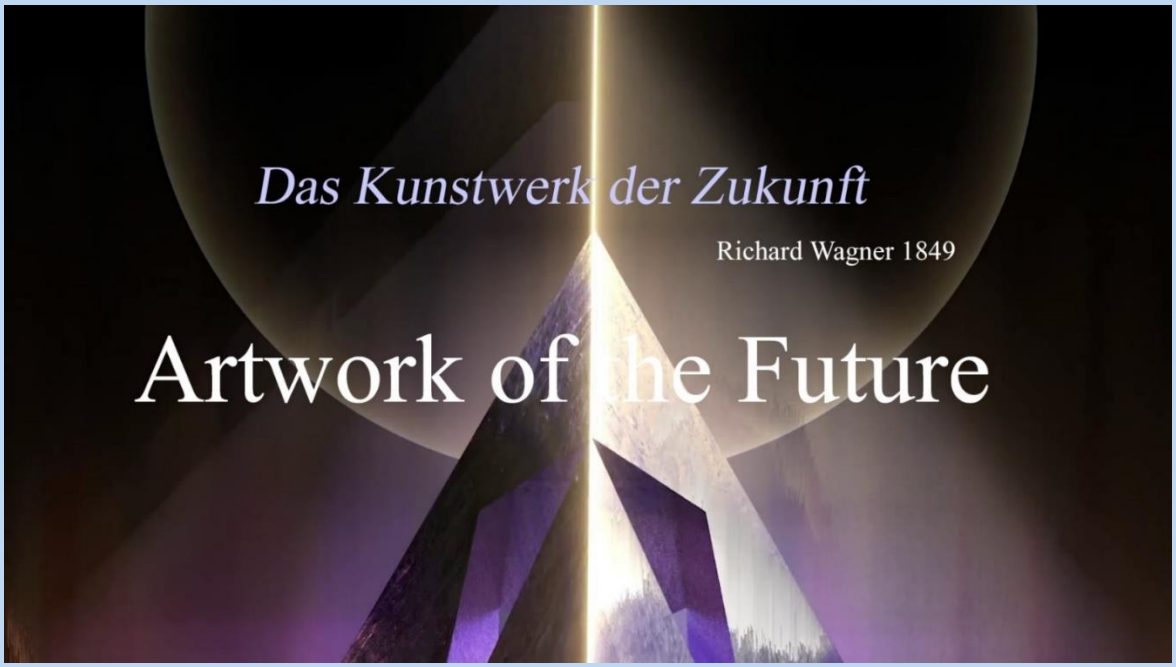
THE *RING*
BRISBANE 2023

An *eBook* by Peter Bassett for the *Ring* Symposia and Talks



The work of art of the future is intended to express the spirit of free people irrespective of all national boundaries; the national element in it must be no more than an ornament, an added individual charm, and not a confining boundary.

From ***Art and Revolution*** by Richard Wagner (1849)

What is the engine that drives the narrative of the *Ring*? What is the impulse that gives form and direction to this story of gods and heroes and the apparently irreconcilable dichotomies of power and love, artifice, and nature? Surely it is the inevitability, indeed the desirability of change. How did Wagner put it? …the necessity of acknowledging "change, variety, multiplicity and the eternal newness of reality and of life, and of yielding to that necessity". The *Ring* shows us that 'change', or if you like 'transformation' is not to be feared but to be welcomed. The positive characters embrace change – the negative ones resist it. Even Wotan in the end welcomes change, as we see in Act III of *Siegfried* when he declares to Erda that the downfall of the gods no longer fills him with fear because it is what he desires. In rage and loathing he had been prepared to surrender the world to Alberich, but now he bequeaths it gladly to Siegfried. On the other hand, Wotan's dark counterpart, Alberich, resists change and is tormented to the end. "Hate happy people" he instructs his son Hagen in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*. Having renounced love to gain power, Alberich is left with neither.

Peter Bassett for *The Australian Psychoanalytical Society Conference*, Adelaide, 2004.

Wagner remains the most influential personality in the history of music … his 11 major works are 11 different worlds. There are 11 different Wagners. *The Rhinegold* orchestra is related to *Lohengrin's*, transcended by extraordinary inventions. *The Valkyrie* has a darker texture – "the most tragic of my works," Wagner said – calling tempests, thunders, and magic fire unique in the history of music. *Siegfried's* orchestra reaches a critical size in the first act. Resuming after seven years of pause, dedicated to *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, Wagner invents a new over-dimensional proportion, exploding the frontiers of orchestral virtuosity. *Twilight of the Gods* transcends all dimensions and all difficulties, exhausting all thematic variations of all the motives in order to give us the ultimate feeling of accomplishment. One cannot escape the overwhelming emotional transfiguration the *Ring* offers. One remembers forever the last chord, pointing out to an eternity of light.

From a *Washington National Opera* interview by *Ring* Conductor **Philippe Auguin**, 2016.

It would be a mistake to assume that Wagner cared more for the orchestra than he did for the voice, which is one accusation often levelled at him. On the contrary, he once remarked that "the human voice is the oldest, the most genuine, and the most beautiful organ of music - the organ to which alone our music owes its existence." In describing the relationship between singer and orchestra in *Tristan und Isolde*, he begged the reader to observe how, in the third act, the gigantic orchestra seems to disappear, or, more correctly speaking, becomes a constituent part of what Tristan is singing. The orchestra as a constituent part of the song sums up Wagner's intentions very well.

From ***Richard Wagner on the Practice and Teaching of Singing*** by Peter Bassett.
8th International Congress of Voice Teachers, Brisbane, July 2013.

Director and production designer **Chen Shi-Zheng** promises that the Brisbane *Ring* will be forward-thinking and spectacular. He is drawing on Australian and Chinese references and placing them in a future digital world. “To renew an old fairy tale” he has said, “I wanted to put it through a future lens. We imagined a different universe and a different perspective.” The natural world comes together with cutting edge technology. Think flowers, snow, rain, forests of trees, minerals from the earth, stone, and fire. The five elements from Chinese philosophy – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water – are a major inspiration. Each opera is set in a particular season.

Richard Wagner directing Rehearsals in 1875 for the first staging of the *Ring* in 1876.

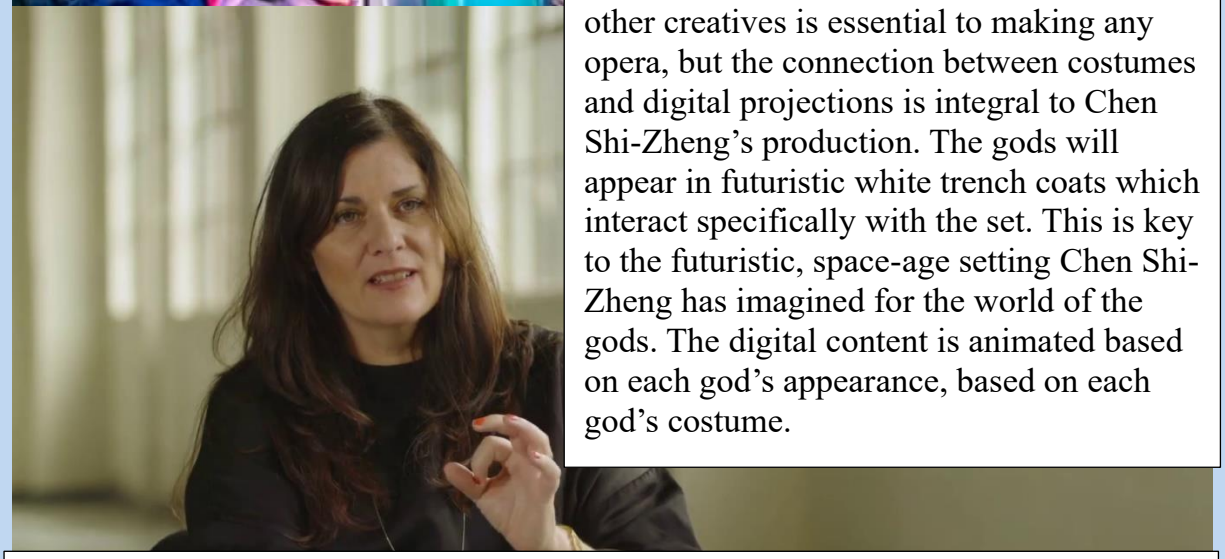
In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the librettist might be simultaneously a provider of words and the director of stage action. Donizetti’s librettist at the San Carlo in Naples, provided all sorts of guidance in connection with the staging of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, such as indicating the stage sides for entrances and exits, the placing of furniture and props, bits of business and swordplay, and positions for the supernumeraries and chorus. On the other hand, there was no way that a so-called ‘director’ of this kind would have told a highly paid *prima donna* how to perform her role. The relativities of pay in 1848 were such that, in Naples, a ‘*prima donna* of special distinction’ commanded 1,200 ducats, while a ‘poet responsible for putting operas on the stage’ was paid just 50!

From ***Life and Art – The Glory of Italian Opera***, by Peter Bassett.

Costume designer **Anita Yavich** is Associate Professor of Theatre Design/Technology in the State University of New York. She has designed for San Francisco Opera, the Royal Opera Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera, Houston Grand Opera, and on *Salome*, *Fidelio*, *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold* for Washington National Opera. She has worked before with Chen Shi-Zheng on various works including *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Spoleto Festival, as well as in China.

In the days of Bellini and Donizetti, some singers came to rule the operatic roost. The contracts of Caterina Gabrielli (1730-96) for instance, included stipulations that she would use her own costumes in the operas in which she sang. The role of a dedicated costume designer, as understood today, dates from the latter part of the 19th century.

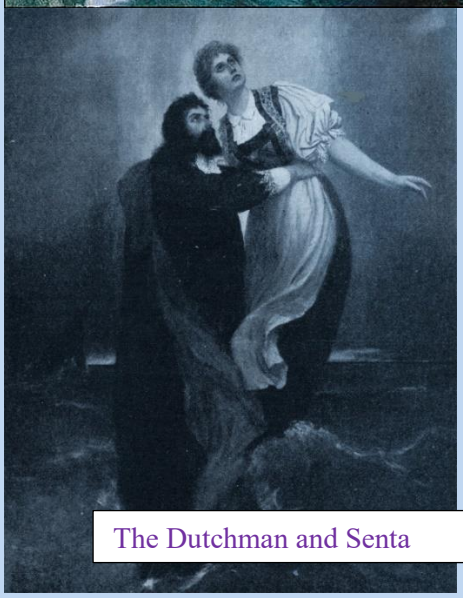
The collaboration between designers and other creatives is essential to making any opera, but the connection between costumes and digital projections is integral to Chen Shi-Zheng's production. The gods will appear in futuristic white trench coats which interact specifically with the set. This is key to the futuristic, space-age setting Chen Shi-Zheng has imagined for the world of the gods. The digital content is animated based on each god's appearance, based on each god's costume.



Leigh Sachwitz is the Digital Content Designer of the Brisbane *Ring*. She has worked with the Berlin Philharmonic, Bregenz Festival, Royal Opera House, ENO, Lithuanian National Opera, San Francisco Opera, and the Reignwood Theatre Beijing among others. Her work with Chen Shi-Zheng has included *A Chinese Home* (Sydney Festival), *La traviata* (Vilnius), *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (ENO), Kronos Quartett (Tour) *The Hegemon King Says Farewell to his Queen* (Beijing), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (San Francisco).

Wagner never tired of comparing the 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements in *The Flying Dutchman* with Faust and Gretchen in Goethe's play. There are links too to Beethoven's *Fidelio*. When Senta tells the Dutchman that she would ease his suffering, he, like Florestan in his prison cell invoking an angelic Leonore, describes her too as an angel. And the dying Siegfried thinks only of Brünnhilde: *"Leaving is sweet, trembling blissful. Brünnhilde offers me her greeting!"* She, in turn, directs her last words to him: *"Siegfried! Siegfried! Blissfully, your wife greets you!"*

Goethe's *Faust* was profoundly important for Wagner. He knew of it as a young boy and read it as a teenager, and he composed songs, *Seven Compositions on Goethe's Faust* (1829–30) probably in conjunction with the appearance of his sister Rosalie as Gretchen in the first Leipzig production. His *Faust Overture* (1839/1855) anticipated the *Ring* in some of its compositional structure. The redeeming quality of a woman's love with roots in the Faustian idea of the *'ewige weibliche'* - 'the eternal feminine' - continued to fascinate Wagner for forty years. In February 1883, he suffered his fatal heart attack while working on an essay entitled *On the Feminine Principle in Mankind*.



The Dutchman and Senta

Tannhäuser and Elisabeth

Chinese Landscape by Huang Junbi (1898-1991).
Inspiration for the 2015 *Götterdämmerung* scenery?

Götterdämmerung by the China National Opera in 2015.

'*Mist at Dawn'* by Chang Dai-chien (1899-1983).
Chang Dai-chien was a renowned expressionist painter.

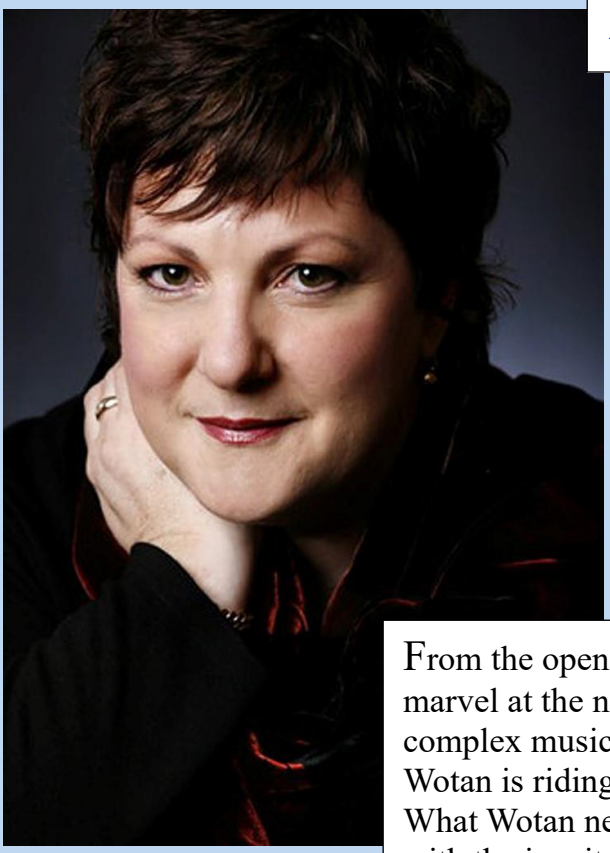
"The wakening sun laughs to the depths."
Set model for Scene 1 of *Das Rheingold* 2023.

Set model for Act One of *Die Walküre* Brisbane 2023.

Professor Colin Mackerras in Beijing.

Colin Mackerras AO is Professor Emeritus of Griffith University and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. He has worked at Griffith University in Queensland since 1974 teaching and researching on China, including its history and contemporary times. He has published widely on China, especially its musical theatre. He comes from a distinguished musical family and has been a Wagner enthusiast since his youth.

Liane Keegan - *Erda*



Rehearsing as Erda for the Adelaide/Châtelet *Ring* of 1998.

From the opening bars of Act 3 of *Siegfried* we can only marvel at the new facility with which Wagner handles his complex musical forces and elaborate thematic structures. Wotan is riding to see Erda to find out what the future holds. What Wotan needs to know now is how to come to terms with the inevitable. There is nothing he can do to change the course of events for, as Erda has declared, “all that exists will end”. Wotan had taken the earliest steps away from a state of nature when he had drunk at the spring of wisdom, torn a branch from the world ash and imprinted the law upon it, just as Adam had tasted the fruit of the Garden of Eden. Wotan's overweening ambition had hastened the decline, but it would have happened anyway. Now he must learn how to accept the inevitable; the wheel cannot stop turning. As Wagner himself put it in 1854: “This is everything that we have to learn from the history of mankind: to will the inevitable and to carry it out oneself.”

When Erda had “plunged the dagger of worry” into Wotan's heart in *Das Rheingold*, the god had then pursued her to the depths of the earth where he had learned wisdom. In return, she had exacted a pledge. What was this pledge? We are not told specifically, either in *Die Walküre* or *Siegfried*, but the fruit of their meeting was Brünnhilde. In the person of Brünnhilde, Erda gave Wotan the means of finding the peace he so desperately craved, and the means of honouring his pledge - to will the inevitable and carry it out. Since Brünnhilde was “his other self”" (as she said in Act 2 of *Walküre*), when Erda told Wotan to consult the ‘wish-maiden’, she was effectively telling him to examine his conscience.

Liane Keegan as Erda in the 2004 Adelaide *Ring*. She also performed as Erda in the 2016 Opera Australia Melbourne *Ring*.

Luke Gabbedy - *Gunther*

Hagen encourages the 'blood brotherhood' of Gunther and Siegfried. A scene from Fritz Lang's silent film of 1924, *Die Nibelungen*, based on the epic poem *Nibelungenlied* (Lay of the Nibelungs) one of Wagner's sources and written around 1200.

The scene at the Hall of the Gibichungs on the banks of the Rhine marks the true beginning of *Götterdämmerung*. All that has gone before is by way of a prologue. Gunther and Gutrune, brother and sister, are the rulers of this place. With them is their half-brother Hagen, son of Alberich. Gunther is uncertain of himself and requires constant reassurance. His sister is sweet but malleable. Hagen exploits them both. Luke Gabbedy performed as Gunther in the 2016 Opera Australia Melbourne *Ring*.

Blood Brothers - and the abduction of Brünnhilde

Siegfried undergoes a metamorphosis in Act One of *Götterdämmerung*, being transformed by the Tarnhelm not only into Gunther but also into a brute. For the moment, he is no better than his old *bête noire*, Fafner, who had been similarly transformed by the Tarnhelm. In *Die Walküre*, Wotan had sentenced Brünnhilde to be taken by the first stranger who chanced by. Brünnhilde had recoiled from this terrifying prospect, pleading with her father to protect her with fire against all but the greatest hero. When Siegfried-as-Gunther emerges suddenly from the flames, he reawakens memories of the terrible fate once threatened by the "angry and cruel god". Brünnhilde, brimming with joy at the prospect of the returning Siegfried, is emotionally crushed. It is in this moment that she renounces love as surely as Alberich had renounced it in the depths of the Rhine. The drugged Siegfried compounds the tragedy by tearing the ring from her finger, mimicking Wotan's violent act of wrenching it from the finger of the Nibelung. The consequences are equally devastating. In this scene, the brutish Siegfried has no redeeming features except loyalty to his blood brother, demonstrated by the placing of the sword between him and Brünnhilde in their marital bed. Thus, the sword, once shattered along with Wotan's ambitions and then naïvely taken up by Siegfried, comes again (literally) between husband and wife as it had (metaphorically) between Wotan and Fricka.

From ***The Gods Grown Old*** by Peter Bassett. Published in the program book for the 2004 Adelaide *Ring* and subsequently for the 4-CD set *Der Ring des Nibelungen - Explorations* (Decca 2012).

The Orchestral Perspective

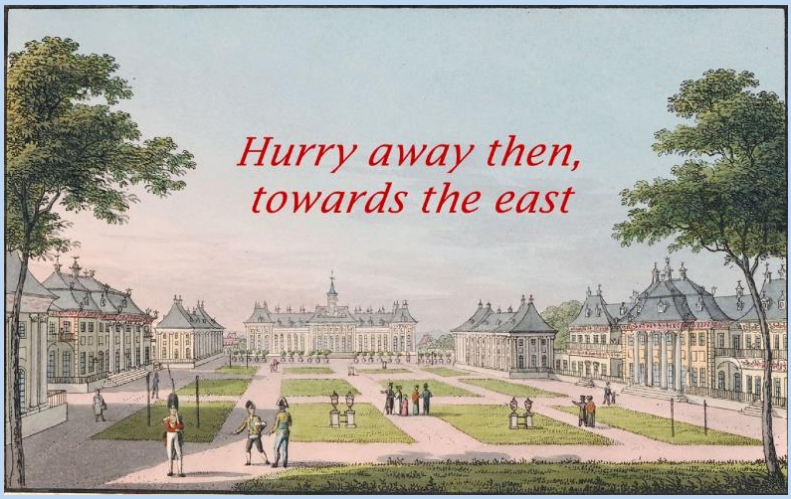
The descriptive power of the *Ring* orchestra

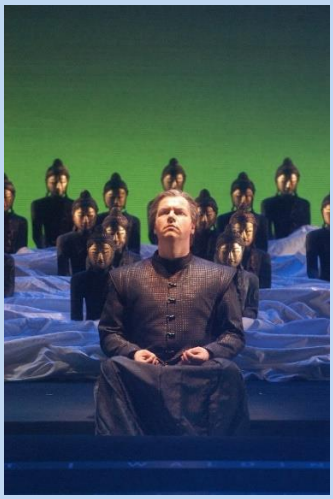
The orchestra of the *Ring* pours out information unceasingly, even when there is no action and the singers are mute. This phenomenon reaches its ultimate sophistication in *Götterdämmerung* where, in Ernest Newman's words, "the course of the drama is told with absolute clearness in the orchestra itself". When, in Act 2 of *Siegfried*, the adolescent hero hears the Woodbird and tries to communicate with it, he is unable to understand its meaning until he has tasted the dragon's blood. Understanding the *Ring* is all about 'tasting the dragon's blood'; that is, being able to 'tune in' to Wagner's highly expressive musical language.

Wagner's skill as a composer has two important features. Firstly, he exploited his rich thematic material with consummate mastery. He was proud, and rightly so, of the subtlety with which his themes were interwoven and developed 'symphonically' to give expression to dramatic action. Secondly, he was able to create themes that not only seemed appropriate to their subject but had a powerful effect on the listener's own sense of recollection. His 'melodic moments of feeling' make an impression, not because we hear them once and so recognise them again, but because they seem familiar even when we hear them for the first time. The most obvious examples are the melodic representations of nature – the Rhine, the Woodbird, the forest and so on – which strike us immediately as utterly recognisable. However, we can also identify instinctively with the musical representations of a whole range of emotions and moods.

From ***The Nibelung's Ring*** by Peter Bassett. Wakefield Press, 2nd ed. 2003.

Adjunct Professor Stephen Emmerson is a respected pianist, teacher and scholar who was, for several decades, on the full-time staff of Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University. He has performed with orchestras and chamber ensembles in Australia and abroad and has made numerous recordings and radio broadcasts. His musical interests are wide, but the accomplishments of Richard Wagner have been among his passions for a long time.





Brünnhilde's injunction to Sieglinde after the death of Siegmund to "hurry away then, towards the east" also expresses Wagner's own preoccupation with eastern stories and philosophies and their blending with Norse and Germanic mythology. Pillnitz castle on the Elbe, shown here with its Chinese-inspired palace, was familiar to Wagner in childhood and in the 1840s when he was Second Kapellmeister to Friedrich August II. On the right is Stefan Vinke (Siegfried in Brisbane) seen here as Parsifal in Leipzig, meditating in a field of Buddha images – conveying the Buddhist/Christian syncretism of *Parsifal*.

Richard Wagner's greatest works were composed during the last three decades of his life, and it was no coincidence that, during that time, he embraced both the philosophical writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and the religious insights of ancient India. In a letter to Liszt in 1855 he wrote admiringly of "the oldest and most sacred religion known to man, Brahman teaching and its final transfiguration in Buddhism, where it achieved its most perfect form".

In 1852, while working on his *Rheingold* poem, he had written to his former assistant August Röckel about the poetry of the 14th century Persian mystic, Hafiz, saying: "Study Hafiz properly. … something similar will also become clear in my *Nibelungen*." The Persian poet had something to say about fate and destiny that is relevant to Wagner's treatment of the Wanderer and Erda in *Siegfried*. Wotan (Wanderer) believes that success, life, and power are all that matters, but Erda tells him that such things will end; he is not the ultimate controller of his fate. Hafiz describes the futility of resisting an appointed destiny, and he offers only one solution: "Cast the world aside, yes abandon it", a solution that Wotan ultimately adopts. The future belongs to Siegfried, which is to say, to humanity no longer beholden to the gods. The poems of Hafiz inspired Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (1814-19). The clearest and perhaps most important Buddhist connection with the *Ring* came with a change in 1856 to the text for the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung*. Earlier versions contemplated the survival of the gods (in 1848), and then (in 1852) the destruction of the gods and the triumph of love over wealth and power – the so-called 'Feuerbach ending'. By 1856 however, Wagner's preoccupation was no longer with redemption through love but with redemption through renunciation, and this became the true moral of the *Ring*.

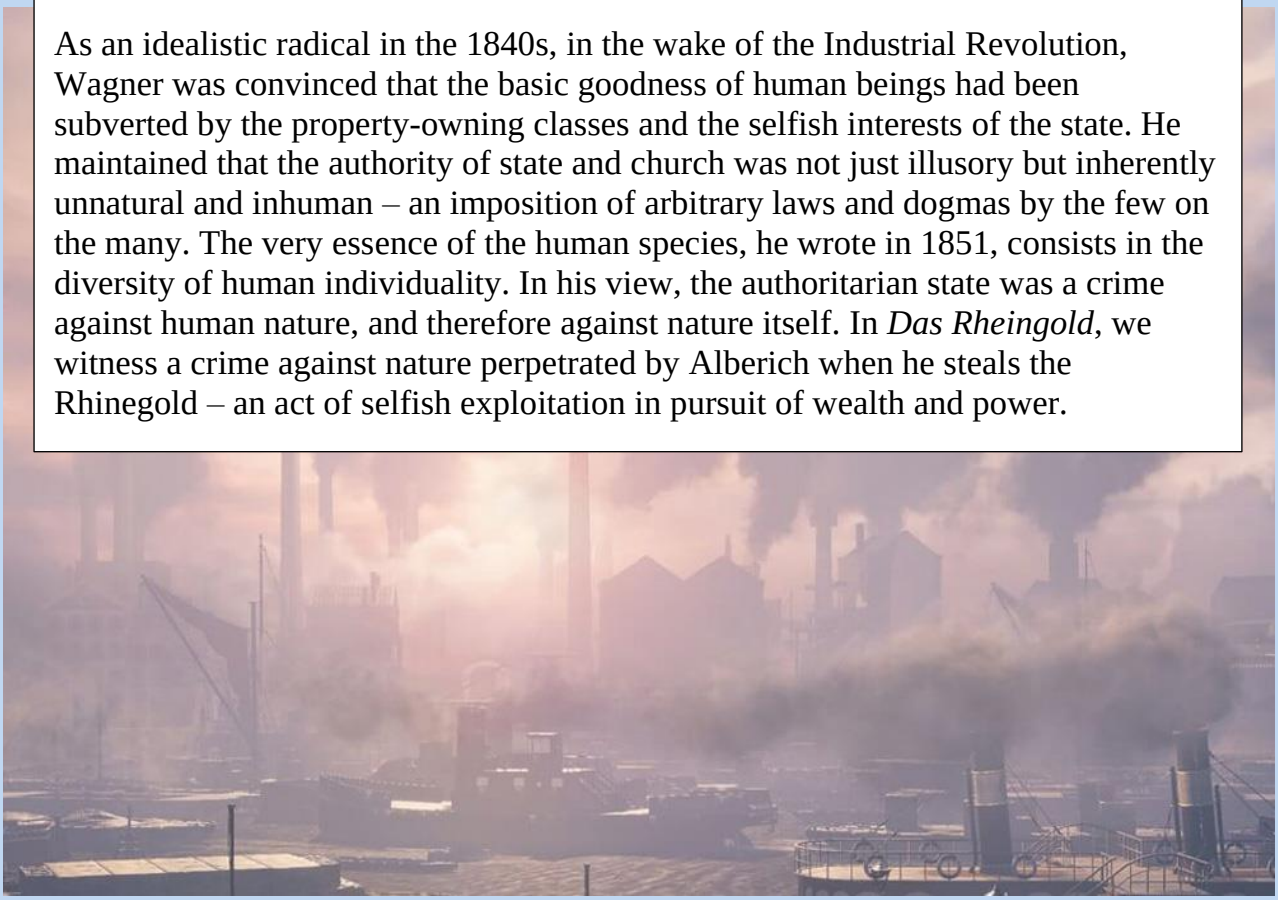
See ***The Use of Eastern Concepts in Wagner's Stage Works*** by Peter Bassett, The Wagner Journal Volume 14, Number 2, July 2020.

Das Rheingold

More than a myth

At first glance, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* seems to be about the golden ring that is made, lost, cursed and coveted by Alberich, the Nibelung. But, of course, it is about much more than that. It's an allegory of politics and power, of love and vengeance, of humanity's struggle for a better world, and of the psychological forces that shape our goals and determine our actions.

As an idealistic radical in the 1840s, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Wagner was convinced that the basic goodness of human beings had been subverted by the property-owning classes and the selfish interests of the state. He maintained that the authority of state and church was not just illusory but inherently unnatural and inhuman – an imposition of arbitrary laws and dogmas by the few on the many. The very essence of the human species, he wrote in 1851, consists in the diversity of human individuality. In his view, the authoritarian state was a crime against human nature, and therefore against nature itself. In *Das Rheingold*, we witness a crime against nature perpetrated by Alberich when he steals the Rhinegold – an act of selfish exploitation in pursuit of wealth and power.



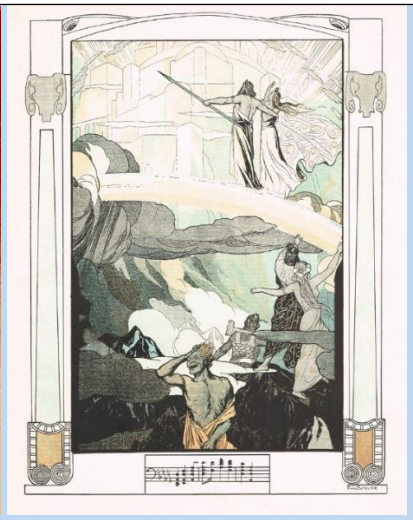
1848 - the year in which Wagner first sketched out his ideas on the Nibelung myth - was also the year in which revolutions broke out in many European capitals, and Marx and Engels published their *Communist Manifesto*. Wagner sided with the revolutionaries and was involved in writing pamphlets, ordering munitions, and reporting on troop movements. The Dresden uprising was suppressed, and a warrant was issued for his arrest for treason. With the help of Franz Liszt, he managed to escape into Switzerland and exile.

Richard Wagner was an impassioned artist, and his revolutionary leanings were motivated primarily by his artistic frustrations. He railed against the shallow attitude of the public towards art, and against a materialistic society that perpetuated such shallowness. And so, the *Ring* as first conceived, was a political allegory of Wagner's own time.

To effect his scene-changes, Wagner wrote transitional passages that were masterpieces of musical description. From the depths of the Rhine, plunged into darkness by the theft of the gold, he takes us up into less watery realms, up, with occasional echoes of the Rhinedaughters' grief, through mists and fogs, to the bright sun-lit atmosphere of a very high place. There, Wotan and his consort Fricka awake to admire the towers of Valhalla, built by the giants at Wotan's behest, and which gleam in the rays of the rising sun.

But all is not sweetness and light. The liquid, plaintive music of the Rhinedaughters and the slippery, pungent music of Alberich have given way to a brittle mood of marital stress and strain. Wotan is a notorious philanderer, like Zeus in Greek mythology, and, as payment for building Valhalla, he has even promised to hand over her sister Freia, the goddess of youth and love, to the brutish giants. In a sense then, Wotan too has renounced love by offering Freia as the price for Valhalla.

One of the most exciting passages in *Das Rheingold* is that known as the descent to Nibelheim. Determined to obtain the ring and the golden hoard (and wriggle out of his commitment to give Freia to the giants) Wotan decides to go with Loge, god of fire and trickery, down through a fissure in the rock to the subterranean caverns where Alberich has enslaved the rest of his race. It is not just a physical journey, although that seems real enough with its downward rush and sulphurous chromaticism; there is a psychological journey too. The motifs that drive the orchestral sound are those associated with Alberich forswearing love, the gold and the ring, the spurning of Alberich by the Rhinedaughters (the latter theme transforming itself into the hellish and unforgettable hammering of anvils) and, pervading everything, the sinister harmonies of the ring. Wagner's orchestration is nowhere more varied and brilliant than in this scene in Nibelheim, nor his vocal line more lively. It is a striking manifestation of his theories of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the fusion of text, music, scene, and action in the service of the drama.



Wotan and Loge trick and capture Alberich and drag him back to the surface where Wotan tears the ring from his finger. Alberich curses the ring before leaving the gods to their fate. The wise goddess Erda appears and tells Wotan to give up the ring; all that exists will end. Reluctantly, Wotan gives the ring to the giants, and one kills the other. The gods pass over a rainbow bridge to Valhalla, but Wotan remains determined to recover the ring.

Die Walküre

The most eternal of all things

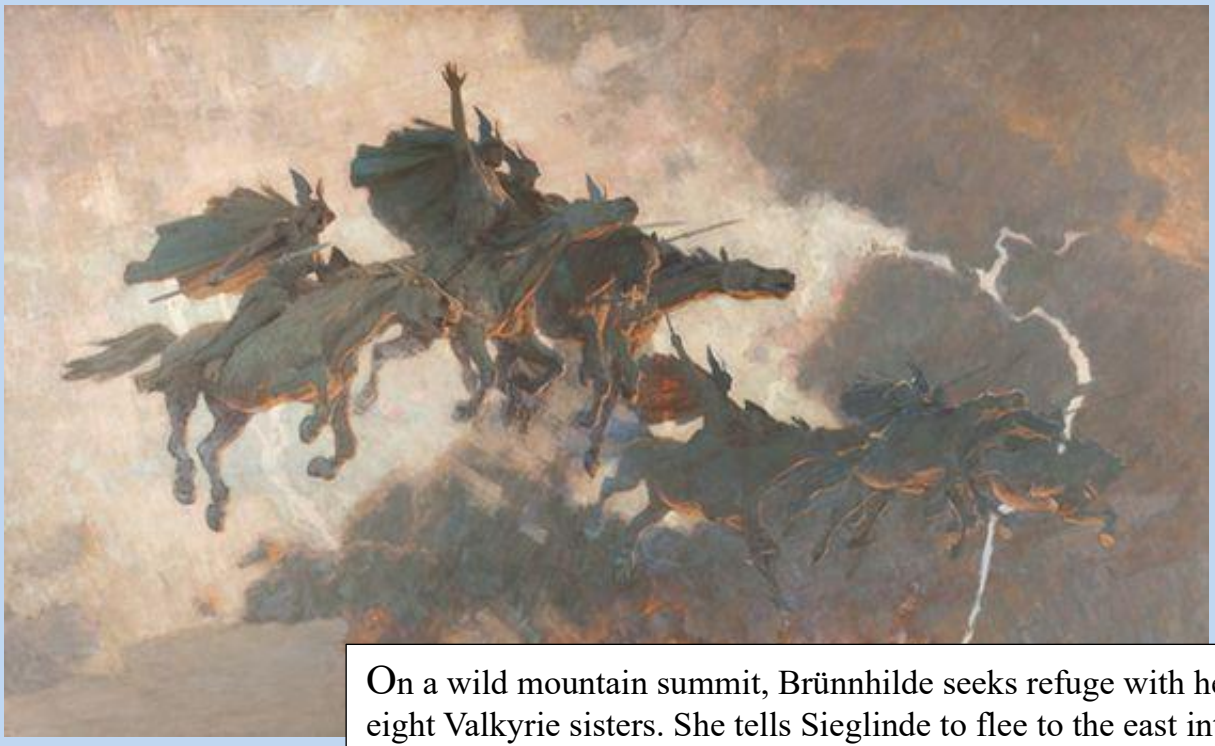
With *Die Walküre*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* begins in earnest. The god Wotan now becomes the central figure. Wagner referred to him as "the sum of the intelligence of the present". He uses and abuses his half-mortal son, Siegmund and, when faced with a crisis of his own making, sacrifices him. When his favourite daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, displays the compassion he had suppressed, he sacrifices her too. Of course, when he punishes her, he is really punishing himself for she is, to begin with, merely an aspect of Wotan's own character - an extension of himself. Time and again, power and love are shown to be incompatible forces; the ways of the world versus the ways of the heart.

In the first Act we experience intensely the joy of love's presence and the pain of love's absence. The twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, separated in childhood, rediscover each other in a forest hut, although mutual recognition comes slowly. Siegmund arrives exhausted in the midst of a storm, fleeing from his enemies. Firelight glints on a sword hilt buried in the ash tree. Wotan's 'great idea' had been to use his mortal offspring to regain the ring from the giant Fafner who now guards it and the Nibelung hoard in the form of a monstrous dragon. Siegmund, armed with the sword, would do what the god, enmeshed in his laws, could not.

Towards the end of Act One, brother and sister see each other clearly, and they comment on their likenesses - the way they look, the way they sound - and they probe relentlessly at each other's identity. When the young man calls his father by another name – *Wälse* - and acknowledges his race as the Volsungs, Sieglinde tells him rapturously that the sword is intended for him. She names him *Siegmund*, and with a mighty effort, he pulls the sword from the tree, calling it *Notung* – 'needful'. She reveals herself as his sister Sieglinde. Passionately he draws her to him and with music of the greatest excitement, they embrace as the curtain falls.

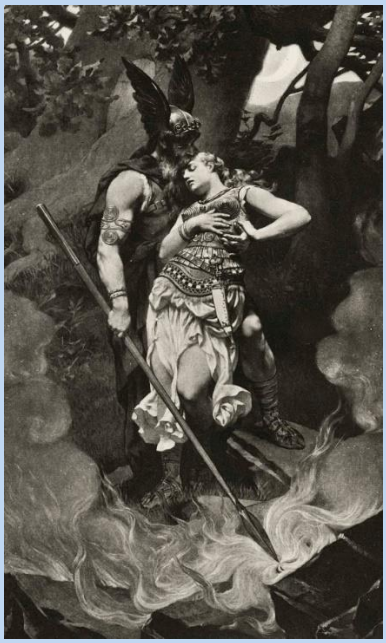
Act Two of *Die Walküre* lies at the very heart of the *Ring*. It is the fulcrum about which the whole drama turns. It contains not one but two dramatic high points - the tormented soliloquy of Wotan as he reveals his innermost anxieties, and the great scene that commences with the annunciation of death by Brünnhilde to Siegmund and ends with her disobedience and fall from grace.

For all his hard-heartedness and suppressed emotion, Wotan soon undergoes a strange and moving process of self-discovery. Trapped in a political and moral quagmire, he begins to accept the inevitability of his demise and the end of the gods. He reaches the startling conclusion that all he really wants is an end to everything. At first, he hesitates, not wanting to confront his inner self. Only when Brünnhilde convinces him that she really is his *alter ego*, does he let go, and everything comes pouring out. Finally, and bitterly, at the behest of Fricka, he instructs Brünnhilde to give victory to Hunding, the wronged husband of Sieglinde, in the coming confrontation, and he threatens Brünnhilde with punishment if she disobeys him. Her annunciation of death to Siegmund follows but, deeply moved by Siegmund's love for Sieglinde, Brünnhilde defies her father. A furious Wotan intervenes and Hunding kills Siegmund when the sword *Notung* is broken on Wotan's spear.



On a wild mountain summit, Brünnhilde seeks refuge with her eight Valkyrie sisters. She tells Sieglinde to flee to the east into the forest, gives her the pieces of the sword and informs her that she will bear the noblest hero, who will be named Siegfried. Wotan catches up with Brünnhilde and condemns her to mortality, to be left asleep and vulnerable to the first man who finds her. However, he is moved by her plea that she knew that he loved Siegmund and was only doing what he himself wanted in his heart. With his spear, Wotan directs a sea of fire to encircle the rock, from where it spreads to enclose the whole mountain. “Whoever fears the point of my spear” he says, “shall never pass through the fire”, and the motif of the unborn Siegfried makes its presence felt in the orchestra. With one last, sorrowful look back at the sleeping Brünnhilde, Wotan disappears through the flames.

After his separation from Brünnhilde, Wotan is no more than a departed spirit. Now he can only accept things; let things happen as they will. It is left to Siegfried - the man of free will, who knows that death is preferable to living in fear - to brave Wotan’s spear point and pass through the fire.

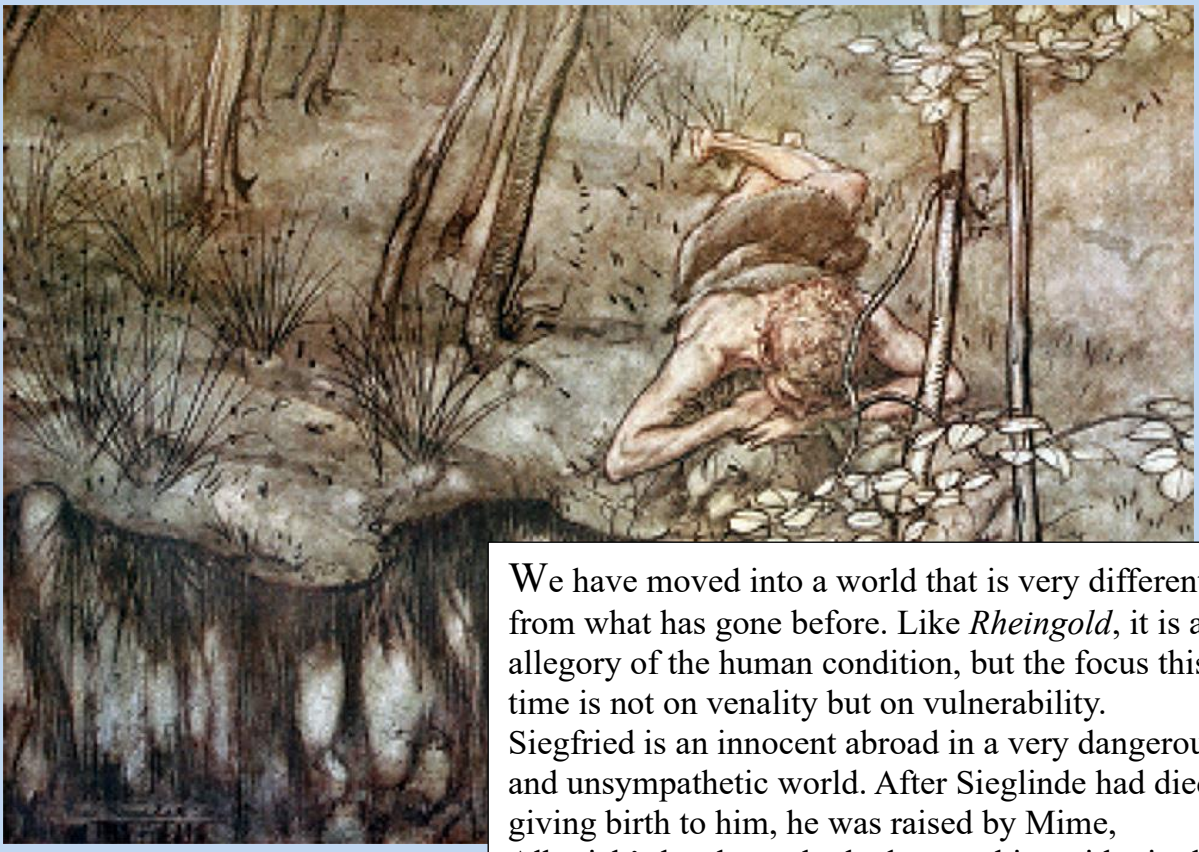


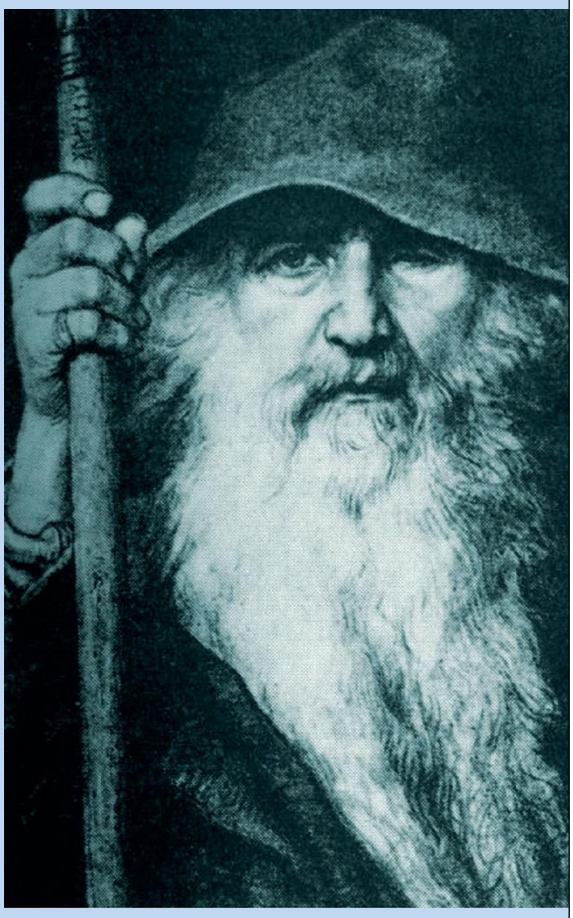
Siegfried

An innocent abroad

The old *Nibelung* sagas and the legends of Siegfried were immensely popular in the post-Napoleonic days of Wagner's youth, when German unification was in the air and poets and playwrights were keen to demonstrate the richness of their own culture.

But as Wagner's dramas evolved, it became clear that, far from warranting redemption, the gods were no longer relevant. So where did that leave poor Siegfried, stripped of his function as the gods' redeemer? A centuries-held view was that 'heroes' were essentially superhuman, usually because of divine ancestry. But, in the *Ring*, the mature Siegfried represents the triumph of humanity over the gods. For 'hero' we must now read 'human'. That is why we witness Wotan (the Wanderer) giving way to Siegfried in the drama *Siegfried* and why, in *Götterdämmerung*, the gods have no role to play at all, being merely figments of memory and imagination. Their authoritarian place has been supplanted by human beings exercising free will and compassionate love. And that is the key message of Wagner's *Siegfried*.





We have moved into a world that is very different from what has gone before. Like *Rheingold*, it is an allegory of the human condition, but the focus this time is not on venality but on vulnerability. Siegfried is an innocent abroad in a very dangerous and unsympathetic world. After Sieglinde had died giving birth to him, he was raised by Mime, Alberich's brother, who had set up his smithy in the forest, close (but not too close) to Fafner's lair *Neidhöhle*, the cave of envy.

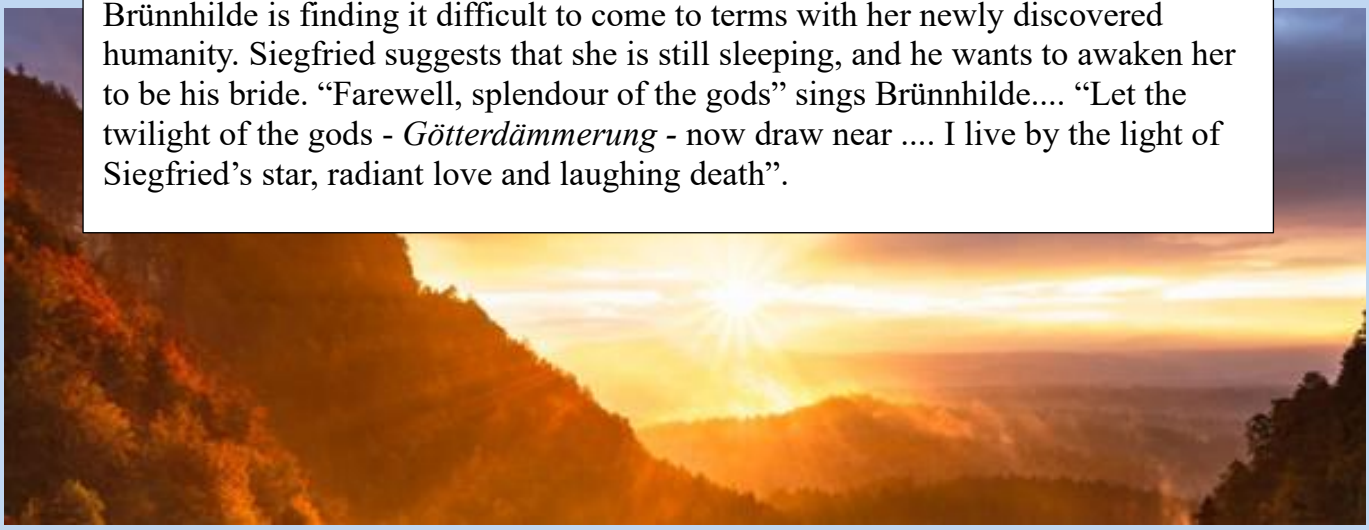
Mime is a much weaker character than his brother Alberich, and resorts to wiles and stratagems to get his way. He would train Siegfried to win for him Alberich's ring. And after that? Well, Siegfried would have served his purpose and could be disposed of.

Wotan in the guise of the Wanderer enters the cave from the forest. The visitor asks if Mime would like to learn something from him, and offers to wager his own head in trying to answer any three questions put to him. Mime asks three simple questions, all of which are easily answered. Then the Wanderer asks *him* three questions on forfeit of *his* head. The Wanderer's last question is: "Who shall forge *Notung* anew?" Mime doesn't know, but the answer is revealed: "One who has never learnt fear". The Wanderer advises Mime to guard his head well, and leaves it forfeit to him who doesn't know fear. He then departs as mysteriously as he came. Siegfried reforges *Notung*.

Deep in the forest, near the mouth of Fafner's cave, the desperately lonely Siegfried tries to imagine what his mother was like, and the music takes on a most delicate and tender quality. There is good reason to think that, for Siegfried, the song of the Woodbird which he hears above him, is the voice of his mother's love, warning her son of danger and leading him to Brünnhilde. Siegfried eventually kills the dragon and emerges from the cave with two items - the Tarnhelm (a cap of invisibility and transformation made by Mime in Nibelheim) and the ring. Having accidentally tasted the dragon's blood, he can now understand what the bird is singing. Once again, the bird speaks to him, warning him of Mime's treachery and telling him that he will be able to see through the dwarf's words to the secret intentions of his heart. In due course, Mime's plans to end the life of the young Siegfried result in his own death, and Siegfried sets off, following the bird to find Brünnhilde asleep on the mountain top.

High in the mountains, the Wanderer summons Erda from her sleep and pours out his troubled heart. Eventually, he brings himself to acknowledge the inevitability of change, the demise of the old order and the emergence of a new one to which Siegfried belongs. He bequeaths the future to the young Volsung who doesn't even know him but who is destined to awaken Brünnhilde. She, in turn, will set the world free.

Finally, Siegfried leaves the flames behind him and reaches the brilliant sunlight and pure atmosphere of the mountain top. For the first time he feels fear, but he awakens the sleeping figure with a kiss. Then there unfolds a rapturous love duet. Brünnhilde is finding it difficult to come to terms with her newly discovered humanity. Siegfried suggests that she is still sleeping, and he wants to awaken her to be his bride. "Farewell, splendour of the gods" sings Brünnhilde.... "Let the twilight of the gods - *Götterdämmerung* - now draw near .... I live by the light of Siegfried's star, radiant love and laughing death".



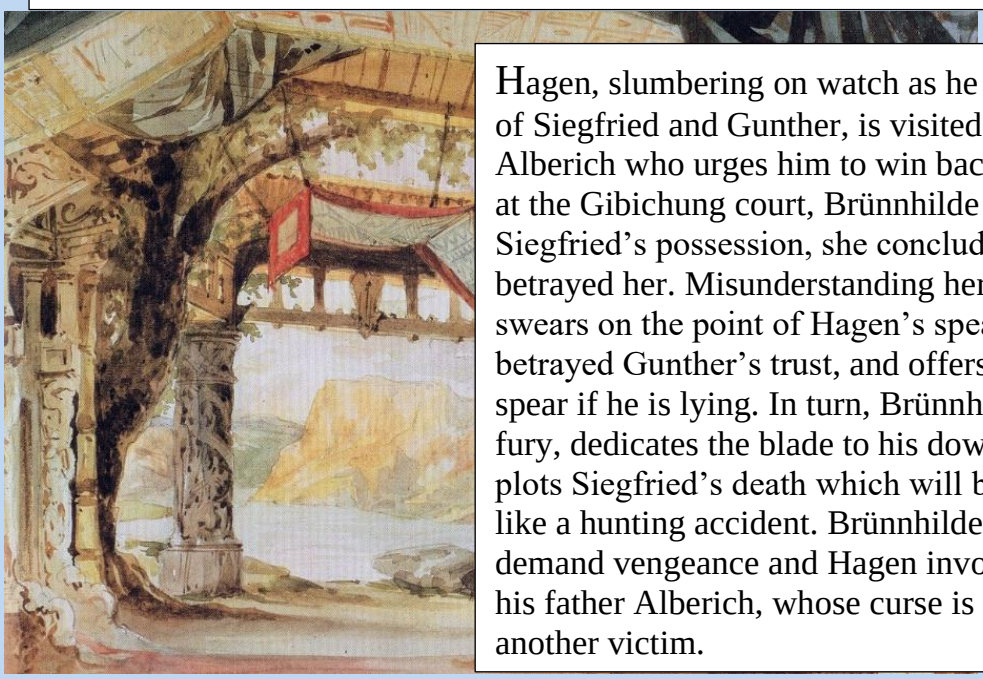
Götterdämmerung

Wisdom through suffering and love

Götterdämmerung contains a number of paradoxes. This is drama on the grandest scale, but it is concerned not with the cosmic ambitions of gods and goddesses, giants and dwarfs but the day-to-day relationships of men and women. Its principal figures, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, spend much of their time behaving in ways that are totally out of character. The three Norns - the daughters of Erda - spin the rope of world knowledge that binds past, present, and future. The rope breaks. Their wisdom ends. The Norns vanish. Day begins to dawn.

The lovers emerge from their shelter. Siegfried is about to set out on adventures and gives Brünnhilde the ring as a token of his love. He is, he says, no longer Siegfried but Brünnhilde's arm, endowed with her spirit. For her part, she wants to be Siegfried's soul. They have, in a sense, merged their identities. At one time, Brünnhilde was Wotan's "other self" as she described it, but now Siegfried has entirely replaced Wotan in her consciousness. She gives him her horse, Grane, to be his companion in the world of men. Siegfried disappears from view, and then we hear the extended orchestral interlude known as the journey to the Rhine. At a hall on the banks of the Rhine live the Gibichung rulers, Gunther and Gutrune, and their half-brother Hagen, the son of Alberich. Hagen urges Gunther and Gutrune to find partners, and proposes Siegfried for Gutrune and Brünnhilde for Gunther. Siegfried arrives and is given a potion which blocks out his memory of Brünnhilde.

Meanwhile, Brünnhilde rejects the pleas of her sister, the Valkyrie Waltraute, to free the gods from their impending doom by returning the cursed ring to the Rhinedaughters. To Brünnhilde, the ring symbolises Siegfried's love for her. Siegfried disguises himself as Gunther by means of the Tarnhelm, penetrates the circle of fire, seizes the ring, and abducts Brünnhilde to be Gunther's bride.



Hagen, slumbering on watch as he awaits the return of Siegfried and Gunther, is visited by his father Alberich who urges him to win back the ring. When, at the Gibichung court, Brünnhilde sees the ring in Siegfried's possession, she concludes that he has betrayed her. Misunderstanding her accusation, he swears on the point of Hagen's spear that he has not betrayed Gunther's trust, and offers his body to the spear if he is lying. In turn, Brünnhilde, roused to fury, dedicates the blade to his downfall. Hagen plots Siegfried's death which will be made to look like a hunting accident. Brünnhilde and Gunther demand vengeance and Hagen invokes the spirit of his father Alberich, whose curse is about to claim another victim.

During the hunt, Siegfried strays from the rest of the party to the river, where the Rhinedaughters try to persuade him to return the ring. He rebuffs them and rejoins the hunting party. He recounts the story of Mime, Notung, Fafner and the Woodbird. Hagen drops an antidote into Siegfried's drink and, gradually, as he speaks, his memory returns. When he recalls how he passed through the fire to Brünnhilde and embraced her, Gunther is shocked at this revelation. Hagen plunges his spear into Siegfried's back. Siegfried dies with the name of his beloved Brünnhilde on his lips and is carried back to the hall of the Gibichungs.

Hagen kills Gunther in a fight over the ring. Brünnhilde interrupts the mourning. She understands Wotan's wish to end the rule of the gods and extinguish the curse which has now claimed her innocent lover. She directs the building of a funeral pyre and, taking the ring, joins Siegfried in the flames. The Rhine overflows its banks and, in the heavens, Valhalla itself is seen consumed by fire. The Rhinedaughters swim on the flood to reclaim the ring and, as Hagen tries to seize it, they drag him down into the depths. Thus, the old order passes away. In its place is a new vision of human existence, revealed to Brünnhilde through her suffering and love.