

Wagner: The Fearsome Genius
Notes and References for Class Number 2
“Jumping into the Ring”

Dan Sherman: January 31, 2011

Our first class provided a great deal of information on the life of Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and the theories he had toward the composition of opera, or as he would prefer, “music drama.” Much of Wagner’s career (1848-1876) was focused on writing and producing the four operas of the “Ring Cycle,” with the idea (amazing for its time and even now) that they would be presented together at a special week-long festival. With his tremendous drive and the fortunate intervention of King Ludwig of Bavaria, Wagner succeeded in designing and building one of the world’s great opera houses in Bayreuth, Germany (about 150 miles north of Munich).

In today’s class, we will focus on two operas – Das Rheingold (which Wagner thought of as a “prelude” to the Ring) and Die Walkure, perhaps the best-known and most- performed of Wagner’s operas (at George Mason University next month).

Das Rheingold is more or less a fantasy opera, with dwarves, giants, gods, mermaid-like creatures, and Mother Earth. Please note there are NO humans in this world. Although there is some human interest and emotions in the characters, it is really in the other operas we have real and deep human interest, with most of this interest coming from gods and their offspring.

Das Rheingold (Gold of the Rhine River) has four scenes and a short prelude:

The prelude: Starts deep in orchestra with double basses and then is built up from notes of key of E-flat into a flowing “river” motive – many of the leitmotifs (leading motives”) of the Ring are built from this simple theme.

Wagner saw leitmotifs (which he called “melodic moments”) as short melodic themes that he worked with to build the Ring, often transforming them and combining them, making harmonic modification, with the idea of setting a mood, making links across characters, and (I think) really drawing on memory and feeling developed over the work. These are not paint-by-number, push-the-button “musical calling cards” (as Debussy

called them) but really a very effective set of themes that have dramatic content. You don't really need to review and study a list of them.

Scene 1 of Rheingold: The three Rhinemaidens are swimming as they guard the gold of the Rhine and are interrupted by the dwarf Alberich (THE Nibelung of the title). Alberich lusts for the maidens but is cruelly rejected. He spies the gold as the sun shines on it and the maidens (foolishly!) tell him that a man who forswears love can rule the world by making a ring from the gold. Alberich renounces love for power, steals the gold (we hear the "Ring" theme), and disappears as we hear the beautiful transformation to where the gods live (and the Valhalla motive is heard; transformed from the ring motive).

Scene 2: Power-hungry Wotan has had his great castle built by two giants and has promised them the god of love (Freia – her "love" theme plays in Die Walkure). His wife wants Freia (her sister) back and Wotan learns about the gold – He goes to Nibelheim (great music) to capture Alberich.

Scene 3: Wotan and the god of fire (the deceitful Loge) trick and capture Alberich, and bring him to the surface.

Scene 4: Wotan tears the Ring from Alberich who puts a curse on it and disappears. The giants reappear for their payment and Wotan offers them the gold Alberich's slaves have brought up. The giants are willing to accept the gold and then see the Ring. Wotan refuses to give it to them until Erda (a mother earth figure) tells Wotan he must give it up or the gods will perish (theme reverses creation motive heard in beginning of opera). GREAT MUSIC HERE! Wotan gives the ring to the giants and Fafner kills Fasolt to the music of the curse. Gods enter their new home as Wotan has idea (in orchestra) that is the heroic sword motif (heard much more in Walkure).

Die Walkure is most performed, best-loved opera of Wagner's in large part because of its human interest – the gods become human and experience tragedy and ultimately learn from it.

The Valkyries are the nine warrior daughters of Wotan conceived after the action of Rheingold with Erda (the mother earth figure). They gather dead heroes to protect Wotan from Alberich and perhaps Fafner, the giant who has the ring and has turned himself into a dragon (who sleeps a lot). Wotan's favorite

daughter is Brunnhilde, who is *the* Valkyrie of the title. She and Wotan are the center of the Ring, and I would argue the Ring is about her and her development.

Act 1: Everybody loves this act. Wotan's great idea has been to create a hero who can gain the ring on his own and return it to the Rheinmaidens. He (Wotan) cannot do it on his own because of the rule of law he must enforce. He has fathered twins (Sigmund and Sieglinde) when he roamed the world as Walse. The twins were separated when young and Sieglinde has married the cruel Hunding. Sigmund (after battle with Hunding's tribe) comes into the Hunding residence. Hunding recognizes him and challenges him to battle the next day. Sigmund and Sieglinde have fallen in love and she drugs her husband. Sigmund pulls the sword from the tree (placed there by Wotan – we hear the Valhalla theme) and they run into the night.

Act 2: Very long but crucial act. Brunnhilde enters as warrior (ho-jo-to-ho) to meet Wotan who says she is to protect Sigmund in battle with Hunding. Fricka (wife of Wotan, a lot like Mrs. Wagner of the time) enters as Brunnhilde leaves and naggingly tells Wotan Sigmund must die to uphold the laws of marriage she must enforce. She demands Brunnhilde not protect Sigmund and that Wotan remove the magic from the sword. Brunnhilde returns as Wotan is in despair. Next scene really is almost a monologue by Wotan as he pours his heart to Brunnhilde, who is his alter-ego (his "will"). He recalls the story of Rheingold from his perspective with mostly soft, gloomy, very poignant music and says sadly he waits only for "the end" – he can fight no more. He orders Brunnhilde to allow Sigmund to die and leaves in a fury. Brunnhilde is deeply puzzled as Sigmund and Sieglinde run onto the stage and Sieglinde passes out. Brunnhilde with beautiful music announces who she is and tells Sigmund he must die; Sigmund says he will kill both himself and Sieglinde with the sword when Brunnhilde is overcome by emotion (new to her!) and tells Sigmund she will defy Wotan and save Sigmund for Sieglinde's sake. Hunding and Sigmund fight, Brunnhilde comes to help Sigmund, but Wotan appears to allow Sigmund (his son) to be killed. Wotan then kills Hunding and goes off in pursuit of the disobedient Brunnhilde who has run off with Sieglinde.

Act 3: Thrilling act with well-known music. Eight of the Valkyries joyously ride in carrying dead heroes to guard Valhalla – They wonder where Brunnhilde is and then see her racing to them. She is carrying despairing Sieglinde, whom the Valkyries refuse to help out of fear of Wotan. Brunnhilde tells Sieglinde she is pregnant with Sigmund's great hero son and sends her off to the forest (near the

dragon) to hide with pieces of Siegmund's sword. Sieglinde sings MOST IMPORTANT MUSIC IN THE RING to wonderful woman Brunnhilde before running off. Wotan arrives and announces he will punish Brunnhilde as the Valkyries flee. Fabulous, touching scene follows as Wotan says he will take Brunnhilde's godhood away to make her mortal and place on a rock where anyone can find and wake her. She pleases with him and he agrees to surround the rock with fire only a great hero can find her. He sings a heartbreaking farewell, puts her to sleep, surrounds her by fire, and sings that only one who is without fear can pass through the fire.

Hint: We meet the hero in the next opera.

General reference for the Ring is at the following site: Includes synopsis, sources, and brief musical examples.

http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/Ring/Ring0_intro.htm

Note: The Rackham illustrations are at: <http://rackham.artpassions.net/>

The Walkure recording I mentioned last week is at:

http://www.amazon.com/Die-Walkure-Wagner/dp/B00006469P/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1296435988&sr=8-2 for about \$20.

In the Berger book, please read the Ring sections (p. 206-326; 252-303 cover the next two operas; the remainder is interesting information); read pages 375-376 for general assessment of Wagner.

The "Decoding Wagner" book is at <http://www.amazon.com/Decoding-Wagner-Invitation-World-Music/dp/1574670972> for about \$25.

Link to the Deems Taylor "The Monster" is at

<http://www.wwenglish.com/en/school/5/jd/6/8173.htm>

Note: An Amazon list I created about the Ring has 25 items and is at:

http://www.amazon.com/lm/1TB48M5ULFG80/ref=cm_pdp_lm_title_2