

In Focus

Richard Wagner

Der Ring des Nibelungen

Third Day: *Götterdämmerung*

Premiere: Bayreuth Festival House, 1876

The *Ring* is a four-day saga depicting the passing of the Old Age of gods, giants, dwarves, dragons, and nature spirits, and the dawning of the Age of Man. Wagner, who wrote his own librettos, created a new musical-dramatic vocabulary to tell this story: characters, things, and ideas are represented by leitmotifs, or “leading motives,” musical themes that are continually developed and transformed over the course of the cycle. The *Ring*’s artistic scope is vast and the musical and aesthetic implications are endless and varied. At its core, however, it is a drama driven by the actions of a handful of memorable characters. Chief among these are Wotan, lord of the gods, whose ideals are loftier than his methods; the magnificently evil dwarf Alberich, the Nibelung of the title; the loving twins Siegmund and Sieglinde; their savage child Siegfried; and, perhaps above all, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, who encompasses both humanity and divinity.

The Creator

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was the complex, controversial creator of music–drama masterpieces that stand at the center of today’s operatic repertory. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he was an artistic revolutionary who reimagined every supposition about music and theater. Wagner insisted that words and music were equals in his works. This approach led to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total work of art,” combining music, poetry, architecture, painting, and other disciplines, a notion that has had an impact on creative fields far beyond opera.

The Setting

The drama of the *Ring* unfolds in a mythical world, at the center of which is the Rhine River as the embodiment of nature. In the first part of the cycle, *Das Rheingold*, the settings are remote and otherworldly: ethereal mountaintops and caves deep under the earth. Throughout the subsequent operas, the settings gradually become more familiar as parts of the human world, with only nature (the Rhine) continuing seamlessly over time.

Götterdämmerung: The Music

The musical ideas set forth in the first three parts of the *Ring* find their full expression in this opera. *Götterdämmerung* contains several of the dialogue confrontations typical of the *Ring* (most notably between Waltraute and Brünnhilde in Act I and between Alberich and Hagen in Act II). A considerable amount of the vocal writing, however, departs from the forms established in the previous operas. The first appearances of true ensemble singing in the trio at the end of Act II, and of a chorus, signify a shift from the rarified world of the gods visited in *Das Rheingold* to an entirely human focus. (The music of the Rhinemaidens in the previous opera, while in the form of an ensemble, serves a different dramatic purpose.) Wagner famously interrupted work on the *Ring* for more than a decade while he was writing *Siegfried*, composing *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in the interim. When he returned to complete the cycle, his creative abilities had evolved. This is apparent not only in complex orchestral passages, such as the symphonic Rhine Journey between the prologue and Act I of

Götterdämmerung, but also in some of the score's subtleties, like the hypnotic clarinet trio that accompanies the Rhinemaidens in Act III. Perhaps the most striking orchestral passage of the entire *Ring* is Siegfried's Funeral Music in Act III, a conglomeration of leitmotifs from all parts of the cycle, built around the repetition of two thunderous chords that encapsulate the finality of death as impressively as anything in music. From a vocal point of view, *Götterdämmerung* presents unique challenges for the lead tenor and the lead soprano. Both roles demand singing of great emotional and physical intensity over a long period of time, culminating in a cathartic narrative for the soprano at the end of the monumental work that is among the longest and most powerful unbroken vocal solos in the operatic repertory.

The Ring at the Met

Die Walküre was the first segment of the *Ring* to be heard at the Met, in 1885, during the company's second season. Leopold Damrosch conducted a cast that included two veterans of the Bayreuth Festival, Amalie Materna and Marianne Brandt. After Damrosch's death, the remaining *Ring* operas received their American premieres at the Met between 1887 and 1889, conducted by Wagner's former assistant at Bayreuth, Anton Seidl. The first complete cycle was presented in March 1889. Robert Lepage's new production, conducted by James Levine, is the eighth in the company's history. It was introduced with the premiere of *Das Rheingold* on Opening Night of the 2010–11 season, followed by *Die Walküre* in April 2011. *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* are scheduled to open in the 2011–12 season.