

Synopsis

Mythical times. In the depths of the Rhine River, the Rhinemaidens Woglinde, Flosshilde, and Wellgunde laugh and play as they swim. Their singing attracts the dwarf Alberich, who clumsily tries to catch them, to their amusement. Suddenly, a beam of sunlight falls into the water, creating a golden glow. The Rhinemaidens joyfully swim around it while Alberich, dazzled by the sight, asks them what it is. The girls tell him about the Rhinegold, a treasure of immeasurable value, and explain that whoever wins it will gain power over the world—but to do so, he must renounce love. Frustrated by his unsuccessful attempts to catch the girls, the ugly dwarf curses love and steals the gold.

High on a mountain, Fricka, the goddess of marriage, wakes her husband, Wotan, lord of the gods. He delightedly looks at their newly built castle visible in the distance, but Fricka reproaches him: Wotan has promised her sister Freia, goddess of youth, to the giants Fasolt and Fafner in return for their building the fortress. Suddenly, Freia runs in, pursued by the giants, who demand payment. Wotan manages to hold them back with the help of the gods Donner and Froh, Freia's brothers, who rush in to help. Finally, Loge, the demigod of fire, appears. He cleverly suggests an alternative payment: the ring that Alberich has forged from the Rhinegold and all the other treasures that he has accumulated. The giants agree, dragging Freia off as a hostage. With the youth goddess gone, the gods suddenly begin to age. Wotan and Loge hurry down through the earth to find Alberich.

In Nibelheim, the underground home of the Nibelungs, Alberich forces his timid brother Mime to give him the Tarnhelm, a magic helmet that Mime has made that transforms its wearer into any shape and can carry him anywhere in a second. Alberich tries it on, becomes invisible, and torments Mime before going off to terrorize the other dwarfs that he has enslaved. Wotan and Loge arrive, and Mime tells them about Alberich's cruel dictatorship. Reappearing, Alberich mocks the gods and threatens to conquer the world and enslave them. Loge asks for a demonstration of the Tarnhelm, and Alberich obliges, turning himself first into a gigantic, ferocious serpent, then into a toad, which the gods capture easily. Loge snatches the Tarnhelm, and as Alberich is transformed back into his real self, the gods bind him and drag him off.

Back on the mountaintop, Wotan and Loge force Alberich to summon the Nibelungs and have them heap up gold for Freia's ransom. Loge keeps the Tarnhelm—and Wotan wants the ring. Alberich says that he would rather die than give it up, but Wotan wrests it from his finger, suddenly overcome with lust for its power. Alberich is shattered. Freed and powerless, he curses the ring: Ceaseless worry and death shall be the destiny of all who possess it. After the dwarf has left, Fricka, Donner, and Froh welcome back Wotan and Loge, who

show them the pile of gold. The giants return with Freia. Fasolt, who loves the girl, agrees to accept the gold only if it completely hides her from his view. Froh and Loge pile up the treasure and even give up the Tarnhelm, but Fasolt can still see Freia's eye through a crack. Fafner demands the ring to close it. When Wotan refuses, the giants start to carry Freia off. Suddenly, Erda, goddess of the earth, appears and warns Wotan that possession of the ring will bring about the end of the gods. Wotan tries to learn more and questions her, but she vanishes. He decides to follow her advice and throws the ring on the hoard. Alberich's curse immediately claims its first victim as Fafner kills his brother in a dispute over the treasure. The gods are horrified. Donner clears the air with thunder and lightning, and Froh conjures a rainbow, which forms a bridge to the castle that Wotan names Valhalla. As the voices of the Rhinemaidens echo from the valley below, lamenting the loss of the Rhinegold, the gods walk toward their new home. Only Loge stays behind, mocking their pride.

Richard Wagner

Das Rheingold

Premiere: National Theater, Munich, 1869

Conceived by Wagner as a prologue to his monumental *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 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 the opera sets in motion the course of events that will eventually alter the order of the universe by the end of the *Ring* tetralogy. 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 Creators

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was the complex, controversial creator of music-drama masterpieces that continue to be performed by all the world's greatest opera houses. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he was an artistic revolutionary who reimagined every supposition about music and theater. Wagner wrote his own libretti, 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.

The Music

The score of *Das Rheingold* may be the least familiar of the four *Ring* operas, 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 more than 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 *Das Rheingold'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 cacophonous, rhythmic anvils during the dramatic interlude that depicts Wotan and Loge's descent into Nibelheim between Scenes 2 and 3, as well as the six harps depicting the churning waves of the Rhine in the monumental finale.

Met History

This opera was first seen at the Met in 1889, as part of the first complete *Ring* cycle in the Western Hemisphere. It was the last of the four parts of the *Ring* to be produced. Anton Seidl, the Hungarian maestro who had been Wagner's assistant at the first presentation of the *Ring* in Bayreuth 13 years earlier, was on the podium. A new production in 1899, starring the Dutch sensation Anton van Rooy as Wotan, inaugurated the first complete, uncut presentation of the *Ring* in North America. Two more new productions of the *Ring*, the first also starring van Rooy, followed in the 1903–04 and 1913–14 seasons. The latter lasted until 1948, when another complete and uncut production of the cycle replaced it. 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. James Levine conducted a new staging by Otto Schenk in 1987, with James Morris as Wotan—who sang a record 27 performances of Wotan in *Das Rheingold* with the company—Waltraud Meier in her Met debut, and Franz Mazura, Siegfried Jerusalem, John Macurdy, and Aage Haugland. The current production, by Robert Lepage, premiered on Opening Night of the 2010–11 season, with Levine leading Sir Bryn Terfel, Eric Owens, Stephanie Blythe, Richard Croft, and Patricia Bardon.

Program Note

In all of Western culture, there is nothing quite like Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*). Based on Wagner's own retelling of stories from ancient German and Icelandic mythology, it consists of four separate but intimately related operas—some of them among the longest ever written—usually performed over the space of a week.

Das Rheingold is the first chapter in this epic tale, and it is—quite unfairly—sometimes not given the respect accorded other parts of the *Ring*. For one thing, it is by far the shortest. At two and a half hours, it is one of Wagner's briefest operas, about the same length as *Der Fliegende Holländer*. The composer himself inadvertently contributed to this slighting of *Rheingold* by calling it a "preliminary evening" to the rest of the *Ring*.

After finishing *Lohengrin* in 1848, Wagner wrote the libretto—or, as he liked to say, poem—to a new opera, *Siegfried's Death* (known today as *Götterdämmerung*). Realizing that he needed to explain how the events of that opera had come to be, he added *Young Siegfried* (the opera we now know as *Siegfried*) in 1851. The following year, feeling further explanation was needed, he finished the libretto of *Die Walküre*.

"In order to give everything completely, these three dramas must be preceded by a grand introductory play: *The Rape of the Rheingold*," Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt. "The object is the complete representation of everything in regard to this rape: the origin of the Nibelung treasure, the possession of this treasure by Wotan, and the curse of Alberich. ... [By writing this separate drama] I gain sufficient space to intensify the wealth of relationship, while in the previous mode of treatment I was compelled to cut down and enfeeble this."

While Wagner was creating the libretto to his stupendous new work, he was also writing books and pamphlets—on theatrical reform, on opera and drama, and the artwork of the future. As his ideas on the nature of opera changed, so did the nature of his libretti. *Götterdämmerung* has marvelous monologues, a thrilling love duet, a sensational vengeance trio—all of which can be excerpted and performed on their own (as can some of the orchestral passages). By the time Wagner had arrived at *Das Rheingold* in 1852, he had come to the conclusion that the drama should not be interrupted by musical set pieces but ought to unfold seamlessly.

The vocal writing therefore had to be different from the way singers had been treated in operas before. At the same time, the orchestra would become as much an integral part of conveying the drama as the soloists on stage. "The music shall sound in such a fashion that people shall hear what they cannot see," Wagner wrote to Liszt. In fact, sketches show that as Wagner was in the preliminary stages of composition, he was not only thinking of the words, but of the stage directions as well, writing music that reflected the movement of the scene.

In order to realize his new conception of music drama, Wagner developed the system of leitmotifs—short segments of melody, rhythm, or harmony that are associated with a character, a dramatic event, an object, or an emotion. Beginning with *Rheingold*, Wagner's music springs almost entirely from these building blocks, which he molds or combines to reflect shifts in the drama on stage. But his leitmotifs are much more than mere musical signposts. They can let the audience know what a character is thinking or why an event is taking place. Musical motifs relating to specific characters or situations were nothing new in opera at the time, but the degree to which Wagner employed this idea had no precedent. "I am spinning my cocoon like a silkworm," he wrote to Liszt as he was working on *Rheingold*, "but I spin it out of myself." (Though the libretti to the *Ring* operas were written in reverse order, the music was composed from the beginning of the cycle to the end.)

One of the most difficult tasks Wagner faced was how to begin *Das Rheingold*. What kind of music could possibly launch not just this opera, but the entire *Ring* cycle? He later related the events that inspired the creation of the prelude (as always with Wagner, his reminiscences are to be taken with a grain of salt). He had gone for a long walk, then returned to take a nap. Falling into a state of half-sleep, he suddenly felt as if he were sinking into a flood of water: "The rush and roar soon took musical shape within my brain as the chord of E-flat major, surging incessantly in broken chords: These declared themselves as melodic figurations of increasing motion, yet the pure triad of E-flat major never changed. ... I awoke from my half-sleep in terror, feeling as though the waves were now rushing high above my head. I at once recognized that the orchestral prelude to the *Rheingold*, which for a long time I must have carried about within me yet had never been able to fix definitely, had at last come into being in me: And I quickly understood the very essence of my own nature: the stream of life was not to flow to me from without but from within."

There is nothing in opera like this miraculous beginning: a low E-flat softly played by the doubles basses, then, four measures later, a B-flat added by the bassoons. Another 12 measure later, a single French horn ("very sweetly" says the score) intones the notes of the E-flat major triad up the scale for more than two octaves, followed by a second horn, then another, until all eight horns are playing waves of arpeggios, all on the three notes of the E-flat major triad. Then the cellos and eventually the entire orchestra join in. It's a musical depiction of the creation of life, growing from a single cell. At the climax, the Rhinemaidens suddenly break into song—representing joyous, unspoiled nature itself.

In addition to writing music unlike anything heard before, Wagner made demands on the physical stage that went beyond what seemed possible at the time: the opening scene of the Rhinemaidens swimming around as if in mid-air; the shift from the depths of the Rhine to the airy mountaintops of the gods, with

Valhalla seen in the distance; the descent to Nibelheim and the journey back; Donner, the god of thunder, summoning the swirling mists, then dissipating them on cue with his hammer, conjuring up a rainbow bridge over which the gods would walk to their new home ...

Wagner eventually overcame all the musical, scenic, and dramatic challenges that he had created. The fact that he not only managed to do so, but that the whole of the *Ring* cycle seems to flow effortlessly from *Das Rheingold*, raises its stature from a mere prologue to a theatrical masterpiece all its own.

Wagner did not wish for any part of the *Ring* to be staged until the cycle could be presented as a whole. He realized that this would require a "great festival, to be arranged perhaps especially for the purpose of this performance," as he had already mentioned to Liszt before a note of the music had been written. But against Wagner's wishes, *Das Rheingold* had its premiere in Munich on September 22, 1869, on the express orders of the composer's ardent admirer and patron, King Ludwig II. Another seven years would pass before Wagner was able to present the *Ring* in its entirety, in the theater at Bayreuth that was built specifically for it (and that still serves as the home of the annual Wagner festival).

Das Rheingold first arrived at the Met on January 4, 1889. The program carried a note stating that, "For this opera the scenery has been ordered from Germany and the costumes and armor are from the designs of Prof. Doepier, who made the original drawings for Richard Wagner." The one-act opera was presented with an intermission between the second and third scenes. "This is the practice of the Imperial Opera House in Vienna, and though open to objection on artistic grounds will doubtless prove a welcome relief," noted one New York newspaper the day before the premiere. In fact, Wagner himself had raised no objections to a break when *Rheingold* was given in Berlin in 1881. The Met presented the work both with and without intermission well into the 20th century. In Robert Lepage's production, the drama unfolds in one uninterrupted act, as the composer conceived it.

—Paul Thomason

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