

## In Focus

**Richard Wagner**

***Der Ring des Nibelungen***

**Prologue: *Das Rheingold***

*Premiere: Munich Court Theater, 1869*

Conceived by Wagner as a prologue to his monumental *Ring of the Nibelung*, this work sets forth the dramatic and theoretical issues that play out in the three subsequent music dramas. The confrontations and dialogue in *Das Rheingold* are punctuated by thrilling musical and dramatic coups, and the entire work (written without an intermission) has a magnificent sweep. A single crime committed toward the beginning of *Das Rheingold* sets in motion the course of events that will eventually alter the order of the universe by the end of the *Ring* tetralogy: the theft of gold from the depths of the Rhine River by the dwarf Alberich, who uses it to forge a ring that will give him unlimited power. When Wotan, lord of the gods, steals this ring from him to secure his rule, Alberich curses the ring and anyone who will ever own it. With *Das Rheingold*, Wagner fully realized his much-discussed system of leitmotifs (musical themes associated with specific things, people, or ideas). This technique is at its most accessible in this opera; in the later parts of the *Ring*, the number of leitmotifs multiplies, their use becoming more and more ambitious and intricate.

### *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 wrote his own librettos, insisting that words and music were equal in his works. This approach led to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total work of art,” a notion that has had an impact on creative fields far beyond opera.

### *The Setting*

The action of *Das Rheingold* takes place in mythic locales below and above (symbolically, at least) the earth: the depths of the Rhine River, mountaintops, and the caves of the toiling dwarves. The time is an unspecified era before history, where the actions of human beings do not yet affect the universal order of things. Time itself is fluid in this work: the gods immediately begin to age when they are deprived of the golden apples of youth in Scene 2.

### *The Music*

The score of *Das Rheingold* may be the least familiar of the four *Ring* operas—there are no set pieces appropriate for concert performance, such as the Ride of the Valkyries from *Die Walküre* or Siegfried’s Rhine Journey from *Götterdämmerung*. Yet it contains some of the most striking music in Wagner’s vast output. The uniqueness of this score is apparent from the opening bars—an exploration of an E-flat major chord that evolves for almost four minutes before finally bursting into melody. Dramatically, this is a concise musical depiction of creation, from undifferentiated primordial matter to evolution and diversification and finally, with the appearance of the Rhinemaidens, speech. A number of deft touches keep recognizably human elements at the center of the *Ring*’s philosophy, among them the bright and delightful music for

the Rhinemaidens, which describes the primal innocence of nature, and the doltish giant Fasolt's lyrical music as he longs for the love of the beautiful goddess Freia. Among the highly unusual effects in the score are the cacophonously rhythmic anvils in the dramatic "descent into Nibelheim" interlude that separates Scenes 2 and 3, and the six harps depicting the churning waves of the Rhine in the monumental finale.

#### *Das Rheingold at the Met*

This opera was first seen at the Met in 1889, as part of the first complete *Ring* cycle in the western hemisphere. The last of the four parts of the *Ring* to be produced, it was conducted by Anton Seidl, the Hungarian maestro who had been Wagner's assistant at the first presentation of the *Ring* in Bayreuth 13 years earlier. A new production in 1899 starring the Dutch sensation Anton van Rooy as Wotan inaugurated the first complete, uncut performance of the *Ring* in North America. Two more new productions of the *Ring*, the first also starring van Rooy, followed in 1903–04 and 1913–14. The latter lasted until 1948, when it was replaced by another complete and uncut production of the cycle. Herbert von Karajan directed and conducted performances of *Das Rheingold* in 1968, with Thomas Stewart as Wotan and other roles taken on by such stars as Josephine Veasey, Zoltán Kelemen, Gerhard Stolze, Edda Moser (all four in their debuts), Lilli Chookasian, Martti Talvela, Karl Ridderbusch, and Sherrill Milnes. That was followed by a production directed by Otto Schenk in 1987 with James Levine conducting, James Morris as Wotan, Waltraud Meier as Fricka in her Met debut, and Franz Mazura, Siegfried Jerusalem, John Macurdy, and Aage Haugland. Robert Lepage's new production, introducing the eighth *Ring* in the company's history, was unveiled on Opening Night of the 2010–11 season, conducted by Maestro Levine.