

In Focus

Richard Wagner

Der Ring des Nibelungen

First Day: *Die Walküre*

Premiere: Munich, Court Theater, 1870

The second opera in Wagner's monumental *Ring* cycle, *Die Walküre* has long stood on its own as an evening of extraordinarily powerful theater. Part of *Die Walküre*'s appeal lies in its focus on some of the *Ring*'s most interesting characters at decisive moments of their lives: Wotan, the leader of the gods, whose compromise of his own laws has jeopardized the gods' rule; his wife, Fricka, whose refusal to compromise causes more problems for the gods; his twin offspring, Siegmund and Sieglinde, who are meant to save the gods; and, above all, Wotan's warrior daughter Brünnhilde (the Valkyrie of the title), who transforms from goddess to woman. These characters and others follow their destinies to some of Wagner's most remarkable music.

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 and insisted that words and music were equal 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 traditional operatic territory.

The Setting

Die Walküre is set in mythological times, when gods, giants, dwarves, and humans all contended for power. While the first part of the cycle, *Das Rheingold*, moves between realms above and below the earth, *Die Walküre* takes place entirely in human territory, as the balance of power in the cosmic struggle tips ever so slowly toward humanity. While no location is specified in the libretto, the Teutonic mythology Wagner based his story on and the significance of the Rhine River in the epic suggest a Germanic setting.

The Music

Throughout the *Ring* cycle, Wagner uses a system of musical themes, or leitmotifs, associated with characters, events, emotions, and things. This fascinating approach has been the subject of intense musicological and philosophical investigation. A good example of how it works is found at the very beginning of *Die Walküre*, when the “thunder theme” is heard. It was first introduced in the final scene of *Das Rheingold*, before the gods enter Valhalla. In *Die Walküre*, it is apparent that this theme (like most of the *Ring*'s leitmotifs) has a direct, literal meaning—the character Siegmund is running through a storm—and also a less direct, oblique significance—we subconsciously connect Siegmund with the divinities in Valhalla, even before the character himself discovers his true identity. The entire first act of *Die Walküre* depicts the experience of falling in love in one great arc, from initial attraction to consummation. It is one of the theater's most convincing portrayals of the power of love—even if the lovers in question are in fact twin brother and sister. At the beginning of Act II, the iconic character of Brünnhilde bursts onto the

stage with the war cry of “Hojotoho!” The role demands both power and subtlety at the singer’s very first appearance. Later in the act, there is a sense of ritual as Brünnhilde tells Siegmund he will die in battle: the formality of the music turns into less structured dialogue as emotions overtake rules, a symbol of humanity taking power from the gods. The beginning of Act III features the famous Ride of the Valkyries. In a dramatic masterstroke, Wagner uses the sound of eight powerful female voices, punctuated by shrieking laughter, to depict the terrible thrill of combat. The opera ends with some of the most moving music ever composed, as Wotan intones his farewell to Brünnhilde.

Die Walküre at the Met

The opera was first seen at the Met in 1885, with Leopold Damrosch conducting Wagner veterans Amalie Materna and Marianne Brandt in a re-creation of Josef Hoffmann’s designs for the Bayreuth Festival. A new production was mounted in 1896, and again in 1903, the latter with Felix Mottl conducting Johanna Gadski, Olive Fremstad, Louise Homer, and Anton van Rooy. Gustav Mahler conducted several performances of this production in 1908. A new production in 1935 featured the Met debut of Marjorie Lawrence as Brünnhilde, with Artur Bodanzky conducting. Wotan was sung by Friedrich Schorr, one of several great German singers who found a home at the Met during the 1930s and ‘40s. The Saturday afternoon broadcast that year featured the Met debut of Kirsten Flagstad, who became the preeminent Brünnhilde of her era. A new *Ring* in 1948 presented the work in its entirety for the first time, without the cuts that had become customary everywhere outside Bayreuth. Fritz Stiedry conducted Helen Traubel, Rose Bampton, Lauritz Melchior, and Herbert Janssen. A remarkable *Walküre* was staged in 1967 with Herbert von Karajan making his Met debut conducting Birgit Nilsson, Gundula Janowitz, Christa Ludwig, Jon Vickers, and Thomas Stewart. A new production by Otto Schenk debuted on opening night of 1986, with James Levine conducting Hildegard Behrens, Jeannine Altmeyer, Peter Hofmann, and Simon Estes. Artists who have appeared in this staging until it was retired in 2009 include Jane Eaglen, Gwyneth Jones, Waltraud Meier, Jessye Norman, Leonie Rysanek, Deborah Voigt, Theo Adam, Plácido Domingo, James Morris, and Matti Salminen. The new production by Robert Lepage opened in April 2011, conducted by Maestro Levine, who has led more than 60 performances of this opera at the Met since 1984.