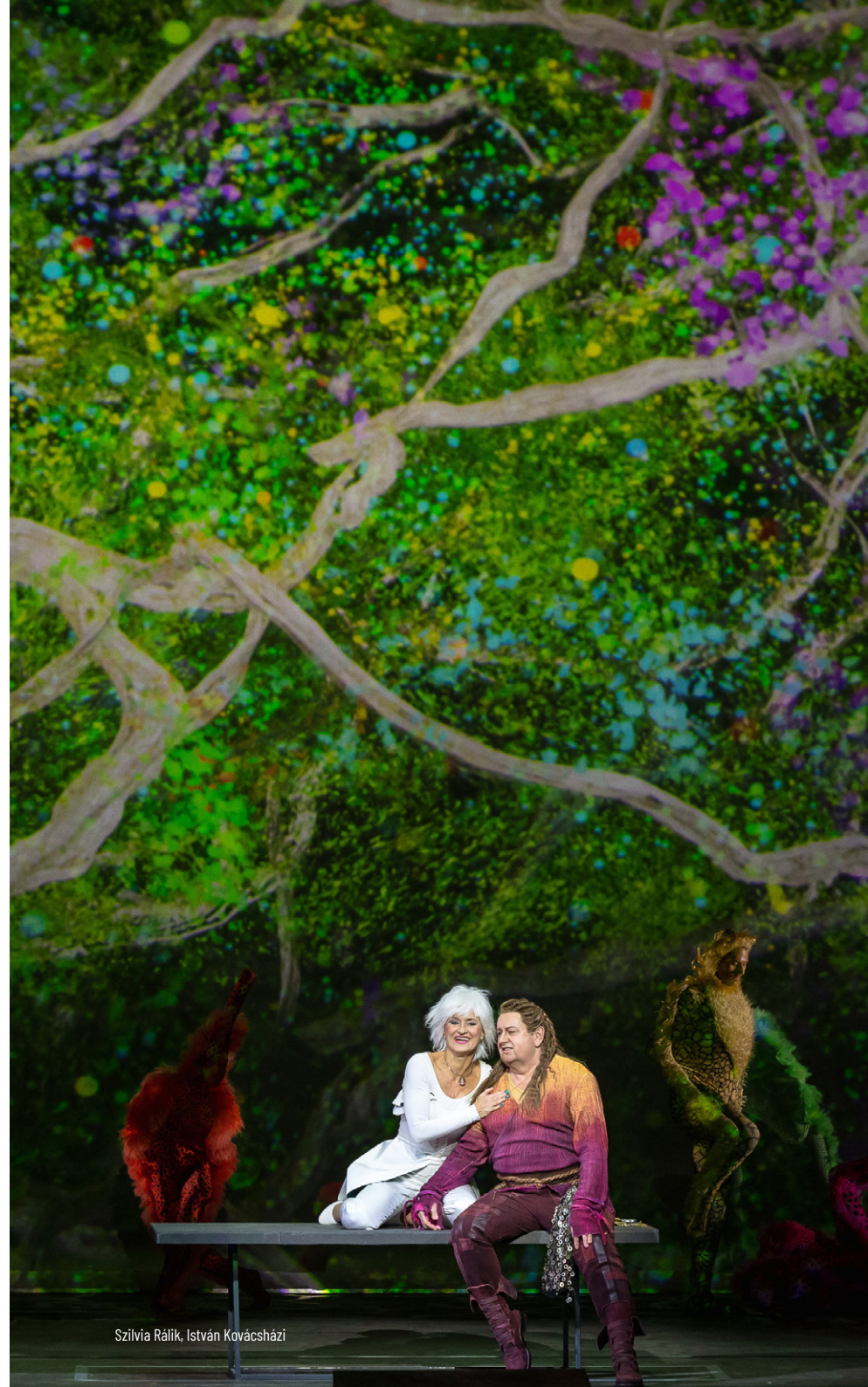
Woglinde **ANDREA BRASSÓI-JÖRÖS**

Wellgunde **NATÁLIA TUZNIK**

Flosshilde **VIKTORIA MESTER**

Featuring the Hungarian State Opera Orchestra and Chorus,  
as well as students of the Hungarian Dance University

Premiere: 15 May 2022, Opera House



Szilvia Rálik, István Kovácsolházi



# Synopsis

## Prologue

The Valkyrie's rock at night. The three Norns, the daughters of Erda, are weaving the rope of destiny. They tell how Wotan ordered the World Ash Tree from which he had carved his spear shaft to be felled and the logs of it piled around Valhalla. The end of the gods' rule will be marked by this pile set on fire. When they try to find out when that will happen, the rope suddenly snaps. Having lost their wisdom, the Norns return to their underground dwelling. Dawn breaks as Brünnhilde and Siegfried emerge from the mountain cave. After casting a protective spell on Siegfried, the woman lets the restless hero go. Siegfried gives the ring he took from the dragon Fafner to Brünnhilde as a pledge of fidelity, and she offers her steed, Grane to him in return. Siegfried sets out on his journey.

## Act 1

Gunther and Gutrune pass time in the Gibichung Hall on the shores of the Rhine. They talk about the decreasing glory of the royal family with their half-brother, Hagen. Hagen advises them to strengthen their power through marriage: he suggests that Gunther take Brünnhilde as his wife, and Gutrune marry Siegfried. As only the greatest hero may pass through the flames surrounding Brünnhilde's rock, Hagen proposes a bold plan: to use a magic potion that makes Siegfried forget about Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune. But the brother only agrees to the marriage if Siegfried claims Brünnhilde for Gunther. At this moment, they hear Siegfried's horn from the direction of the river, signalling the arrival of the hero. Everything goes according to plan: Gutrune gives the potion to Siegfried, who is still paying his respects in front of Brünnhilde as he takes the cup, but as soon as he drinks it, he confesses his love to Gutrune. Then Siegfried offers to change into Gunther with the help of Tarnhelm's transformation magic, and crossing the fire, he claims Brünnhilde for Gunther's wife. The two men swear a blood-brotherhood and leave. Hagen stays to guard the boat.

Terrified of the approaching end of Valhalla, the Valkyrie Waltraute visits Brünnhilde's rock to ask for her sister's help. She tells her that the gods can only be saved if Brünnhilde returns the ring to its rightful owners, the Rhinemaidens. Brünnhilde refuses to do so, saying that Siegfried's love is more important to her than the fate of the gods. Waltraute leaves in desperation. When she hears Siegfried's horn in the distance, Brünnhilde is overjoyed. Her happiness soon turns into confusion and terror when a stranger appears in front of

her, introducing himself as Gunther, who demands that she marry him and takes the ring from her with force.

## Act 2

Night. In the Gibichung Hall. Hagen has fallen asleep while standing guard. His father, Alberich appears in his dream to remind him that he needs to get the ring back. Dawn breaks, and Siegfried arrives. Hagen gathers the vassals of the Gibichungs, who will follow his orders from this point. Gunther and the humiliated Brünnhilde arrive. When she sees Siegfried, she angrily accuses him of betraying her. Still under the influence of the potion, Siegfried tells her that he will marry Gutrune, and Brünnhilde is to become Gunther's wife. Brünnhilde notices the ring on Siegfried's hand, and wants to know where he got it from, as it was supposed to be Gunther who took it from her the previous night. Brünnhilde accuses Siegfried of stealing the ring, and states that he is her husband. Siegfried objects and swears on Hagen's spear that he did not do anything against the oath of blood-brotherhood. He rejects Brünnhilde's accusations and sets off to celebrate with Gutrune and the vassals. Brünnhilde can only think about revenge. Hagen offers to kill Siegfried, but the woman explains to him that the man is invulnerable: she protected him with magic – only his back is unprotected, as he would never turn his back to his enemy. Gunther first hesitates about joining the murderous conspiracy but agrees in the end.

## Act 3

Separated from the hunting party, Siegfried encounters the three Rhinemaidens on the shores of the Rhine. They ask him to return the ring to them, and he is about to agree, but when they mention Alberich's curse, he changes his mind and decides to keep the ring as a proof of his fearlessness. The maidens predict his approaching death, and disappear just as Hagen, Gunther and the other hunters arrive. Encouraged by Hagen, Siegfried talks about his youth: how he lived with Mime, how he forged Nothung, the sword, and how he fought the dragon. While he tells his story, Hagen offers him some wine, which contains the antidote of the potion. Having regained his memory, Siegfried also tells how he crossed the ring of fire to wake Brünnhilde. Upon hearing the girl's name, Hagen stabs Siegfried in the back with his spear, and tells the shocked Gunther that he avenged the false oath taken by Siegfried. Siegfried utters his last words about Brünnhilde as he dies.

Roused from a bad dream, Gutrune wonders what could have happened to Siegfried. When they bring the hero's corpse, the girl accuses Gunther of murder, who replies that it was Hagen who committed the crime. The two men start to fight, and Gunther dies. When Hagen





reaches for the ring, the dead Siegfried forbiddingly raises his arm, and Brünnhilde enters the hall. Hagen cannot get to the ring. The former Valkyrie orders to have a funeral pyre built on the shores of the Rhine for the hero. She blames the gods for Siegfried's death. She bids farewell to her father, Wotan, and then she takes the ring from Siegfried's hand and promises to give it to the Rhinemaidens: after they perish on the pyre, the Rhine gold will be returned to them. Then she lights the pyre and leaps into the flames. The flooding river destroys the hall, and Hagen tries to catch the ring, only to meet his end accompanied by the joyful laughter of the maidens. The gods and the burning Valhalla are seen in the distance.

## Götterdämmerung

### – Finishing the End

(...) Wagner's conceptual and practical difficulties with *Götterdämmerung* ("The Twilight of the Gods") were due not simply to the passage of time and his growing estrangement from an old libretto, but also to an aspect of the work that had been there from the start: its negative dramatic structure. We only need to imagine the 1848 libretto to guess the nature of the problem. The action begins in the Hall of the Gibichungs (the prologue and the other *Ring* dramas were not written yet), which means that Siegfried and Brünnhilde are not seen together as lovers at all. The antihero Alberich does not confront his great antipode Wotan or rob the gold from the Rhine maidens: he simply tells Hagen at the beginning of the second act that he has stolen it. As in the final version, Siegfried does abduct Brünnhilde in the first act, and she does (unjustly) accuse Siegfried of rape and plot his murder in the second. But if the hero and heroine are only shown together as implacable enemies, the sudden happy end, which in the 1848 version includes a fleeting image of Brünnhilde on horseback reconciled with a Siegfried especially resurrected for the purpose, hardly looks convincing. Moreover, Alberich is deprived of the chance of actually committing his primal crime in front of the audience – the rending asunder of nature and society that Siegfried ultimately reverses by sacrificing his life, and on which the full force of the drama depends. To be effective, the bleak dramaturgy of the 1848 version not only needed the characters' epic narrative of past events to set it in relief, but it needed sharp physical contrasts on

stage as well. Wagner's solution was to give *Siegfrieds Tod* ("Siegfried's Death") a prologue, to expand it into the whole *Ring* cycle, and then later to revise it again in light of the three new preceding dramas he had written in the meantime. But the negative images and drastic reversals remained. Wagner even completely rewrote two key scenes in order to reinforce them. In the revised version, the Norns now speak of Wotan desecrating the World Ash Tree to make a shaft for his spear, and of the breaking of the spear by Siegfried. (Wagner added this last event to the final version of *Siegfried* as well; curiously, it is not present in the first version of that work either.) They also speak of Wotan sitting with shattered spear in hand waiting for the end, ordering his heroes to fell the withered tree and pile the logs around Valhalla, which at the end of the drama Loge will set alight.

In another scene Brünnhilde hears the same story from Waltraute, and one of the reasons for the reiteration is that Wagner wanted to further strengthen the imagery of the resigned god and the spear so that they not only recall earlier parts of the cycle, but also act as the reverse of a central image in *Götterdämmerung* itself. At the end of *Die Walküre* Wotan announces that only the hero unafraid "of the tip of my spear" shall penetrate the fire surrounding Brünnhilde's rock. (...)

*John Deathridge: Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*



# Transition from *Siegfrieds Tod* to *Götterdämmerung*

## Prologue and the First Act

The prologue of *Siegfrieds Tod* consists of two scenes: the Norn scene, which takes place within sight of Brünnhilde's rock, and the farewell scene between Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Although the Norn scene seems to occupy the same place and fulfil essentially the same role of drawing attention to Siegfried's deeds and his death as it does in *Götterdämmerung*, in *Siegfrieds Tod* it refers only to those events Wagner considered important for this drama. In fact, there is only a single line from this original text that survives into *Götterdämmerung*. The Norse sources mention three names for the Norns: Urð, Verðandi, and Skuld. The names refer transparently to the past, the present, and the future. [...] The Norns tell us that Alberich had stolen the gold and made the ring, which the gods stole in order to pay for their castle. There is no mention of the downfall of the gods or the end of "fate" that is suggested when the rope of the Norns breaks in *Götterdämmerung*, since these are ideas that occurred later in the composition of the cycle.

[...] In Act One the scene at the hall of the Gibichungs also undergoes little change from version to version. Only the retelling of Siegfried's conception and birth is shortened, since the completed *Ring* has two whole operas devoted to those events. Later, the reference to Siegfried's trip to take revenge on Hunding and his clan for the murder of his father Siegmund is eliminated, since Wagner had dropped it from Siegfried's biography. The only other major change in this scene is to the text of the oath, which is altered to emphasize the role of the gods in hallowing and avenging the oath. This tendency of Wagner to reduce the role of the gods is evident throughout, though they are still referred to many times, both individually and as a group. The scene on Brünnhilde's rock with the full group of Valkyries plays an entirely different role in *Siegfrieds Tod* than does the scene with Waltraute that replaces it in *Götterdämmerung*. The only thing the two scenes have in common is the contact between the exiled Brünnhilde and the world of the immortal gods. The Valkyries' main concern in *Siegfrieds Tod* is to retell Brünnhilde's crime and the punishment Wotan had given her and to establish her opposition to the old world she has left behind. The scene is vastly improved in *Götterdämmerung*, since it allows a deeper understanding of Brünnhilde's love for Siegfried and the situation into which the finale will take us. Waltraute, who has remained a Valkyrie, also represents what Brünnhilde had been, allowing a sort of

dialog between the past and the present. The final scene, with its non-sexual rape, retains its essential shape in *Götterdämmerung*, but Siegfried doesn't tell as many lies in the later version as in *Siegfrieds Tod*. In fact, Wagner rewrote the scene so that Siegfried's prevarications are generally true on a literal level. After introducing himself as a Gibichung, something he may consider himself to be after the oath of blood-brotherhood with Gunther, he refers to "himself" in the third person as Gunther. [...]

## Second Act

Like the Norn scene in the prologue, the scene between Hagen and Alberich seems the same in both versions, but they actually have only a few lines in common. The opening and closing are very similar, but the main content of the version in *Siegfrieds Tod* is once again an exposition of events that are more effectively told in the operas conceived and written later. The version in *Götterdämmerung* focuses on Alberich's attitude toward the ring and what Hagen has to do to recover it. The scene is highly effective on the stage, and Wagner was understandably reluctant to jettison it. [...] The scene of Siegfried's arrival and Hagen's summoning of the vassals is virtually unchanged from *Siegfrieds Tod* to *Götterdämmerung*, as is the following scene of Brünnhilde's arrival with Gunther and her accusation of Siegfried. Only the text of the two oaths has been changed to move their emphasis from the power of the gods to the power of the weapons. [...] The "vengeance trio" involving Brünnhilde, Hagen, and Gunther in *Götterdämmerung* is taken over virtually unchanged from *Siegfrieds Tod*, although a second stanza has been added to the trio itself. What has changed radically is what comes after the vengeance trio. In *Siegfrieds Tod* the wedding participants return from their visit to the sacrificial altar with Brünnhilde and Gunther pretending to be reconciled. This little passage also contains Siegfried's attempted explanation that the Tarnhelm had only half-covered him. Wagner felt that he needed this, so in the final version of *Götterdämmerung* he moved it into the confusion immediately following the oath and before Siegfried and Guttrune's exit. Here and at the end of the opera Wagner realized that less is more and eliminated a scene that would have been anticlimactic if it had been retained in favour of a highly effective moment carried by the orchestra alone.

## Third Act

The song of the Rhine daughters has been retained in *Götterdämmerung* without change. The remainder of the scene is unchanged through all of the versions until the part of the confrontation in which Siegfried refers to the final battle of the gods. Since in *Götterdämmerung* they no longer have a final battle, this passage had to be dropped. Instead, Siegfried



says that he has shattered the spear and the rope, the symbols of the eternal law, and that he would have given the ring in exchange for love, but not to save himself. [...] The second scene proceeds relatively unchanged until we get to Siegfried's narrative. In *Siegfrieds Tod* Wagner starts with the line "Mime hieß ein männlicher Zwerg," which, one is left to assume, means that Mime is in human form. Wagner's idiosyncratic use here of the Middle High German spelling "männlich," without umlaut, which in its day meant "heroic, manly" (as opposed to the related modern word "männlich," with umlaut, meaning "male, masculine") makes translation confounding, because he goes to great lengths to show that the dwarf is not manly. In *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner resolves the problem by using the word "mürrisch" (bad-tempered) instead of "männlich." There also, the entire narrative has been changed to reflect the changed plot in Siegfried and the fact that Siegfried no longer has to deal with Hunding and his sons. Two brief passages having to do with the dragon's blood, the forest bird [...], and the warning about Mime are retained without much change, although they are separated in the revision. The sequence of instructions by the forest bird is also changed. Here Siegfried is first instructed to kill Mime and then he is told about the ring and Tarnhelm. The narration of the finding and awakening of Brünnhilde are retained almost verbatim until just before the actual murder. In *Siegfrieds Tod* Hagen says that the ravens are setting out to announce Siegfried to Wotan, while in the revision — with its playing down of the gods' role — Hagen says that they are advising him to carry out vengeance. Siegfried's final speech in *Siegfrieds Tod* addresses Brünnhilde as a Valkyrie, a role she will now return to in order to lead him to Valhalla, whereas *Götterdämmerung* has a much more intimate vision of a reawakening of Brünnhilde that perhaps parallels her recovery of her senses after Siegfried's death.

[...] In *Siegfrieds Tod* Wagner has the vassals and the ladies of the court sing a chorus over the slain Siegfried as they bear the body to the pyre. In *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner wisely chose to eliminate this anticlimactic passage and to turn the final moments over to the orchestra, as he had done in the second act. Hagen's outcry as the Rhine daughters carry away the ring is an echo of Alberich's final exhortation to his son in *Siegfrieds Tod*.

This conclusion lets Hagen have the last words in the entire *Ring*, but they are followed immediately by his death. Many observers (and some stage directors) have reminded us that Alberich is still alive, a fact that is emphasized in *Siegfrieds Tod* by having him on stage at the end, so that evil is not gone from the world, although it is unclear what he would do without the ring. In one respect, however, this original version of the death of Siegfried is not as enigmatic as that portrayed in *Götterdämmerung*. Returning to her original role as a Valkyrie, Brünnhilde leads Siegfried to his rightful place among the heroes of Valhalla. In the final version of the *Ring*, neither Siegfried nor his father accepts the Valkyrie's offer of

eternal bliss among the gods, but in *Siegfrieds Tod* the final scene leaves no doubt about the outcome. "On a dark bank of clouds [as from the ashes of a doused wood fire] there appears the light in which one can see Brünnhilde, as she — in helmet, radiant armour, and on a brilliant steed, as a Valkyrie — leads Siegfried by the hand through the air." This scene is presaged by Siegfried's vision at his moment of death. Stewart Spencer has brought together the various concluding texts from *Siegfrieds Tod* to *Götterdämmerung* [...]. In the former one Wagner saw Siegfried's sacrifice as the necessary means to return the gods to power, but in the final version of *Ring*, Siegfried's death marks the end of the gods' power.

Edward R. Haymes: Wagner's Ring in 1848







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Responsible publisher: Szilveszter Ókovács DLA, General Director  
of the Hungarian State Opera

The programme was edited by György Jávorszky

Translated by Gyula Hegedűs, Arthur Roger Crane, Villám Translation Services

Photos: Valter Berecz, Attila Nagy

Photo editor: Jozefa Iványi

Layout: Mátrai és Végh Kreatív Műhely

Published in 2023



Szilvia Rálik





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