

Making Sense of Wagner's *Ring*: A Viewer's Guide

Prof. Warren Bebbington
*answers four basic questions about the cycle
to help navigate his webinars*

1. Why does attending a performance of *The Ring* take nearly a week?

Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* is a stage-festival comprised of three days of full-length music dramas, introduced by a one-act music drama the evening before. There is also usually at least one "rest day" scheduled during the cycle, to allow singers, musicians and festival-goers alike a break from the demands of the work, so attendance at the whole festival takes at least five days. Each full-length work usually commences late afternoon and pauses for a dinner break between acts, while the introductory work is a shorter evening, with no intermission.

Traditionally, the festival has been held annually in the picturesque Bavarian town of Bayreuth, where Wagner built a Festival Theatre specifically designed for the work, opened in 1876, and where he lived for the last part of his life. But today, Ring cycles are held in many parts of the world, in Australia first in Adelaide (from 2004), then Melbourne, and (from 2021) in Brisbane.

2. Where and when is the story set?

The setting is the Middle Rhine, its forests, rocky precipices, mountains, the Rhine River itself, and the mythical Underworld below. The time is the early medieval era, origin of German and Norse saga, when the region remained peppered with warrior tribes, some still pagan.

3. How do we make sense of the large array of characters?

There are 35 characters in the cycle, and in viewing these webinars you will best understand them through their groupings—the gods, the mortals, the spirits, and the Nibelung (the race of the Underworld). A list grouping them in this way with a brief explanation of each is below:

The Gods

- Wotan, leader of the gods
- Fricka, his wife, goddess of marriage
- Freia, her sister, goddess of love
- Donner, Freia's brother, the storm god
- Froh, his brother, the fair god
- Loge, half-god of fire
- Brünnhilde, a Valkyrie, horse-riding virgin goddess, favourite daughter of Wotan and Erda
- The Valkyries—Gerhilde, Helmwige, Waltraute, Schwertleite, Ortlinde, Siegrune, Grimgerde,
- Rosswiese, horse-riding virgin goddesses, all daughters of Wotan and Erda

The Mortals

- Sigmund, a Volsung, son of Wotan
- Sieglinde, his twin sister
- Hunding, a Neiding, husband of Sieglinde
- Siegfried, son of Sigmund and Sieglinde, grandson of Wotan
- Fasolt, giant
- Fafner, giant
- The Wood Bird
- Gunther, son of King Gibich, leader of the Gibichung
- Gutrune, sister of Gunther
- The Gibichungs—Men and Women

The Spirits

- The Rhine Daughters—Woglinde, Welgunde, Flosshilde
- Erda the Wala, eternal wise woman, Earth mother
- The Three Norns, First, Second and Third

The Nibelung

- Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf
- Mime, a Nibelung, Alberich's brother
- Hagen, son of Alberich, half-brother of Gunther
- The Nibelungs—Boys

4. So what is the story?

Here is a synopsis of the entire span of the cycle, which you might want to consult progressively as you listen to each webinar.

Evening Before: The Rhine Gold

(*Vorabend: Das Rheingold*)

Deep in the Rhine River, three daughters of the Rhine swim and play. A lusty Nibelung dwarf Alberich appears and tries to trap one of them, but is suddenly distracted when a shaft of morning sunlight reveals a hoard of gold on a rock on the river's bed. The Rhine-daughters tell him that whoever can forge a ring from the gold will gain power over the world, but only by first renouncing love. Alberich quickly swears he will renounce love, grabs the gold and races away with it to his home in the underworld, Nibelheim.

Above on a mountain top, the one-eyed Wotan is about to occupy Valhalla, a new castle built for the gods he leads. But his wife the goddess Fricka, who had requested the new home, is furious because he had agreed to pay the two giants who built it by handing over to them a goddess, Fricka's sister Freia. The giants arrive to collect their payment, and Wotan intervenes with his all-powerful spear to stop the other gods attacking them to protect Freia. Wotan had sent the half-god Loge down into the world to find an alternative payment: he returns empty-handed, but with the tale of a hoard of gold in Nibelheim, stolen from the Rhine, from which Alberich has forged a ring of magical powers. The giants agree they would consider having gold instead of Freia, but they take her away as hostage until Wotan can obtain the gold to pay them.

Descending into Nibelheim, Wotan and Loge find Alberich has used the ring's power to enslave the Nibelung race, who sit at anvils endlessly forging objects for him from the gold. Alberich is taunting his brother Mime with the Tarnhelm, a magic helmet that transforms its wearer into any shape. He brags to the two visiting gods of the Tarnhelm's powers, demonstrating by turning himself into a large serpent. Loge feigns terror, and asks if Alberich can also turn himself into something small. Alberich then becomes a toad, which the gods immediately trap, and take back to the mountaintop, along with the gold. Wotan takes the ring from Alberich and puts it on his own finger; so the furious Alberich puts a curse on the ring: anyone who possesses it will die.

The giants return and reluctantly agree to release the attractive Freia, but only if the gold makes a pile high enough to conceal her form from their sight. The gods pile up all the gold, adding the Tarnhelm, but Wotan is loath to part with the ring. A wise spirit Erda then appears and warns him that possession of the cursed ring will bring the end of the gods. Wotan reluctantly adds the ring to pile, and Freia is released. The giants immediately squabble over dividing their shares of the gold, and one kills the other—first victim of the ring's curse. The gods turn away to enter their new home Valhalla, across a bridge of rainbow, created from lightning and thunder by the storm god Donner. As they do so, the wails of the Rhine-daughters can be heard from the valley below, lamenting the loss of their gold.

First Day: The Valkyrie

(*Erster Tag: Die Walküre*)

Act I

It is at least 18 years after the events of *Rhine Gold*. In a dark forest during a violent thunderstorm, a young man flees for his life, stumbling exhausted into the warrior Hunding's cottage for shelter. Hunding's wife Sieglinde enters and brings the man water. Hunding returns home and questions the man, who calls himself "Woeful," his woes including a mother murdered, a father vanished and a twin sister abducted. He explains he is being chased by the Neiding clan, one of whom he killed at a wedding for trying to force a girl into marriage. But Hunding announces he is a kinsman of the Neiding: the young man may spend the night but in the morning they will fight to the death. Left alone, Siegmund calls for his vanished father to give him the sword he promised him in his hour of need. Sieglinde reappears, having drugged her husband Hunding. She tells him of her own forced Neiding wedding, at which a one-eyed stranger appeared and sank a sword into the ash tree that grows through the centre of the cottage, promising great things to the man who could pull it out; no wedding guest was able to. She believes the young man has come to deliver her and that he will be able to draw out the sword and use it in the fight with Hunding. A door swings open, revealing the storm has subsided, and the man celebrates the passing of winter. In the dawn light, Sieglinde recognises his face: it is her long-lost twin brother: they are twins of a Volsung mother. She will call him Siegmund (Victorious one); he draws the sword out of the tree, naming it Nothung (Needful). They embrace passionately, she will be both "bride and sister" to him.

Act II

On a craggy mountain, Wotan tells his favourite daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, to protect Siegmund in his coming fight with Hunding. But his wife Fricka arrives, incensed that not only have Wotan's infidelities produced nine Valkyrie daughters with the spirit Erda, but worse, now he has fathered the incestuous twins Sieg-

mund and Sieglinde with a mere mortal, a Volsung woman. She demands the death of Siegmund as punishment for his incest. Wotan tries to explain that he needs a man not controlled by him, to act of his own free will to get the gold back from the giant Fafner; his own hands are tied by his contract to pay the gold to the giants, a contract which, as the world's ruler he is obliged to honour. But Fricka ridicules him: Siegmund who he fathered and left a sword for is hardly free. Wotan despairs: he must obey Fricka and uphold the law. In a long monologue he explains to Brunnhilde how he is "the least free of all things"; with rising frustration he rages he would abandon Valhalla and his rule to Alberich in an instant. He can see no way out, and orders Brunnhilde that she must now withhold protection from Siegmund in the fight, she must see he dies. With a heavy heart, Brunnhilde appears to Siegmund to announce his impending death, and explain how she is a Valkyrie whose role is to convey his dead body to Valhalla where he will be granted eternal life. To her astonishment, Siegmund declares he would rather stay with his beloved Sieglinde than have eternal life. She cannot see such a fervent human love destroyed, and resolves she will disobey her father's order, and allow the loving twins to live on.

As the hour of the fight approaches, Sieglinde has a nightmare of the death of her mother. Hunding enters and calls on Siegmund to face him; Brunnhilde appears in a white cloud protecting him. Wotan, enraged to see his daughter's betrayal, appears in a red cloud and with his spear smashes Siegmund's sword to pieces, enabling Hunding to kill him. Quickly, Brunnhilde gathers up the pieces of the smashed sword, bundles the now fainted Sieglinde onto her horse and rides off for Valhalla. Desolate over his dead son, Wotan strikes Hunding dead, then in a fury rides off in pursuit of Brunnhilde.

Act III

The Valkyries call to each other as they ride into Valhalla, each with a dead warrior to whom eternal life will be granted. But when they see Brunnhilde arrive with Sieglinde on her horse, fleeing from Wotan, they will not disobey their father to assist her. Brunnhilde tells Sieglinde that she is pregnant with Siegmund's child, and must flee to the forest for her safety: Fafner lives there with the gold, and Wotan avoids it. She gives Sieglinde the pieces of the sword to hold for her expected son, whom she requests be called Siegfried (victorious peace); Sieglinde thanks her profoundly, and rides off. Wotan rides in and angrily berates Brunnhilde, announcing she will be punished by being removed from the gods, left in sleep on a mountaintop as an ordinary mortal woman, vulnerable to being possessed by any man. Brunnhilde is horrified, and pleads that she tried to do only what her father wished to do but could not. She begs him, if she is to be punished in this way, to surround her sleeping body with a ring of fire, so that only a hero with no fear can reach her. Wotan's heart is softened, and he agrees: in tears he kisses her eyes and she falls into a deep sleep, he covers her body with her armour, and summoning Loge, the god of fire, he surrounds her with fire. Heartbroken by having to enforce such a punishment against his favourite child, he withdraws sadly from the scene.

Second Day: Siegfried

(Zweiter Tag: Siegfried)

Act I

It is perhaps 16 years after the end of *The Valkyrie*. In the forest, Fafner lives with the gold, having turned himself into a dragon to protect it. Sieglinde has died in childbirth, and her son Siegfried is being raised by Mime, Alberich's brother. In his forest cave, Mime repeatedly forges swords for Siegfried, but each one the teenager smashes as too weak. Siegfried enters, terrifying Mime with a bear. Mime gives him the latest sword, which again he smashes on the anvil. Siegfried forces from Mime the true story of his parents, how his father was killed, his sword smashed to pieces, and his mother died in childbirth. As proof Mime produces the pieces of his father's sword, which Siegfried immediately tells him to repair, and bounds off into the forest. Presently a much older Wotan enters disguised as a "Wanderer," and challenges Mime to a game of 3 questions each, in which whoever loses will forfeit his life. Mime asks three simplistic questions, which the Wanderer answers in some annoyance. The Wanderer then asks his three, the last of which—Who will forge the smashed sword?—Mime cannot answer, and complains that he has been trying endlessly to forge it, but cannot. The Wanderer says Mime wasted his questions, and could have asked who will forge the sword, which will be the man who knows no fear. He leaves, telling Mime his life is now forfeit. Siegfried returns, and finding the sword still not repaired does it himself. He heats the bellows to a high temperature and melts the pieces down to base metal, remaking the whole sword afresh, singing its name Nothung to himself as he works. Watching this, Mime realises it is Siegfried who knows no fear, that he can use him to slay Fafner, fantasising that then he will then poison the boy to obtain the gold for himself. Siegfried slams the finished sword down on the anvil to test it, as he did with the others, but this time the sword is so strong it breaks the anvil in two.

Act II

Alberich is hiding outside Fafner's cave. The Wanderer appears, telling him that Mime approaches bringing Siegfried to fight the dragon. He wakes the dragon and Alberich offers to deflect Siegfried in return for the ring, but Fafner refuses. Mime enters with Siegfried, telling him here he will learn fear; Mime then hides to watch what will happen. Siegfried lies down to wait, listening to the murmurs of the forest and wishing he could understand the forest birds he hears singing. He tries making a reed pipe to communicate with them, then tries playing his silver horn, which rouses the dragon. Siegfried is delighted to find a companion, but Fafner thinks he will eat Siegfried for lunch. So Siegfried kills the dragon, and withdrawing his sword from the

body, is scalded by the dragon's blood. Putting the blood on his finger to his mouth, he can suddenly understand the singing of the woodbird, who tells him to take the ring and Tarnhelm from the cave for himself, and warns him against Mime. While Siegfried is in the cave, Alberich and Mime come out of hiding and start arguing over who will have the gold. Siegfried reappears, now understanding that Mime's offer of a refreshing drink is poison that will kill him; he strikes Mime dead with his sword. He rests under a linden tree, but hearing from the woodbird that a wife awaits the man with no fear on the mountaintop, surrounded by a ring of fire, he sets off for the mountain.

Act III

Below the rocky mountain summit, Wotan summons Erda, to ask how he can stop events unfolding he can no longer control. She tells him he is no longer what he once was, and should consult Brunnhilde for advice; but he explains he has locked Brunnhilde in sleep as a punishment for disobedience. She tells him the end of the gods is coming, and sinks back into the earth. Seeing Siegfried coming up the path, he steps out, yearning for an encounter with the grandson he has never met. But the teenager's lack of respect infuriates him, and he tries to bar the way to the mountaintop, warning that his spear had shattered the sword Siegfried holds. Siegfried then thinks this must be his father's killer, so he draws his sword and shatters Wotan's spear. Wotan, the agent of his power now destroyed, disappears. Siegfried passes through the fire and sees what he thinks is the armour-clad body of a dead male warrior. He lifts the shield and sees breathing, then removes the breastplate, and draws back in fear at his first sight of a woman's breasts. He cries out for his mother, but is soon overcome with unfamiliar emotions of arousal. After trying in vain to wake her, he kisses her lips. Slowly opening her eyes, Brunnhilde greets the sun, but is ashamed, reminded by the presence of her horse nearby that she is no longer a Valkyrie. She sees the burning ardour of the young Siegfried, whose existence she had known about since before he was born; she tries to have him leave her be. But soon she is moved by his passionate pleading, and they embrace, declare their love to each other, and adjourn to a cave for the night.

Third Day: Twilight of the Gods

(Dritter Tage: Götterdämmerung)

Prologue

It is before dawn the next morning on Brunnhilde's rock, around which the ring of fire still glows. Outside the cave where Brunnhilde and Siegfried are asleep, three Norns recline, reflecting on the past and prophesying the future as they spin the rope of Destiny. They recall Wotan's originally carving his all-powerful spear from a branch of the World Ash Tree, but now without his spear he has felled the Ash Tree, piling it up as firewood around Valhalla, which he waits to light when the end of the gods threatens. But they cannot foresee the events that will lead to this, the rope snaps, and they return to the earth. At dawn Siegfried and Brunnhilde emerge from their cave. He gives her the ring as a token of love, and she gives him her horse to ride down the mountain, where he takes a boat down the Rhine.

Act I

Further downstream, the home of the Gibichung stands on the Rhine's banks. The Gibichung king Gunther and his sister Gutrune are both unmarried, and seek the counsel of their half-brother, Hagen as to who they should court. Hagen advises Gunther to marry the woman on the mountaintop Brunnhilde: she will need to be brought through the ring of fire by Siegfried (Hagen thus hopes to secure the ring from them for himself). They hail Siegfried to shore as his boat approaches down the Rhine, and Hagen contrives to have Gutrune offer him a drink, which contains a powerful potion that wipes his memory and puts him at once in their power. Immediately, all knowledge of Brunnhilde vanishes from Siegfried's mind, and instead he sees Gutrune, who Gunther says he can marry in exchange from bringing him Brunnhilde. Siegfried agrees, they swear blood brotherhood, and Siegfried returns to the mountain to fetch Brunnhilde. As evening falls Hagen gloats over the unfolding events as he keeps watch. Meanwhile on the mountain, Brunnhilde's Valkyrie sister Waltraute arrives to tell her of the gloom pervading Valhalla because of Alberich's curse on Wotan, and to ask her to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens, which would end the curse's effect. But Brunnhilde will not give up what was a symbol of love given her by Siegfried. Dusk falls and Siegfried returns thorough the fire, disguised as Gunther; wresting the ring from the horrified Brunnhilde, claiming her as his (Gunther's) bride and dragging her into the cave to consummate her union with the Gibichung king.

Act II

During the night as Hagen keeps watch at the Gibichung hall, his father Alberich appears and urges him to swear he will regain the ring for them. As dawn breaks, Siegfried returns, telling Hagen he has done as agreed, won Brunnhilde for Gunther, who approaches with her in a boat on the Rhine. He can now claim Gutrune's hand in marriage in return. Hagen summons the vassals to welcome back the king and his bride-to-be as they arrive. Brunnhilde is horrified to see Siegfried unknowing of her and on the arm of another woman. But seeing the ring on his finger, she knows trickery has been at work. She tells the assembled throng that Siegfried has already slept with her, and thus King Gunther has been dishonoured. Siegfried swears he has never done this, and all withdraw in confusion. Hagen quietly asks Brunnhilde if it is true that Siegfried is fearless and undefeatable; in a jealous rage Brunnhilde reveals that his back is unprotected, so he can be defeated by stabbing

his back. All return, dressed for the double wedding, with children throwing garlands, as Siegfried and Guttrune eagerly join the wedding procession, while Brunnhilde begrudgingly follows Gunther.

Act III

The next morning, the Gibichung menfolk hunt in the forest. Siegfried has become separated from the hunting party, following a bear, which he loses, and comes out on the banks of the Rhine to see the Rhine-daughters swimming towards him. They offer to give him a bear in exchange for the ring, but he tells them he won it fighting a dragon, so would not give it up; he ignores their warnings about the curse on it. Presently, the hunting party catches up, and while Siegfried is distracted by two ravens flying overhead, Hagen spears him in the back. Siegfried falls dying, in his delirium the effect of the potion lifts and he can clearly see Brunnhilde and their love again, but he expires. The men raise him on a bier and carry him in funeral procession back to the Hall of the Gibichung.

There, Guttrune awaits the return of her new husband from the hunt, but instead receives back his dead body. After first claiming Siegfried was killed by a wild boar, Hagen admits he killed him to avenge Gunther's honour, and that he should be rewarded with the ring. But Gunther says then ring now belongs to Guttrune, as a widow inherits her husband's possessions; Hagen becomes enraged and kills Gunther. He then scrambles to take the ring from the dead Siegfried's finger, but the hand of the corpse with the ring suddenly rises up, and all fall back in terror.

Brunnhilde then steps forward, calling for a funeral pyre of logs to be built, laying Siegfried's body on it, and calling for a flaming torch. She then takes the ring from his finger, tossing it back into the Rhine and the care of the Rhine-daughters. She declares Siegfried a great hero and rails against Wotan for betraying them both. She throws the torch on the pyre. Mounting her horse, she rides into the flames, greeting her husband as hero, crying out as the flames engulf them both that she will embrace him as husband in mightiest love. The flames of the pyre rise up and consume the Gibichung Hall, which comes crashing down. The Rhine overflows its banks, and Hagen dives in, trying to retrieve the ring; but the Rhine-daughters pull him under the water and drown him. In the distance a red glow can be seen as the logs of the World Ash Tree burn and consume Valhalla, with the gods sitting silently, awaiting their end. They are finally engulfed in the flames.

—Synopsis by Warren Bebbington

