



2024-25 Hal & Jeanette Segerstrom
Family Foundation Classical Series

CURSE OF THE RING: DAS RHEINGOLD

Thursday, Apr. 10, 2025 @ 8 p.m.

Sunday, Apr. 13, 2025 @ 2 p.m.

Tuesday, Apr. 15, 2025 @ 8 p.m.



IN CARL ST. CLAIR'S WORDS

Wagner and *Das Rheingold*

"Wagner changed the course of music history like very few others have before or since. There are voice types and instruments, leitmotifs, things that hadn't existed before Wagner wrote *The Ring* cycle."

"This is crazy drama and wild imagination in a musical package. It's through composed—an epic narrative that just doesn't stop."

"Wagner spent 28 years with this obsession—he spent six years researching mythology before he wrote anything, and then he wrote the librettos and the music, built a theater just for *The Ring* operas, created the stage concept, and directed the operas. It was a monumental undertaking. Revolutionary."

"This is the greatest musical adventure that I know of."



SKETCH BY JOSEF HOFFMANN

Das Rheingold

Quick Reference Guide

German composer Richard Wagner wrote the music and the libretto (words) for this opera.

The opera is sung in German.
There will be English supertitles.

Das Rheingold (“The Rheingold”) is the first in a set of four epic operas, or music dramas, called *The Ring of the Nibelung* (*The Ring* or *Ring Cycle* for short). Each of the four can be performed individually or as a series (cycle). The story is based loosely on characters from Germanic heroic legend, Norse legends, and the *Nibelungenlied*.

The tale of *The Ring* may sound familiar—J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* series of books, and the more recent films based on them, are inspired by the same Norse mythology as the operas.

The good guys: The Rhinemaidens, Erda, and Fasolt, who is, at least, not corrupt.

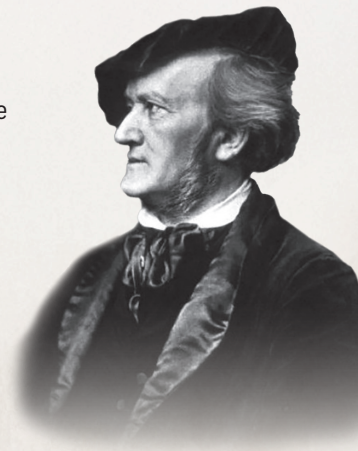
The bad guys: Everyone else (they’re all greedy).

Leitmotif: a recurring musical theme associated with or representing a particular person, idea, or situation. Sort of like a walk up song for the singers – when you hear it you know that character is being referenced or appearing. Famous leitmotifs in popular culture: Indiana Jones, Darth Vader, Jaws.

Wagner tubas: extra instruments in the orchestra for many of Wagner’s scores. The Wagner tuba is not a tuba; it’s pitched between the French horn and the trumpet with brighter, lighter sound, and is typically played by the French horn players.

Supertitle: Translation of the opera’s words (in this case, to English), typically projected above the stage.

Run time: *Das Rheingold* runs approximately two and a half hours. There is no intermission in the original opera, but never fear! **There will be one intermission at these performances.**



COMPOSER RICHARD WAGNER

Who's Who in *Das Rheingold*

Woglinde, Wellgunde and **Flosshilde** are **The Rhinemaidens**. Their job is to guard the Rhinegold.

THE GODS/GODDESSES

Wotan: He's in charge, the ruler of the gods. Not immune to greed, Wotan resorts to stealing the ring from Alberich in a play for even more power.

Fricka: Wotan's wife. Guardian of marriage, morality, and order. Sister of Freia, Donner and Froh.

Freia: Fricka's sister, goddess of love and nature. She keeps the orchard where the golden apples that keep the gods eternally young grow. Her brothers are Donner and Froh.

Loge: God of fire. Has a love/hate relationship with the other gods, despite being one himself. He's smart and wily.

Donner: Brother of Fricka, Freia, and Froh. God of thunder; uses his hammer to create thunder and lightning. Attempts to stop the giants from taking his Freia. (His name means "thunder" in German.)

Froh: Brother of Fricka, Freia, and Donner. God of spring, protective of his sister Freia. More mild-mannered than his aggressive brother. (His name means "joyful" in German.)

Erda: Ancient earth goddess, older than Wotan, with knowledge of the past and foresight into the future. She appears to resolve conflict, but imparts her wisdom in riddles. (Her name means "earth" in German.)

THE GIANTS

Fasolt: The more mild-tempered and less greedy brother of Fafner. He's in love with Freia, and reluctant to sacrifice her for the sake of the Nibelung treasure.

Fafner: A violent character who plots to overthrow the gods. After killing his brother and gaining possession of the Nibelung treasure, Fafner turns into a dragon, flees to a cave and guards his hoard.

THE NIBELUNG

Alberich: The villain, but a character without much real power. Chief of the Nibelungen race of dwarfs, skilled smiths who live in the subterranean realm of Nibelheim. He steals the Rheingold from the Rhinemaidens.

Mime: Alberich's brother, a master craftsman, mistreated by Alberich. Creator of the Tarnhelm, a magic helmet that allows the wearer to transform into anything.

References: Opéra de Montréal, BBC Arts

Das Rheingold Synopsis

SCENE 1

The Rhinemaidens frolic in the river and are surprised when Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf, intrudes. They reject his aggressive flirting which turns to mockery and insults. The Rhinemaidens' father ordered them to guard the Rhinegold, which catches Alberich's eye; they explain that a ring fashioned from it could give its possessor the power to rule the world if they renounce love. Angry and humiliated, Alberich steals the gold.

SCENE 2

Wotan, ruler of the gods, is asleep on a mountaintop. Fricka, his wife, wakes him and reminds him that he promised her sister Freia in marriage to Fasolt and Fafner, the giants who built their castle. Freia begs Wotan for protection from the giants, and he hopes that Loge, the cunning demigod of fire, will find a way out for her. Loge disappoints them by explaining that he has wandered the earth searching for a possible ransom for Freia and found nothing to equal her beauty and love.

Loge tells Wotan that Alberich has stolen the Rhinegold, and that the Rhinemaidens are pleading for Wotan to restore it to them. The thought of possessing Alberich's all-powerful ring intrigues Wotan. Loge declares that he can help steal it if Alberich can be subdued. The giants offer to accept the ring in lieu of Freia if Wotan can obtain it. In the meantime, Freia remains their hostage, but without her golden apples to safeguard the gods' immortality, they begin to age. Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim, Alberich's lair.

INTERMISSION

SCENE 3

Loge and Wotan encounter Mime—Alberich's brother—who tells them of Alberich's tyrannical rule. Alberich returns, boasting of the magic helmet called Tarnhelm, crafted by Mime, and of his plans to rule the world. But Loge tricks Alberich, goading him to demonstrate the helmet's powers by transforming himself—first into a snake and then into a toad—which Wotan and Loge seize and bring back to their mountaintop against his will.

SCENE 4

Wotan and Loge pressure Alberich to barter his stash of treasure for his freedom. He hopes to regain Tarnhelm and the magic ring, but when Wotan refuses, Alberich curses the ring so that it will bring only misfortune and death to its owner. When the giants return with Freia, Fasolt refuses to release her, insisting that the gold be piled high enough to hide her. Tarnhelm and the ring are both needed to fully obscure Freia from view, but Wotan demands to keep the ring. Erda, the earth goddess, arrives and warns Wotan that the ring is cursed and that his refusal could doom them. He reconsiders, but Fafner kills his brother for the ring—a realization of Alberich's curse—and takes all of the treasure. As the opera ends, Freia's brother Froh, the god of spring, summons a rainbow, which the gods cross in a triumphant procession to their castle, which Wotan has named Valhalla. Voices of the Rhinemaidens are heard, lamenting the loss of their gold.

The Wagner Problem

“Not as bad as it sounds” was Mark Twain’s witty take on Wagner’s music. But for modern audiences, the problem is not so much the music and dramas, which reflect Wagner’s personal universe. His extreme and overt antisemitism still has the power to shock. In addition, his operas mix elements of Christianity, pagan magic, medieval mythology, and German nationalism into a brew that exalts ideas that are often at odds with our cultural values today. Yet the fact remains that Wagner is foundational to the modern orchestra and to all the classical composers who came after him—even those who are Jewish and who cherish the values of Western liberal democracies.

How are we to experience Wagner’s opera in the modern world? That depends in part on how much you’ve heard them before. For veteran operagoers, the challenge could be termed “the Shylock problem”—No one is about to “cancel” *The Merchant of Venice* based on Shakespeare’s ignorance of Jews. But Wagner’s poisonous sociopathy, which is present in his operas, goes beyond his antisemitism. Apologists such as Wagner scholar Father Owen Lee, sorting through Wagner’s dramatic ideas and sources, find shreds of humanism that are barely there. But if we aren’t convinced, we can’t just sit back and listen, ignoring the texts; as Wagner himself insisted, the music exists only as an embodiment and projection of the drama.

Neither can we decide to skip over these flawed masterpieces; they changed not just music history, but the course of 20th Century art in the West. Contemporary accounts relate how the opening bars of *Tristan und Isolde* caused listeners to faint in terror before the curtain rose. This was the famous “Tristan chord,” actually a progression that hangs in the air, unresolved and ambiguous, expressing longing as nothing in art ever had before. If Wagner could venture so deeply into thoughts and feelings (his own), rejecting the world of external reality, was anything off-limits to the artist?

—Michael Clive, *Pacific Symphony Annotator*



WOTAN SKETCH BY MATTIE ULLRICH



WELLGUNDE SKETCH BY MATTIE ULLRICH

Wagner's Legacy: Great Art and Troubling Ideology

Wagner was an extraordinarily influential figure even beyond the opera house. In music critic Alex Ross' book, *Wagnerism*, he explores Wagner's influence by illustrating the scope of his impact on generations of musicians, poets, philosophers, and filmmakers, as well as how his artistic vision extended past musical limits to become essential to Western cultural understanding.

Wagner's work made a profound impact on a wide range of individuals including Friedrich Nietzsche and Adolf Hitler, as well as early feminists and anarchists. This paradox forces audiences to grapple with the question: how can we differentiate authentic artistic merit from the troubling political beliefs its creator supported? Or, more simply, how does one separate the artist from the art?

IT'S COMPLICATED

Wagner's significant musical achievements alongside his severe antisemitic writings (particularly in *Das Judentum in der Musik* (Jewishness in Music) from 1850) contribute to an ongoing intense discussion regarding his position in cultural history. Wagner attacked Jewish composers while advancing an ideology that disturbingly matched the antisemitic trends of his time. The intersection of exceptional artistic talent and ethical shortcomings challenges our approach to assessing historical figures. Is it appropriate to evaluate historical figures using the moral standards of their own times or should we judge them by contemporary ethical standards?

By choosing contemporary standards we risk eliminating their culturally significant works; however, judging them by their own era's ethics might cause us to ignore the damage their beliefs created. The situation surrounding Wagner demonstrates how artistic accomplishments and moral judgments intersect with historical circumstances necessitating ongoing evaluation of cultural legacy assessments.

Historians recognize how an ideological connection between Wagner and Hitler exists despite Wagner dying long before Hitler used his music for propaganda purposes. Despite Wagner's problematic opinions, Jewish musicians such as Gustav Mahler and Leonard Bernstein continued to perform his work because they valued its enduring artistic excellence, which cannot be separated from its historical context. Today, Daniel Barenboim maintains that Wagner's music allows listeners to gain a deeper historical perspective while uncovering its remarkable creativity and revolutionary impact.

Great art challenges us—not just with what it reveals, but with what it demands. Great art requires individuals to reflect deeply and exhibit courage when facing complexity.

—John Forsythe, Pacific Symphony President



Pacific Symphony

CARL ST. CLAIR MUSIC DIRECTOR