

In Focus

Richard Wagner *Der Ring des Nibelungen* Second Day: *Siegfried*

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.

Siegfried: *The Music*

While the other *Ring* operas are concerned with mythic and philosophical issues, *Siegfried* is intensely focused on the title character—a force of nature rather than an evolved (and therefore compromised) person and not always likeable in any conventional sense. The role is uniquely difficult, even within the catalogue of Wagner’s monumental vocal challenges. On stage for most of the opera, the singer has to convey both power and unselfconscious vulnerability. The first act of *Siegfried* mirrors that of *Die Walküre*: both have only three characters and consist of a single narrative arc beginning in dark and murky tones and culminating in a frenzied climax. In *Siegfried*, this climax is not a love duet, as in *Die Walküre*, but a rousing solo as the hero forges the broken sword once wielded by his unknown father and originally supplied by his grandfather, Wotan. In this opera, Wotan appears not as the great god of Valhalla but is merely known as The Wanderer. The score’s orchestral writing is magnificent and remarkable in its diversity, from the delicate minimalism of the Forest Murmurs in Act II to the torrent of sound at the beginning of

Act III, when the Wanderer expresses his divinity once again. This texture becomes even denser as Siegfried ascends the mountain through the Magic Fire. Wagner has an ingenious (if spare, in terms of time) use of female voices in *Siegfried*: the extremes are covered by the deep-voiced Erda, the Earth Mother, in Act III, and the graceful lyricism of the off-stage Forest Bird in Act II. But the complete feminine principle remains unexplored until the final half hour of the opera, when Siegfried awakes the sleeping Brünnhilde. The two then share one of the most exciting love duets in opera. It's also a dramatic coup by Wagner: the late addition of the soprano voice to the score completes the vocal spectrum just as Brünnhilde's love is the final ingredient in Siegfried's life education.

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.