

Synopsis

Der Ring des Nibelungen

Das Rheingold (The Rhinegold) – The Preliminary Evening

Deep in the River Rhine, three Rhine-daughters watch over their gold. Alberich (the Nibelung of the title) lusts after them. He learns that whoever renounces love and fashions a ring from the gold can have immeasurable power. Frustrated by the teasing Rhine-daughters, he renounces love and snatches the gold.

The chief god Wotan and his wife Fricka contemplate a gleaming fortress – Valhalla, an abode for gods and heroes, built by the giants Fasolt and Fafner. The giants had been promised the goddess Freia, keeper of the golden apples of eternal youth, as payment, but Wotan is reluctant to part with Freia. Her abduction will cause the gods to wither and grow old. Loge, god of fire and an accomplished trickster, offers a solution – to substitute the all-powerful ring for Freia.

Wotan and Loge climb down to Nibelheim, where Alberich's brother Mime and the other Nibelungs are enslaved by the power of the ring. Through Loge's trickery, Wotan takes Alberich prisoner and they return to the surface.

Wotan seizes the ring. A bitter Alberich curses the ring and all who possess it. Instead of Freia, the giants demand the Nibelung treasure, the ring and the Tarnhelm – a magic helmet of transformation and invisibility. Reluctantly, Wotan is persuaded to give up the ring by Erda, who warns him that the end of the gods is at hand. Almost at once, the giants quarrel over their prize and Fafner kills his brother. Alberich's curse claims its first victim.

As Wotan devises a plan to recover the ring and Loge looks on mockingly, the gods pass triumphantly into Valhalla, insensitive to the lament of the Rhine-daughters below.

Die Walküre (The Valkyrie) – The First Day

Act I

A man is being pursued through the forest during a stormy night and takes refuge, unwittingly, in the house of an enemy. Hunding, the owner, is absent but his wife takes pity on the stranger, and a bond starts to grow between them. Hunding returns and guesses the identity of his guest as he recounts the story of his childhood, the murder of his mother, the abduction of his twin sister and separation from his father, Wolfe. The laws of hospitality protect the guest for the night but Hunding challenges him to combat the following day, and then retires with a drink in which his wife has put a sleeping draught. The stranger recalls his father's promise to provide him with a sword in his direst need. The woman draws attention to a sword buried in an ash tree by a stranger during her wedding to Hunding. No-one had been able to draw it out.

Passionate feelings grow between the guest and the woman and eventually she realises that he is the Volsung for whom the sword was intended. She names him Siegmund. He claims the sword and calls it *Notung*. She tells him that she is his twin sister Sieglinde. Together they flee into the spring night.

Act II

Wotan instructs his favourite Valkyrie daughter, Brünnhilde, to give victory to Siegmund in the impending fight against Hunding. Fricka, who is the guardian of marriage, is outraged,

denounces the incestuous couple and castigates the promiscuous Wotan for not upholding divine law. Reluctantly, he agrees to give victory to Hunding. Wotan reveals to Brünnhilde his despair in the face of a declining, imprisoning destiny. He explains to her why they are bound to act against his own son, and demands her obedience.

Brünnhilde appears to Siegmund to announce his imminent death. She is moved by his defiant grief and his love for Sieglinde and decides to defy Wotan and to let Siegmund win. However, Wotan intervenes in the battle. Siegmund's sword is broken on Wotan's spear and Hunding kills his unarmed adversary. Brünnhilde flees Wotan's wrath, taking with her the pregnant Sieglinde and the broken pieces of the sword.

Act III

Eight Valkyrie sisters gather to rest *en route* to Valhalla. They are joined by Brünnhilde who seeks refuge with them. She tells Sieglinde to flee 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 sleeping and vulnerable to the first man who finds her. However, he is moved by her plea that she knew he loved Siegmund and was only doing what he himself wanted in his heart. With great emotion, he bids her farewell, leaving her encircled by magic fire through which no one who fears the point of his spear will be able to pass.

Siegfried – The Second Day

Act I

Sieglinde has died giving birth to Siegfried. The boy has been raised in a remote part of the forest by the Nibelung Mime. Beyond Mime's forge in the forest, Fafner, in the guise of a dragon, guards his hoard and the ring. Siegfried has observed that all of the creatures of the forest resemble their parents and scoffs at the idea that Mime could be his father. Eventually, he is told the truth about his birth. Mime despairs of repairing the shattered sword *Notung*, with which he hopes Siegfried will recover the ring. Mime learns from the Wanderer (Wotan) that the sword can be repaired only by one who does not know fear. Siegfried re-forges *Notung*.

Act II

Alberich lies in wait in the forest seeking to reclaim the ring. He encounters the Wanderer who tells him that Wotan will no longer compete with the Nibelung over the ring. Alberich would do better to fear his own brother Mime and the young man he is leading to Fafner's cave.

Mime has led Siegfried to Fafner's cave, hoping he will kill the dragon for him. Left alone, Siegfried wonders what his parents were like and if all human mothers die giving birth. He longs for congenial company and tries to communicate even with the birds of the forest. He awakens Fafner and, in the ensuing fight, kills him. Mime and Alberich squabble over who should get the treasure. When Siegfried involuntarily tastes Fafner's blood, he is able to understand the Woodbird's song and also Mime's murderous intentions. He kills Mime and then sets off towards the place where, the bird tells him, he will find a companion – Brünnhilde – who lies asleep.

Act III

The Wanderer summons Erda, demanding of her whether his destiny can be changed. She is evasive and he recognises that the future now belongs to Siegfried. The young man arrives and the Wanderer stands in his way, seeing for himself that Siegfried is without fear and unaided. Wotan's spear yields to the sword it had shattered. After passing through the circle

of fire, Siegfried discovers Brünnhilde. At his first sight of a woman, he experiences fear. He resolves to waken her. Siegfried and the now mortal Brünnhilde discover love.

Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods) – The Third Day

Prologue and Act I

The three Norns have spun the rope of world knowledge which binds past, present and future. They tell each other why they can no longer spin. The rope breaks in a premonition of the end of the existing order.

Siegfried and Brünnhilde exchange tokens as reminders of their love: she gives him her horse Grane, and he gives her the ring. Siegfried sets off towards the Rhine, in search of adventure.

At a hall on the banks of the Rhine live the Gibichung rulers, Gunther and Gutrune, and their half-brother Hagen, 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 the 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 Rhine-daughters. To Brünnhilde, the ring symbolizes 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.

Act II

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 for him. When, at the Gibichung court, Brünnhilde sees the ring in Siegfried's possession, she concludes that he has betrayed her. 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.

Act III

During the hunt, Siegfried strays from the rest of the party to the river, where the Rhine-daughters try to persuade him to return the ring. At first he rebuffs them but then says he would return the ring in exchange for love. The Rhine-daughters tell him to keep the ring and learn what ill fortune it brings. He rejoins the hunting party and recounts the story of Mime, Notung, Fafner and the Woodbird. Hagen drops an antidote into Siegfried's drink and, as he speaks, his memory returns. When he recalls how he passed through the fire to Brünnhilde and embraced her, it is Gunther who now feels betrayed. Hagen plunges his spear into Siegfried's back. Siegfried dies.

Gutrune is expecting the return of her husband Siegfried. She feels fearful and uneasy. Hagen cruelly confronts her with the facts of Siegfried's death and proceeds to kill Gunther in a fight over the ring. Brünnhilde stops Hagen taking the ring. She understands Wotan's wish to end the rule of the gods and extinguish Alberich's curse. She directs the building of a funeral pyre and, taking the ring, joins Siegfried in the flames. Hagen is dragged down into the depths of the Rhine.

Thus the old order passes away. In its place is a new vision of human existence.

Synopsis by Peter Bassett