

Synopsis

Act I

Mythical times. Pursued by enemies during a storm, Siegmund exhaustedly stumbles into an unfamiliar home. Sieglinde finds him lying by the hearth, and the two feel an immediate attraction. Sieglinde's husband, Hunding, interrupts them, asking the stranger who he is. Calling himself "Woeful," Siegmund tells of a disaster-filled life, only to learn that Hunding is a kinsman of his enemies. Hunding tells his guest that they will fight to the death in the morning.

Alone, Siegmund calls on his father, Wälse—who was in fact Wotan, leader of the gods, in human disguise—for the sword that he once promised him. Sieglinde reappears, having given Hunding a sleeping potion. She tells of her wedding, at which a one-eyed stranger thrust into a tree a sword that has since resisted every effort to pull it out. Sieglinde confesses her unhappiness to Siegmund, and he embraces her and promises to free her from her forced marriage to Hunding. As moonlight floods the room, Siegmund compares their feelings to the marriage of love and spring. Sieglinde addresses him as "Spring" but asks if his father was really "Wolf," as he said earlier. When Siegmund gives his father's name as "Wälse" instead, Sieglinde recognizes him as her twin brother. Siegmund pulls the sword from the tree and claims Sieglinde as his bride, rejoicing in the union of the Wälungs. The pair rush off together into the night.

Act II

In the mountains, Wotan tells his warrior daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, that she must defend his mortal son Siegmund in his upcoming battle with Hunding. She leaves joyfully to do what he has asked, as Fricka, Wotan's wife and the goddess of marriage, appears. Fricka insists that Wotan must defend Hunding's marriage rights against Siegmund. She ignores his argument that Siegmund could save the gods by winning back the all-powerful ring from the dragon Fafner. When Wotan realizes that he is caught in his own trap—he will lose his power if he does not enforce the law—he submits to his wife's demands. Fricka leaves, and Wotan, devastated, tells the returning Brünnhilde about the theft of the Rhinegold and Alberich's curse on it. Brünnhilde is shocked to hear her father, his plans in ruins, order her to fight for Hunding.

As they flee in the forest, Siegmund comforts his fearful bride and watches over her when she falls asleep. Brünnhilde appears to him as if in a vision, telling him that he will soon die and go to Valhalla. He replies that he will not leave Sieglinde and threatens to kill himself and his bride if his sword has no power against Hunding. Moved by his steadfastness and devotion, Brünnhilde

decides to defy Wotan and help Siegmund. When he hears the approaching Hunding's challenge, Siegmund bids farewell to Sieglinde. The two men fight, and with Brünnhilde's aid, Siegmund is about to be victorious. Suddenly, Wotan appears and shatters Siegmund's sword, leaving him to be killed by Hunding. Brünnhilde escapes with Sieglinde and the broken weapon. Wotan contemptuously kills Hunding with a wave of his hand and leaves to punish Brünnhilde for her disobedience.

Act III

Brünnhilde's eight warrior sisters have gathered on the Valkyries' Rock, bearing slain heroes to Valhalla. They are surprised to see Brünnhilde arrive with a woman, Sieglinde. When they realize that she is fleeing Wotan's wrath, they are afraid to hide her. Sieglinde is numb with despair until Brünnhilde tells her that she bears Siegmund's child. Now eager to be saved, she takes the pieces of the sword from Brünnhilde, thanks her, and rushes off into the forest to hide from Wotan. When the god appears, he sentences Brünnhilde to become a mortal woman, silencing her sisters' objections by threatening to do the same to them. Left alone with her father, Brünnhilde pleads that, in disobeying his orders, she was really doing what he wished. Wotan will not give in: She must lie in an enchanted sleep, a prize for any man who awakens her. She asks to be surrounded in sleep by a wall of fire that only the bravest hero can pierce. Both sense that this hero must be the child that Sieglinde will bear. Sadly renouncing his daughter, Wotan kisses Brünnhilde's eyes with sleep and mortality before summoning Loge, the demigod of fire, to encircle the rock. As flames spring up, the departing Wotan invokes a spell defying anyone who fears his spear to brave the flames.

Richard Wagner

Die Walküre

Premiere: National Theater, Munich, 1870

The second opera in Wagner's monumental *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Die Walküre* has long stood on its own as an evening of extraordinarily powerful theater. Part of its appeal lies in the opera's 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.

The Creator

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 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 mythical times, when gods, giants, dwarves, and humans all contended for power. While the first part of the *Ring* 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 upon which Wagner based his story 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. 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 Brünnhilde bursts onto the stage with the war cry “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 that he will die in battle: The formality of the music turns into less structured dialogue as emotions overtake rules. 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.

Met History

The opera was first seen at the Met in 1885, with Leopold Damrosch conducting Wagner veterans Amalie Materna (who sang Brünnhilde in the 1876 world premiere of the *Ring* cycle) and Marianne Brandt in a re-creation of Josef Hoffmann's designs for the Bayreuth Festival. The company mounted new productions in 1896 and 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. Friedrich Schorr, one of several great German singers who found a home at the Met during the 1930s and 40s, sang Wotan. The Saturday afternoon radio broadcast that year featured the Met debut of Kirsten Flagstad (as Sieglinde), who became the preeminent Brünnhilde of her era. Fritz Stiedry conducted a new *Ring* in 1948 with Helen Traubel, Rose Bampton, Lauritz Melchior, and Herbert Janssen. A remarkable *Walküre* premiered in 1967, with Herbert von Karajan making his Met debut conducting Birgit Nilsson, Gundula Janowitz, Christa Ludwig, Jon Vickers, and Thomas Stewart. A new staging by Otto Schenk debuted on opening night in 1986, with James Levine conducting Hildegard Behrens, Jeannine Altmeyer, Peter Hofmann, and Simon Estes. Artists who appeared in this staging included Jane Eaglen, Dame Gwyneth Jones, Waltraud Meier, Jessye Norman, Leonie Rysanek, Deborah Voigt (as Sieglinde), Theo Adam, Plácido Domingo, James Morris, and Matti Salminen. The current production, by Robert Lepage, opened during the 2010–2011 season, starring Voigt (as Brünnhilde), Eva-Maria Westbroek, Stephanie Blythe, Jonas Kaufmann, and Sir Bryn Terfel.

Program Note

“My *Walküre* turns out terribly beautiful,” Richard Wagner wrote to his friend, the composer Franz Liszt, on June 16, 1852. “I hope to submit to you the whole poem of the tetralogy before the end of the summer. The music will be easily and quickly done, for it is only the execution of something practically ready.”

For neither the first nor the last time in Wagner’s life, things did not work out quite as he had planned. By the end of that year he had, indeed, finished the libretto (or “poem,” as he called it) for his four-part cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), based on stories from ancient Germanic and Norse myths. But the music for *Walküre* was not finished until December 1854, and it was another year and a half before he completed the orchestration.

The *Ring* begins with *Das Rheingold*, a one-act work Wagner called a “Preliminary Evening.” *Die Walküre* (the “First Day of the Festival Play”) is next, followed by *Siegfried*, then *Götterdämmerung*. It all started in 1848 when Wagner wrote 11 pages that he published as *The Nibelung Myth: as Sketch for a Drama*. But it was almost 30 years before the first performance of the completed work was given in a theater that Wagner had constructed specifically for that purpose in Bayreuth, Germany. His intention was for the *Ring* to be performed as a whole, rather than broken up into its individual operas. It’s a monumental work in both scope and impact, and it is not going too far to say that many people who attend a cycle feel that their lives have been changed forever by the experience.

Most modern performances of the *Ring* are spread over a week, as Wagner wished, but since the composer’s own time, theaters have also been presenting the separate parts on their own. *Walküre* quickly became the most enduringly popular, for a number of reasons. For one thing, after the gods, goddesses, dwarves, and giants of *Rheingold*, *Walküre* introduces human beings into the story of the *Ring*. It begins with two very sympathetic people, Siegmund and Sieglinde, and the first act is devoted to their falling in love. “The score of the first act of *Walküre* will soon be ready; it is wonderfully beautiful. I have done nothing like it or approaching it before,” Wagner told Liszt. He was right. The music of *Die Walküre* builds significantly on *Das Rheingold*, where he had begun using leitmotifs to construct the music. These short segments of melody, rhythm, or harmony could be associated with a character or a dramatic event, even an emotion or an object. In *Walküre*, Wagner used them to help suspend time itself while the drama took place, wordlessly, *inside* the characters. Thanks to Wagner’s brilliant writing for orchestra—something that he had to develop even above what he had done in *Rheingold*—the audience actually experiences for themselves the inner lives of the characters on stage.

Just moments into Act I of *Die Walküre*, Sieglinde offers Siegmund some water. The stage directions say: “Siegmund drinks and hands her back the horn. As he signals his thanks with his head, his glance fastens on her features with

growing interest.” To underline these stage directions, Wagner silences the orchestra entirely, except for a single cello. For nine measures, this lone cello plays some of the sweetest, most yearning music imaginable, before being joined by the rest of the cellos and two basses for another eight measures. Listeners need not know what labels commentators have attached to the music to experience for themselves the longing in Siegmund’s soul, the love that is even then starting to blossom.

The plot of *Die Walküre* can be summarized in a few dozen words; the outer events are relatively simple. But the inner journey of the characters is uncommonly rich and complex. It’s the difference between flying from New York to California and driving there: You fly because you want to get to your destination as quickly as possible. But if you drive, the journey itself becomes the point.

In *Walküre*, Wagner’s music has a new power that compels us to let him be our guide on the quest that he is undertaking. That’s how he allows us to experience for ourselves the growing love between Siegmund and Sieglinde, to feel the rightness, the naturalness of it. The powerful nature of their love is well established long before they (and we) discover that they are brother and sister, so our emotions accept their love, even if our mind—assuming we can wrench it away from Wagner’s music—might have a few questions.

In addition to Siegmund and Sieglinde, we meet Brünnhilde, one of the central characters in the *Ring*. She enters the story in Act II, singing one of the most famous (and one of the shortest) “numbers” in the entire cycle, the battle cry “Hojotoho!” Wagner was extraordinarily careful in noting exactly how this should be sung. The first two syllables (“Ho-jo”) are a single phrase, followed by a sixteenth note (“to”), then the last syllable (“ho”) to be held for five beats, followed by a single beat rest. This gives the music a quick, bouncy quality that is emphasized later when Wagner asks the soprano to sing the final “ho” on two notes, separated by an octave leap but connected smoothly, ending on high Bs and then high Cs. He also asks her to trill—nonstop—for almost two measures before launching up to a high B and holding it for two measures. If a soprano can sing this incredibly difficult “Hojotoho!” as Wagner intended, the audience cannot help but be charmed by the impetuous, cheeky, rambunctious teenage girl sassing her father, Wotan—to his delight and ours. Her character, and her relationship with Wotan, are firmly established within a couple of minutes.

It is also one of the few genuinely joyful moments in *Walküre*, an opera rather short on happiness. While in the thick of composing, Wagner lamented to his friend the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, “I find the subject of *Die Walküre* too painful by far: There’s really not one of the world’s sorrows that the work does not express, and in the most painful form; playing artistic games with that pain is taking its revenge on me: It has made me really ill several times already, so that I have had to stop completely.”

Another reason for the popularity of *Walküre* is that we are likely to find ourselves mirrored in it—if not in the new love enjoyed by Sieglinde and Siegmund in Act I, then by the dilemma facing Wotan in Act II, as he realizes that all of his careful planning is for naught and that, despite his best efforts, his life has taken a terrible turn, leaving him no way out. The scene in which Wotan wrestles with this crisis caused Wagner no end of trouble, and he agonized over whether or not people would grasp what Wotan is going through. “For the development of the great tetralogy, this is the most important scene of all,” he insisted.

Wotan’s anguish continues, with a new focus, in the final act. Its ending is one of the most extraordinary in all of opera, with a sense of loss, grief, abandonment, and yet overwhelming love as Wotan is forced to let go of the most precious thing in the world to him, Brünnhilde. It seems like a bitter defeat: His cherished son Siegmund is dead. His favorite child, Brünnhilde, is banished forever. His plans—to create a hero who would be able to win back the ring and return it to the Rhinemaidens and thus save the gods—have crumbled to nothingness. He has nowhere to turn.

And yet it is *because* of these apparent failures that Siegfried (in the next opera) turns out to be the very hero that the gods need. This glimmer of hope, in the middle of such overwhelming sorrow, is surely another reason why *Die Walküre* is such a beloved opera.

Bavaria’s King Ludwig II was not willing to wait until Wagner had completed the entire *Ring* before experiencing *Die Walküre* in the theater. Against Wagner’s wishes, the opera was given for the first time on June 26, 1870, in Munich, nine months after the premiere of *Das Rheingold*. Wagner refused to be involved in any way, and he asked his friends not to attend. The famous violinist Joseph Joachim was there. So were Brahms and Saint-Saëns. Despite his friendship with Wagner, Liszt went and sobbed through part of the opera. Even newspapers usually critical of Wagner pronounced *Die Walküre* an extraordinary work of art.

The fact that opera houses continue to devote considerable time and resources to presenting *Die Walküre* in new ways proves that Liszt did not exaggerate in his assessment when he wrote to Wagner, “Your *Walküre* [score] has arrived, and I should like to reply to you by your *Lohengrin* chorus, sung by 1,000 voices, and repeated a thousandfold: ‘A wonder! A wonder!’”

—Paul Thomason

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