# Synopsis

## Prologue

*Mythical times.* At night in the mountains, the three Norns, daughters of Erda, weave the rope of destiny. They tell how Wotan ordered the World Ash Tree, from which his spear was once cut, to be felled and its wood piled around Valhalla. The burning of the pyre will mark the end of the old order. Suddenly, the rope breaks. Their wisdom ended, the Norns descend into the earth.

Dawn breaks on the Valkyries' rock, and Siegfried and Brünnhilde emerge. Having cast protective spells on Siegfried, Brünnhilde sends him into the world to do heroic deeds. As a pledge of his love, Siegfried gives her the ring that he took from the dragon Fafner, and she offers her horse, Grane, in return. Siegfried sets off on his travels.

## Act I

In the hall of the Gibichungs on the banks of the Rhine, Hagen advises his half-siblings, Gunther and Gutrune, to strengthen their rule through marriage. He suggests Brünnhilde as Gunther's bride and Siegfried as Gutrune's husband. Since only the strongest hero can pass through the fire on Brünnhilde's rock, Hagen proposes a plan: A potion will make Siegfried forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune. To win her, he will claim Brünnhilde for Gunther. When Siegfried's horn is heard from the river, Hagen calls him ashore. Gutrune offers him the potion. Siegfried drinks and immediately confesses his love for her.Ð When Gunther describes the perils of winning his chosen bride, Siegfried offers to use the Tarnhelm to transform himself into Gunther. The two men take an oath of blood brotherhood and set out on their quest.

Brünnhilde's Valkyrie sister Waltraute, horrified by the impending destruction of Valhalla, comes to Brünnhilde's rock, pleading with her sister to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens, its rightful owners, to save the gods. Brünnhilde refuses, declaring that she could never part with Siegfried's gift. Waltraute leaves in despair. Hearing Siegfried's horn in the distance, Brünnhilde is overjoyed but becomes terrified when a stranger appears before her, claiming her as Gunther's bride and tearing the ring from her hand.

## Act II

Outside the Gibichungs' hall at night, Hagen's father, Alberich, appears to his son as if in a dream and reminds him to win back the ring. Dawn breaks, and Siegfried arrives. Hagen summons the Gibichungs to welcome Gunther, who enters with the humiliated Brünnhilde. When she sees Siegfried, she furiously denounces him, but he, still under the spell of the potion, doesn't understand

her anger. Noticing the ring on Siegfried's finger, Brünnhilde demands to know who gave it to him, since it was taken from her, supposedly by Gunther, just the night before. She accuses Siegfried of having stolen the ring and declares that he is her husband. Siegfried protests, swearing on Hagen's spear that he has done no wrong. Brünnhilde now only wants vengeance. Hagen offers to kill Siegfried, but she explains that she has protected his body with magic—except for his back, which she knows he would never turn to an enemy. Gunther hesitatingly joins the conspiracy of murder.

## Act III

Siegfried, separated from his hunting party, meets the three Rhinemaidens by the banks of the Rhine. They ask him to return the ring to them, but he refuses in order to prove that he doesn't fear its curse.The Rhinemaidens predict his imminent death and disappear as Hagen, Gunther, and the other hunters arrive. Encouraged by Hagen, Siegfried tells of his youth and his life with Mime, the forging of the sword Nothung, and his fight with the dragon. While he is talking, Hagen makes him drink an antidote to the potion. His memory restored, Siegfried describes how he walked through the fire and woke Brünnhilde. At this, Hagen stabs him in the back with the spear on which Siegfried had sworn. When Gunther expresses his shock, Hagen claims that he avenged a false oath. Siegfried remembers his beloved Brünnhilde with his last words and dies.

Back at the hall, Gutrune wonders what has happened to Siegfried. When the men carry his body in, she accuses Gunther of murder, who replies that Hagen is to blame. The two men fight about the ring, and Hagen fells his half-brother. As Hagen reaches for the ring, the dead Siegfried threateningly raises his arm. Brünnhilde enters and calmly orders a funeral pyre to be built on the banks of the Rhine. She denounces the gods for their guilt in Siegfried's death, takes the ring from his hand, and promises it to the Rhinemaidens. Then she lights the pyre, mounts Grane, and triumphantly rides her horse into the flames. The fire consumes the hall, and the river overflows its banks. Hagen, trying to get to the ring, is dragged into the water by the Rhinemaidens, who joyfully reclaim their gold. In the distance, Valhalla and the gods are seen engulfed in flames, as the entire world is granted a cleansing rebirth.

*Richard Wagner*

# Götterdämmerung

*Premiere: Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, 1876*

A culmination of the dramatic and musical ideas set forth in the previous three works of the *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the final opera of Wagner's cycle is also a complete and monumental theatrical journey of its own. The central conflict of the *Ring* remains the same over the course of the four operas, but the protagonists change. In *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*) the ring that the Nibelung dwarf Alberich fashioned out of the stolen Rhinegold continues to rule the destinies of humans, including Alberich's own son Hagen. Wotan, the lord of the gods and a major figure in the first three operas, has withdrawn from ruling the world and directing its fate and does not appear, while his mortal grandson Siegfried is both the owner and the victim of the ring forged years before his birth. Only Brünnhilde, once a warrior goddess and now Siegfried's mortal wife, has the perspective and wisdom to grasp the full significance of the situation—her journey toward the ultimate sacrifice that will absolve heaven and earth from its primal corruption is the great drama of this opera.

## *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 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 *Ring* is set in a mythical world, beginning, in *Das Rheingold*, beneath the earth (the depths of the Rhine river, the caves of the dwarfs) and above it (the gods' sky-bound realm of Valhalla). Throughout the action, the setting moves inexorably toward the human dimension. By the time we reach *Götterdämmerung*, the focus has clearly shifted: The gods do not appear as characters, and they no longer interact directly with humans but are merely referred to. The libretto doesn't mention real-world places, with the notable exception of the Rhine, indicating that this symbol of nature is an important aspect of both the beginning and the end of the entire cycle.

## *The Music*

The musical ideas set forth in the first three parts of the *Ring* find their full expression in this opera. *Götterdämmerung* contains several of the one-on-one confrontations typical of the *Ring*, but a considerable amount of the vocal writing departs from the forms established in the previous operas. The first appearance of true ensemble singing in the trio at the end of Act II and the use of a chorus signify a shift from the rarified world of the gods to an entirely human perspective. Wagner famously interrupted work on the *Ring* for more than a decade, while in the midst of writing *Siegfried*, to compose *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. When he returned to complete the cycle, his creative abilities had evolved. Perhaps the most striking orchestral passage of the entire *Ring* is Siegfried's Funeral Music in Act III, which is built around a succession of leitmotifs from all parts of the cycle that represent the hero's life story, interspersed with the repetition of two thunderous chords that encapsulate the finality of death. *Götterdämmerung* presents unique challenges for the lead tenor and soprano, culminating in a cathartic 15-minute narrative by Brünnhilde that is among the longest and most powerful unbroken vocal solos in the operatic repertory.

## *Met History*

The Met presented the U.S. premiere of *Götterdämmerung* in 1888, with Anton Seidl (one of Wagner's assistants at the first Bayreuth Festival) conducting fellow Bayreuth alumni Lilli Lehmann and Albert Niemann as Brünnhilde and Siegfried, respectively. The Norn and Waltraute scenes were cut in this performance. The following year, the production was part of the first American *Ring* cycle (with the Hagen–Alberich scene in Act II omitted as well). The first uncut *Götterdämmerung* appeared in 1899, starring Lillian Nordica as Brünnhilde and brothers Jean and Edouard de Reszke as Siegfried and Hagen, respectively. New productions followed in 1904 and 1914; in 1908, *Götterdämmerung* was the first German opera Arturo Toscanini conducted at the Met, in his first season with the company. Lauritz Melchior sang the role of Siegfried in this opera a record 51 times at the Met between 1929 and 1948. Among the most notable Brünnhildes in this era were Kirsten Flagstad (17 performances from 1935 to 1941 and an additional one in 1951) and the Australian Marjorie Lawrence, who capped off the Act III Immolation Scene by mounting a live horse and leaping into the stage flames. Herbert Graf directed a new production in 1948, with Fritz Stiedry conducting Melchior and Helen Traubel. Herbert von Karajan's production premiered in 1974, with Rafael Kubelík on the podium and a cast led by Birgit Nilsson and Jess Thomas. In 1988, James Levine conducted the premiere of Otto Schenk's production, starring Hildegard Behrens, Toni Krämer, and Matti Salminen (as Hagen). Robert Lepage's staging, which opened January 27, 2012, with Fabio Luisi conducting, starred Deborah Voigt, Jay Hunter Morris, Waltraud Meier, and Hans-Peter König.

# Program Note

"The most astounding fact in all Wagner's career was probably the writing of the text of *Siegfried's Death* in 1848," says musicologist Ernest Newman in *Wagner as Man and Artist*. "We can only stand amazed at the audacity of the conception, the imaginative power the work displays, the artistic growth it reveals since *Lohengrin* was written, and the total breach it indicates with the whole of the operatic art of his time. But *Siegfried's Death* was impossible in the musical idiom of *Lohengrin*; and Wagner must have known this intuitively."

Even so, it is unlikely that Wagner understood in November 1848 that his new opera would not be completed for decades, or that it would—under the title *Götterdämmerung*—be the culmination of one of the greatest masterpieces in all of Western civilization, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Earlier that year, Wagner had finished orchestrating *Lohengrin*. He was becoming increasingly active in the political turmoil sweeping Dresden (as well as much of Europe). He also made sketches for operas based on the lives of Friedrich Barbarossa and Jesus of Nazareth. That summer, he had written the essay "The Wibelungen: World-History from the Saga," and later he would write "The Nibelung Myth: As Sketch for a Drama." But there is no indication that, at this time, Wagner was actively planning on mining the Nibelung saga for more than *Siegfried's Death*.

In May of 1849, the uprisings in Dresden were put down. Wanted by the police for his political activity, Wagner fled, eventually settling in Switzerland. He produced a number of prose works over the next few years, including the important *Opera and Drama*, written during the winter of 1850–51, and planned an opera called *Wieland the Smith*. In 1850, he also revisited his libretto for *Siegfried's Death*, making some musical sketches.

The more Wagner thought about it, the more he realized that for the story of the hero's end to be truly understood by the audience, they needed to know more about what had gone before. So in 1851, he wrote the libretto to *Young Siegfried*, which was then followed by *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold*, spelling out in greater detail why the events of *Siegfried's Death* occurred. It was not until October 1869—after composing the music for the first three works in the *Ring*, as well as *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*—that Wagner again took up the task of creating the music of the drama now known as *Götterdämmerung*. The name change reflected a significant shift in the opera itself, from the death of its hero to the downfall of the gods themselves.

In the earliest version of the story, Brünnhilde took the body of Siegfried to Valhalla, where his death redeemed the gods. Before igniting Siegfried's funeral pyre, she announced, "Hear then, ye mighty gods; your wrong-doing is annulled; thank him, the hero who took your guilt upon him. … One only shall rule, All-Father, Glorious One, Thou [Wotan]. This man [Siegfried] I bring you as pledge of thy eternal might: Good welcome give him, as is his desert!"

There has been much speculation about why Wagner changed the ending of the *Ring* from this optimistic one, in which Wotan and the gods continued to rule, to the ending we know today, in which the gods perish. Sometimes this shift is attributed to Wagner's discovery of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, but that did not occur until the end of 1854, at which point Wagner had completed the text for the *Ring*. Wagner's optimism about a new social order for Europe began crumbling as the revolts of 1848 and 1849 were crushed, and by the time he began making a prose sketch for *Young Siegfried* in May 1851, he noted: "Guilt of the gods, and their necessary downfall. Siegfried's mission. Self-annihilation of the gods."

Wagner's Dresden friend August Röckel, who had only read the libretto of the *Ring*, asked the composer a question that has puzzled audiences at *Götterdämmerung* from the beginning: "Why, seeing that the gold is returned to the Rhine, is it necessary for the gods to perish?"

"I believe that, at a good performance, even the most naïve spectator will be left in no doubt on this point," Wagner replied. "It must be said, however, that the gods' downfall is not the result of points in a contract. … No, the necessity of this downfall arises from our innermost feelings. Thus it was important to justify this sense of necessity *emotionally*. … I have once again realized how much of the work's meaning (given the nature of my poetic intent) is only made clear by the music. I can now no longer bear to look at the poem [the libretto] without music."

This is a significant insight into Wagner's view of the nature of both drama and music, views he held very early. When he was 15 years old, Wagner wrote a play called *Leubald und Adelaïde*, a "great tragedy," he later recalled in his autobiography, "drawn largely on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, and Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*." There are ghosts, revenge, and mayhem galore. The hero goes mad, and as Newman explains, "stabs Adelaïde, finds peace in the approved later Wagner manner, lays his head in her lap, and passes away in a gratified *Verklärung* [transfiguration], under her blood-stained caresses." When Wagner showed the play to his family, they were horrified that he was wasting his time with such foolishness and neglecting his studies.

"I knew a fact that no one else could know," Wagner later wrote, "namely, that my work could only be rightly judged when set to the music which I had resolved to write for it." No trace of his music exists, if, indeed, it was ever written. But the point is that, from the beginning, Wagner's view of drama depended on its most significant points being made *through music*. In a letter to the composer Franz Liszt, he explained the special nature of the music that he was composing for the *Ring*. "The thing shall *sound* [the italics are Wagner's] in such a fashion that people shall hear what they cannot see."

Thomas Mann brilliantly summed up the relationship between Wagner's words and music in the speech he gave on the 50th anniversary of the composer's

death: "The texts around which it [the music] is woven, which it thereby makes into drama, are not literature—but the music is. It seems to shoot up like a geyser from the pre-civilized bedrock depths of myth (and not only 'seems'; it really does); but in fact—and at the same time—it is carefully considered, calculated, supremely intelligent, full of shrewdness and cunning, and as literary in its conception as the texts are musical in theirs."

Wagner knew that he could not compose the music of *Götterdämmerung* until he had achieved absolute mastery of his compositional technique, which, he explained to Röckel, had "become a close-knit unity: There is scarcely a bar in the orchestra that does not develop out of the preceding unit." As he composed the *Ring,* Wagner greatly expanded his use of leitmotifs—bits of melody, harmony, rhythm, even tonality—far beyond merely representing a character or an object. They became infinitely malleable, and Wagner put them together in ways that became not only increasingly subtle but also superbly expressive, adding layers of drama and emotion to the events taking place on stage. Even if listeners have no knowledge of the leitmotifs, Wagner's music is still enormously potent and can be a life-changing experience.

"Music drama should be about the insides of the characters," Wagner said. "The object of music drama is the presentation of archetypal situations *as experienced by the participants* [Wagner's italics], and to this dramatic end, music is a means, albeit a uniquely expressive one."

At first glance, after the uninterrupted flow of drama in the three preceding parts of the *Ring*, the libretto of *Götterdämmerung* might seem a throwback. It has recognizable, easily excerptable arias, a marvelous love duet, a thrilling swearing-of-blood-brotherhood duet, a chilling vengeance trio, and rousing choruses. But when Wagner finally began to compose the music for *Götterdämmerung*, he did not rewrite the libretto, other than to make some changes in the wording of the final scene. He knew that the libretto worked exactly as it should, providing him with precisely the words and dramatic situations that he needed to write some of the greatest orchestral music ever conceived. And it is through the music that Wagner can make dramatic points much more vividly than could be made through words.

One of the most shattering parts of *Götterdämmerung* is Siegfried's Funeral Music. Even played in the concert hall, shorn of the rest of the opera, it makes a tremendous effect. In its proper place during a performance of the full drama, however, it is overwhelming. A bit of insight into why this is so comes from the diary of Wagner's second wife, Cosima. The entry for September 29, 1871, reads:

> 'I have composed a Greek chorus,' R[ichard] exclaims to me in the morning, 'but a chorus which will be sung, so to speak, by the orchestra; after Siegfried's death, while the scene is being changed, the Siegmund theme will be played, as if the chorus were saying: 'This was his father'; then the sword motive; and finally his

own theme; then the curtain goes up and Gutrune enters, thinking she had heard his horn. How could words ever make the impression that these solemn themes, in their new form, will evoke?'

Cosima does not mention the concept of a Greek chorus in connection with the Act III Immolation Scene or the great orchestral outpouring that follows Brünnhilde's words. But it is impossible not to think of these moments as a magnificent musical threnody for everything that has gone before. Such a profound summing up of complex lives, situations, and emotions must be expressed by the orchestra, because mere words could not do them justice or provide the catharsis that allows for a true transformation and a new beginning—all of which Wagner's music does, perfectly, at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

Several years after the *Ring* had premiered in its entirety at Bayreuth in 1876, Cosima noted in her diary: "In the evening, before supper, [Richard] … glances through the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* and says that never again will he write anything as complicated as that." For many Wagnerians, he never wrote anything better.

—*Paul Thomason*

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