

At the end, realizing that only she can break the cycle of death, Brünnhilde sets fire to Valhalla, returns the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, and rides into the flames. Wagner ends the cataclysm with a page of transcendent music representing redemption, but later directors find different ways to stage it.

Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, opening (Copenhagen 2006, Kasper Bech Holten, *director*; Irène Théorin, *Brünnhilde*)

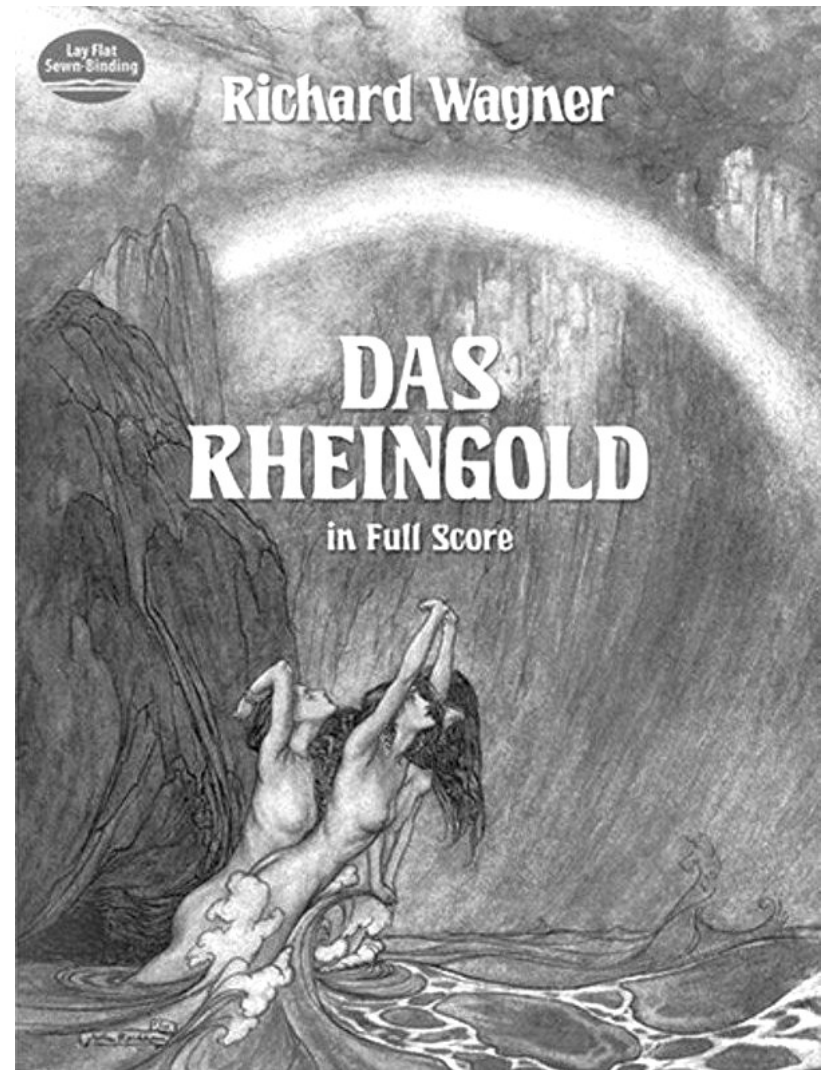
Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, wakening of the Gold (as above)

Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, ending (as above)

Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde's farewell (as above)

Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*, ending (as above)

OPERA PRODUCTION



The class website is www.brunyate.com/RenInstProduction/
I will always answer eMail at rogerbrunyate@gmail.com

10. EMBRACING THE EPIC

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WAGNER'S "RING OF THE NIBELUNGS," THAT FOUR-EVENING CYCLE of long operas about the founding of the modern world, has become a kind of Everest+K2 for opera directors, the ultimate test of skill. One talks about "the Chéreau Ring," or "the Lepage Ring," or "the Castorf Ring" as though they were separate entities—which in effect they are, each with its own look and philosophy.

The challenge of staging the *Ring* has two components that are often in opposition. One is to respond to the epic scale and mythic resonance of a score that is very much an organic unit, shifting shape and gaining depth even as you watch. The other is to find ways of taking a story born of a particular time and culture—Germany in the 19th Century—and making it relevant to modern audiences.

It is obviously impossible to cover the entire work in a 75-minute class, so we shall take three celebrated passages—the "Ride of the Valkyries" in the second opera, *Die Walküre*; the opening of the first one, *Das Rheingold*; and the very end of the last one, *Götterdämmerung*—and see how they have been handled by some of the leading directors of our day.

A. ALONG FOR THE RIDE

The Valkyrie of the title of the second opera, *Die Walküre*, is **Brünnhilde**, the favorite daughter of Wotan, the King of the Gods, one of nine sisters whose task is to ride over battlefields and take the bodies of slain heroes back to Valhalla. Gathering at the start of the third act, they will attempt (but fail) to protect the fleeing Brünnhilde, who has disobeyed their father and incurred his wrath. Regardless of its function in the plot, the *Ride* gave Wagner his first passage of ensemble singing in the *Ring*, and a unique opportunity to display his skills of musical depiction. But with so much going on in the music, what is left to be shown on stage?

Wagner: *Ride of the Valkyries* (Bayreuth 1988, Harry Kupfer, *dir.*)

Wagner: *Ride of the Valkyries* (Met 2010, Robert Lepage, *dir.*)

Wagner: *Ride of the Valkyries* (Chicago 2020, David Pountney, *dir.*)

Wagner: *Ride/Valkyries* (Copenhagen 2006, Kasper Bech Holten, *dir.*)

B. RISING FROM THE RHINE

Das Rheingold, the first *Ring* opera, opens in the depths of the Rhine, where three **Rhinemaidens** are charged with guarding its treasure, the Gold. Attracted by their beauty, the dwarf **Alberich** comes up from the underworld, Nibelheim, to woo them, but they reject him. [However, when he learns that the Gold will confer limitless power on anyone who will forswear love and forge it into a Ring, he swears an oath against love and steals the Gold.]

Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, opening (Met 1987, Otto Schenk, *dir.*)

Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, opening (Met 2010, Robert Lepage, *dir.*)

Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, opening (Bayreuth 2013, Frank Castorf, *dir.*)

C. HOW IT ENDS

[Later in *Das Rheingold*, **Wotan** is told about the power of the Ring that Alberich has forged, so he goes down to Nibelheim to steal it for himself. Shortly after, though, he is forced to give it up in payment to the giants **Fafner** and **Fasolt** who have built his new fortress-palace Valhalla. When Fafner kills Fasolt, the curse placed upon the Ring by Alberich claims its first victim. Before *Die Walküre* begins, Wotan puts a plan into motion to sire a mortal hero who can win the Ring back as a free agent while he himself cannot. Wotan's wife points out the fallacy of using his son as a puppet, so Wotan is forced to allow this hero-son, **Siegmond**, to be killed—but not before Siegmund has sired a son of his own, **Siegfried**.

The third opera, *Siegfried*, shows the adolescence of its title character, whose complete absence of fear allows him to kill Fafner, recover the Ring, defy Wotan, and rescue the now-mortal Brünnhilde from where Wotan had left her sleeping on a mountain ringed by fire. He gives her the Ring. In the last opera, *Götterdämmerung* (the Twilight of the Gods), Brünnhilde sends him down the Rhine on adventures, but he is drugged, tricked, and eventually killed—another victim of the curse.]