



UNIVERSITY OF
THE THIRD AGE

Benalla & District Inc.



Programme Notes 26th July, 2019



Der Ring des Nibelungen - Origin



The works which comprise The Ring Cycle are based loosely on characters from the Norse sagas and the Nibelungenlied - translated as The Song of the Nibelungs, an epic poem written around 1200.

The time came when the people of Western Europe learned to believe in one God and were converted to Christianity, but the old stories about the gods and Valkyries and giants and heroes, who were half gods and half men, were not forgotten.

These stories were repeated from father to son for generations, and in the twelfth century a poet, whose name we do not know, wrote them in verse. He called his poem the Nibelungenlied. It is the great national poem of the Germans. The legends told in it are the basis of Wagner's operas.

The Nibelungs

"Nibelungs" was the name given to some northern dwarfs whose king had once possessed a great treasure of gold and precious stones but had lost it. Whoever got possession of this treasure was followed by a curse. The Nibelungenlied tells the adventures of those who possessed the treasure.

(Acknowledgement: www.sacred-texts.com).



The story of the Ring is easily told in summary.

The operas, each of which can stand on its own, are: **Das Rheingold** which tells how Alberich (the chief god of the underworld or Nibelung) came to curse the Ring that was stolen from him by Wotan (the chief god of Valhalla) which bestowed to its owner unlimited power over the material world; **Die Walküre** which tells about Siegmund and Sieglinde, Wotan's mortal children and how Brünnhilde (Wotan's favourite daughter) came to know about love, **Siegfried** the hero/issue of Siegmund and Sieglinde's incestuous love—which tells about his carefree youth in the primeval forest and his first encounter with woman; and **Götterdämmerung** which tells about Siegfried's betrayal, his vengeful death and the fall of the gods.

It is about the beginning and end of the world. It starts with Wagner's brilliant evocation of the primordial Rhine River, and ends with catastrophic natural disaster. The magic ring of the title is fashioned from gold stolen from the bottom of the Rhine, and each of the main characters — they are gods and mythological figures, but very human in their failings — is driven by their own desire to possess it.

In addition, **Das Rheingold** tells of Alberich's theft of the Rhine gold, and Wotan's wheeling and dealing to build his castle Valhalla. In **Die Walküre**, the valkyrie Brünnhilde disobeys her father, Wotan, and ensures the safety of an unborn child who will grow to be her hero.

That hero is *Siegfried*, who in the third opera slays the dragon Fafner, claims the ring and awakens the sleeping Brunnhilde. The final episode is *Gotterdammerung*, the twilight of the gods. Siegfried is tricked into betraying Brunnhilde and is killed by Alberich's son Hagen. Brunnhilde promises to return the ring to the Rhine and, with her self-immolation, the gods and Valhalla are consumed in flames.

The Festspielhaus - Wagnerian Wonderland



One of the birthplaces of the modern entertainment industry is not in Stratford-upon-Avon or a backlot in Hollywood, but on top of a green hill in Bayreuth, a small city in northern Bavaria.

It is here that the composer Richard Wagner put into practice his ideas about the "artwork of the future". A revolutionary in more ways than one, Wagner wanted to bring together all of the artistic disciplines — poetry, music, movement and design — in a powerful theatrical experience. He called it the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art. We might think of it as a steampunk precursor to virtual reality.

The Festspielhaus theatre in Bayreuth was built for such an experience. Wagner didn't want the lavish decor and distractions of the opera house. He imagined a darkened auditorium with a stage that appears at a dream-like distance. He devised an orchestra pit that is hidden from view, and from which his music — so often described as the origin of modern movie music — fills the auditorium.

Everything about the Festspielhaus seems to say "Shut up, sit still and pay attention". A performance here offers a multisensory, musical adventure that is almost overwhelming.

The story of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus is a fascinating one of artistic ambition, hateful ideology and unseemly squabbles over control of Wagner's legacy.

Wagner at first imagined the Festspielhaus as a kind of pop-up theatre made of planks that would be knocked down after the event. It didn't happen quite that way, and the Festspielhaus was built as a permanent structure at considerable expense. It opened with the first Ring cycle in August 1876 and it was a social and artistic event: in the audience were Nietzsche, Tchaikovsky, Grieg and Liszt, Wagner's patron King Ludwig II of Bavaria and Kaiser Wilhelm.



The Festspielhaus - an original drawing

The first Ring was not an unqualified success. The venture lost money, and sets and costumes were sold off to help meet debts. The Festspielhaus was used in 1882 to stage Wagner's last music drama, the quasi-religious *Parsifal*, but the Ring would not be staged here again until 1896, 20 years after the premiere.

After Wagner's death in 1883, his widow Cosima took over running the festival. Arch-conservative Cosima ushered in some of the festival's most notorious aspects. She insisted on utter fidelity to Wagner's stage directions, ensuring a persistent Germanic cliché of horned helmets, blonde wigs and stand-and-deliver performances. She turned her husband's anti-Semitism into house policy and banned Jewish performers. Hitler was on intimate terms with the Wagner family, and when the Nazis came to power swastikas flew over the Festspielhaus. On the grounds today is a memorial to the "Silenced Voices" — Jewish artists associated with Bayreuth who were isolated, exiled or murdered.

The operation of the Festspielhaus has been a family concern ever since, although ownership was passed to a foundation in 1973. The incumbent artistic director is Katharina Wagner, the composer's great-granddaughter.

(Acknowledgement: www.theaustralian.com.au)

The Ring Cycle's Main Characters

Alberich

Alberich sets in motion the entire Ring by renouncing love and taking the Rhinegold from the Rhinemaidens. After his brother, Mime, fashions the gold into a ring of immense power, Alberich enslaves the other gnomes of the underworld (Nibelheim) and forces them to mine gold for his treasury. Mime also fashions from the gold a magical helmet (the Tarnhelm) that allows the wearer to change shape and size.

Wotan

Wotan is chief of the gods and keeper of covenants and promises. He is married to Fricka, the goddess of house and home. His quest for ultimate power begins the chain of events that eventually lead to the destruction of the entire world, including the gods.

Fricka

As mentioned previously, Fricka is the goddess of house and home and wife of Wotan. She is also the sister of Freya. Fricka urges her husband, Wotan, to obtain the ring after she learns that it could be used to keep him faithful.

In *Die Walküre*, it is Fricka who tells Wotan that he must defend Hunding's marriage to Sieglinde against the Siegmund. If Wotan refuses to defend Hunding, he will lose his power.



Wotan & Fricka

Freya

Freya provides the other gods with golden apples that ensure their eternal youth and power. Her abduction by the giants, Fafner and Fasolt, after the completion of Valhalla is devastating to the gods, who begin to age immediately. Had Freya's presence not been absolutely essential to the survival of the gods, Wotan and company may not have gone to the trouble to rescue her.

Loge



Loge is the fire god who eventually returns to his elemental form and destroys everything.

In *Das Rheingold*, Wotan awaits the arrival of Loge, hoping he will have the wisdom to get the chief god out of his mess with the giants, implying some sort of inherent wisdom. It was also Loge who proposed the gods steal the gold, just as Alberich did. It was Loge who tricked Alberich into changing into a frog and stole the Tarnhelm. In *Siegfried* Loge creates the ring of fire that surrounds Brünnhilde.

Sigmund and Sieglinde

Twins - brother and sister - fathered by Wotan from an earthly mother. They lose contact with each other and Sieglinde meanwhile marries the warrior Hunding. By chance the twins meet again, fall in love with each other and escape together from Hunding's house. Their union produces Siegfried.

Siegfried

The son of Sigmund and Sieglinde, Siegfried is the hero of the story, although we continually see him deceived and manipulated by other characters. He slays the giant who has possession of the Ring. He falls in love with and marries Brunnhilde. Siegfried is eventually killed after Brunnhilde, believing him to be unfaithful, reveals his weakness to Hagen, the son of Alberich.

Brünnhilde



Siegfried & Brunnhilde

Brünnhilde is the warrior daughter of Wotan, (one of eight children - known as Valkyrie - Wotan sires with the earth goddess Erda. She is originally ordered by Wotan to defend Sigmund, but is forced to change sides when Fricka reminds Wotan that he is required to defend Hunding's marriage vows. She defies her father's orders, and loses her immortality as punishment.

She eventually marries Siegfried, who gives her the ring after killing Fafner, the giant.

When her husband is killed, Brünnhilde considers the gods responsible for Siegfried's death, and swears the Ring will once again belong to the Rhinemaidens. She puts it on, sets Siegfried's funeral pyre on fire, and jumps into the flames (but not before she orders her father's ravens to tell Loge to go Valhalla for the downfall of the gods). The world burns down, the gods are destroyed, and the Rhinemaidens once again possess their gold.

Hagen



Alberich (left) & son Hagen

He is the son of Alberich. And the half brother of Gunther and Gutrune. In an effort to gain control of the ring, he convinces his siblings to use a magic potion to marry Brünnhilde and Siegfried themselves and get complete world domination. It was Hagen who convinced Gunther to help him murder Siegfried. Hagen kills Gunther in a quarrel over the ring after Siegfried is murdered.

(Acknowledgement: www.liveabout.com)

About the version of the Ring Cycle from which our excerpts are taken

All of the excerpts are taken from the complete cycle filmed in 1991/92 at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Music Direction is by Daniel Barenboim and Stage Direction by Harry Kupfer.

The cast features JOHN TOMLINSON as Wotan, ANNE EVANS as Brünnhilde, SIEGFRIED JERUSALEM as Siegfried, POUL ELMING as Siegmund, NADINE SECUNDE as Sieglinde, LINDA FINNIE as Fricka, GRAHAM CLARK as Loge, GÜNTER VON KANNEN as Alberich and HELMUT PAMPUCH as Mime.

It is argued that this is the finest of the DVD versions of the cycle currently available, but as in all things it comes down to a matter of taste.

One critic (mostlyopera.blogspot.com) commented “the major strengths of this Ring is Daniel Barenboim’s conducting and Harry Kupfer’s staging. As theatrical drama I find it unbeatable. Clearly the best Nibelungen Ring DVD on the market as I am concerned”.

And so to the operas.....

(Acknowledgement for what follows: “A First-Timers guide to Wagner’s Ring @ people.well.com”).

Although the “hero” of the story is Siegfried (who was famously compared once to Li'l Abner), the main protagonist of the Ring is Wotan, the king of the Gods. Wotan is a man who wants power, and the story is about how he sought it and the price he ultimately paid. He began his career (long before the story begins) when, as a young God, he cut a branch off the World Ash Tree, source of all wisdom and power, gave one eye in payment, and made from it a spear. Over the years Wotan increased his power by making treaties, which were inscribed on his spear as the embodiment of that power, until he made himself chief of all the Gods. And there Wagner's story begins.....

Das Rheingold



The story begins in the depths of the Rhine river, where the three Rhinemaidens (think "mermaids") are playing in a state of primal state-of-nature innocence. Enter Alberich the Nibelung (dwarf) from a fissure beneath the earth, who spies the three and lusts after them.

The Rhinemaidens taunt him and humiliate him for his ugliness and awkwardness.

In his rage at being rejected, Alberich steals the Rhinegold from them, having learned that he who is willing to renounce love will thereby gain the ability to forge a ring of power from the gold. The maidens had assumed that no one in his right mind would make such a renunciation, but Alberich is enraged and leaving the bereft maidens to sing a song of loss and grief that will reappear all through the four operas. Alberich forges the ring and makes himself lord over all the Nibelungen.



The yellow Rhinegold glow from underneath.

Alberich watches.

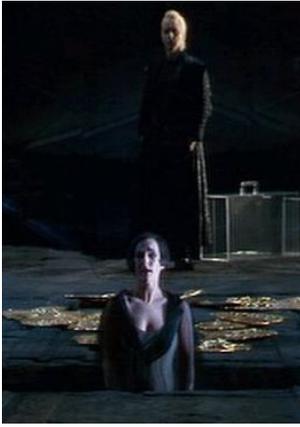
Meanwhile, Wotan wants a grand castle for the gods to live in as a testament to his greatness. He has contracted with the two giants Fasolt and Fafner to build him the castle. On the advice of the wily Loge, god of fire, Wotan has promised the Giants Freia, goddess of youth and beauty, in return for the building.



Wotan and the gods with the giants

Loge has assured Wotan that he will find him a way out of the deal. Fasolt and Fafner, having finished the castle, come for their payment. Wotan is stuck; since all his power rests on the treaties inscribed into his spear, he cannot renege on the deal, and the giants make off with the terrified Freia.

Loge, having learned of Alberich's ring, suggests to Wotan that they steal it from Alberich and offer it to the giants as a substitute payment. Wotan agrees, though he secretly plans to keep the ring for himself. The two go down into the earth to Nibelheim where the dwarves live. There Alberich has enslaved the dwarves and forced them to mine him an enormous pile of gold. Wotan and Loge succeed in kidnapping Alberich and take him back to the gods' abode on the mountain top. There they relieve Alberich of the hoard and of the ring. Alberich is as shattered by the loss of his ring. He places on the ring a terrible curse, bringing endless misery to all who possess or seek it.



Wotan and Loge offer the giants Alberich's hoard of gold in return for Freia. Fafner accepts, though Fasolt has by now become rather sweet on Freia and wants to keep her. The hoard is piled up, but Fafner wants one last thing: Alberich's ring, now on Wotan's finger. Wotan refuses, the giants threaten to call off the deal and leave with Freia, and in the middle of the hubbub there appears out of the ground Erda ("earth"), goddess of the earth and the world's wisest woman. She warns Wotan to flee the ring's curse, foretells that a death-laden day is coming for the gods, and disappears. Wotan relents and gives the ring to the giants, who immediately fall to arguing about the division of the spoils. Fafner kills Fasolt on the spot, and goes off with the loot.

The problem resolved for the time being, Wotan and the rest of the gods prepare to enter into the new castle, which Wotan dubs "Walhall"--literally, the "hall of the fallen heroes." Fricka, his wife, asks him the meaning of the name, and Wotan says, "If what I'm planning works out, its meaning will become clear to you." The gods enter Valhalla, as the Rhinemaidens sing a mournful song of loss.



The gods prepare to head for Valhalla

Between the first two operas

What Wotan is planning, which doesn't become apparent until the next opera, is this, and it forms the driving notion of the entire plot:

Because of his dependence on treaties, Wotan cannot himself take the ring back from the giant, Fafner; but if he can create a hero who is not dependent on him, who is not acting as Wotan's agent, that hero could slay Fafner and win the ring back for him. Wotan, always a great womanizer, descends to earth in human guise as "Wälse" and sires a pair of twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, on an earthly mother. He then abandons them to their fate, and starts paying visits to Erda the earth goddess. Erda bears him eight immortal daughters - the Valkyries (Walküre: "bearer of the fallen heroes"). Bearing in mind Erda's prediction of a final Armageddon of the Gods, Wotan instructs the Valkyries to roam the earth, inciting men to make war on each other so as to find the most valiant warriors, and when they fall in battle to carry them to Valhalla to abide with the Gods and (by the way) defend Valhalla in its eventual apocalyptic battle against Alberich's army.

Die Walküre

On a dark and stormy night Siegmund (his name means "victorious") arrives exhausted and weaponless at the home of Hunding (literally, "son of a bitch"), where he is tended by Sieglinde, Hunding's wife. (Hunding is a great character – a big, hulking brute whose entire life revolves around notions of kinship and warrior's honour.) Hunding recognizes Siegmund as his tribe's enemy, and tells him he can spend the night there, but Hunding intends to kill him in the morning.

Left alone, Siegmund ruminates on his father Wälse, and his promise that Siegmund would find a magic sword in his hour of need.



Siegmund & Sieglinde at the Ash Tree
where the sword is in Hunding's home

Sure enough, the sword is stuck in the ash tree that grows through Hunding's house; it has been there for years, and no one has been able to draw it forth. Sieglinde appears, and the two recognize both their kinship and their love for each other.

Siegmund draws the sword, and he and Sieglinde run off together into the night

Back in Valhalla, Wotan's wife Fricka is furious. She is the goddess of hearth and family, and here is Sieglinde renouncing her marriage vows and running off with her own twin brother. She demands to Wotan that Siegmund must die in the coming fight. Wotan explains that Siegmund is his only hope for a hero that will reclaim the ring for him. Fricka points out that, by giving Siegmund his sword, Wotan has taken away any claim Siegmund might have had to being a free agent, and therefore can't win the ring anyway. Wotan is trapped, and sadly agrees to Siegmund's death. He tells Brünnhilde to give the victory to Hunding. Brünnhilde is shocked that Wotan would turn against his cherished son, whom she too has loved from afar, but Wotan is firm and angrily orders Brünnhilde to do his bidding.

Brünnhilde confronts Siegmund while Sieglinde lies asleep in exhaustion, and tells him he is about to die and be taken to Valhalla. Siegmund asks about Valhalla, and Brünnhilde describes it in glowing terms. Finally, Siegmund asks if Sieglinde will be there with him; Brünnhilde says no. Siegmund says, "So greet for me Wotan and all the fallen heroes, for I will abide here."

Torn by grief and moved by Siegmund's courage, Brünnhilde rebels against Wotan's will and assures Siegmund that she will protect him. At the moment of battle, Wotan appears and shatters the magic sword with his spear. Siegmund is killed.

Brünnhilde gathers up Sieglinde and the shards of the sword, mounts her horse and flees.



Wotan pushing Siegmund into Hunding's
spear after Brünnhilde has tried to help
Siegmund against his explicit orders

Act III opens with the famous "Ride of the Valkyries" as all eight gather on a mountain top with their load of fallen heroes preparatory to taking them to Valhalla. Brünnhilde appears with Sieglinde, in terror of the coming wrath of Wotan. To protect Sieglinde she sends her off with the shards of the sword to hide in the forest, telling her that she carries Siegmund's child.

Wotan appears, threatening thundering destruction to all who shield Brünnhilde, and the Valkyries flee in terror. In punishment for her disobedience, Wotan condemns her to sleep on a rock on a mountain top, to become the mortal bride of whatever man awakens her. As a consolation, he agrees to surround the rock with terrifying fire, so that only a man who knows no fear can reach her.



Wotan confronting Brünnhilde with her disobedience

Wotan has thus in short order been forced to renounce his two most beloved children-- Siegmund and Brünnhilde. He is by now a very different person than the vigorous, ambitious God we first met. He knows now that he will from this point on be alone, and that he is powerless to keep Erda's predictions from coming true. From now on he is a spectator in the story's action.

Siegfried



Mime with the now adult Siegfried

In the forest, Sieglinde has been taken in by Mime the Nibelung, brother of Alberich. He knows the whole story and is only helping her in hopes of using the hero she is to bear to get the ring for himself. Sieglinde dies in childbirth, and Mime raises Siegfried to young manhood.

Siegfried is a child of nature, totally uneducated and not even very bright, but strong and – literally – fearless. He reforges his father's sword, and Mime takes him to Fafner to teach him about fear. Fafner has used the ring to turn himself into a dragon, where he sits in a cave and guards the Nibelung hoard. Mime brews up a cup of poison, which he plans to give to Siegfried as soon as he has slain Fafner. Siegfried kills Fafner (quite pitilessly; Fafner is not looking for trouble). Tasting of Fafner's blood, Siegfried finds he can understand the language of the birds, who tell him of the hoard and the ring and of Mime's treachery. Siegfried kills Mime. The birds then tell him of the woman lying asleep on a rock, and Siegfried sets off to find her.

On the way, Siegfried comes across Wotan, now in the guise of a Wanderer. Wotan tries to bar Siegfried's way. Siegfried, in a reversal of the action in Die Walküre, breaks Wotan's spear with his sword. Wotan's power is broken, and he slinks off, not to be seen again in the opera cycle. Siegfried climbs the mountain, strides through the magic fire, and awakens the sleeping Brünnhilde.

Götterdämmerung ("Twilight of the Gods")

Siegfried takes his leave of Brünnhilde to seek adventure and heroic deeds. His travels down from the mountain top are described in the orchestral passage called "Siegfried's Rhine Journey." He ends up in the kingdom of the Gibichungs along the Rhine. The Gibichungs are a gloomy and none too bright bunch, where king Gunther is advised and controlled by Hagen, Alberich's son by a human woman. They hail Siegfried as a great hero, and Siegfried in his naiveté swears blood-brotherhood with Gunther. Hagen slips Siegfried a potion that makes him forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune, Gunther's sister. Siegfried proposes to Gutrune and then, when told about Brünnhilde on her rock, agrees to capture her to be Gunther's wife.

As Brünnhilde sits on her rock, she is visited by one of the other Valkyries. It seems that Wotan came home one day from his travels with his spear in two pieces. He instructed that kindling be piled all around Valhalla, and sent two ravens out into the world as messengers. Since then he sits, the fallen heroes ranged around him in the great hall, waiting for the ravens to return and signal the end of the Gods. She asks Brünnhilde to help, but Brünnhilde says she is now a mortal woman with the love of a mortal man and is no longer concerned with the fate of the Gods. After the Valkyrie leaves, Siegfried shows up disguised as Gunther and carries Brünnhilde most unwillingly off to the Gibichungs. The double wedding is planned amidst great merriment.

Hagen's plan is to kill Siegfried on a hunting trip and claim the ring. While on the hunting trip, Siegfried passes by the Rhine and encounters the three Rhinemaidens, who chide him as the foolish child he is, and warn him that his life is in danger. Siegfried, ever confident, laughs at their warning, and Hagen duly slays him with a spear in the back. There follows the other great orchestral passage of this opera, "Siegfried's Funeral March."

Back at the Gibichungs there is much acrimony, as Gutrune has been done out of a husband and Gunther out of a blood-brother. Hagen claims the ring on Siegfried's dead hand and moves to take it. At that moment Brünnhilde appears. This is the



"Immolation Scene," the longest single aria in the operatic literature. Brünnhilde orders Siegfried's body placed on a funeral pyre. She takes the ring from his finger in preparation to giving it back to the Rhine and thus cleansing the earth of the curse at last. The funeral pyre is lit, and Brünnhilde rides onto

it on her horse. The fire consumes all, and the Rhine rises to flood the room. Hagen cries, "The ring is mine!" but is dragged to his death by the Rhinemaidens, who reclaim their gold at last. In the distance, Valhalla can be seen to be burning.

In this production as the curtain falls we are clearly at the end of *The Road of History* - marked with a big flashing red X for all to see. Everyone watches the end of the Gibichungen world on tv-screens. Two children, representing a ray of hope, try to move past the watchful Alberich, away from the grown-ups, looking for Utopia (according to Kupfer). The cycle is now complete and we are ready to start another Rheingold.

What stands is the circular timelessness and sense of the eternal.

YOUTUBE LINKS TO SOME OF TODAY'S MUSIC

Das Rheingold

Weia! Waga! Waga du Welle	www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY5SX1iyySY
Lugt Schwesters (Look sisters....)	www.youtube.com/watch?v=DchHCj2bqeE
Loge's Monologue	www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSaX4ujPnUE
Rheingold! Rheingold! (Entrance of gods to Valhalla)	www.youtube.com/watch?v=tw9buBU4Wfc

Die Walkure

Siegmund heiss (Victorious you call me)	www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhZKod--gTI
Ride of the Valkyries	www.youtube.com/watch?v=CATCQzEJ5JM
Magic Fire Music (Act 3 finale)	www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZijhB2oUhrw

Siegfried

Wir sind zur stelle (This is the place, stay where you are)	www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXbtFfpa4BU
--	--

Gotterdammerung

Siegfried's death & Funeral Music	www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPmldLR3bJw
Brünnhilde's Immolation, finale & closing credits	www.youtube.com/watch?v=flj-NwplPdA

There are many other excerpts on Youtube from the same production – too many to include here.

A simple way to discover them is to type into your search engine the relevant opera (Das Rheingold, Die Walkure, Siegfried, or Gotterdammerung) and Kupner 1991/92; then sort through the myriads of responses that come up.

For example, a complete recording of Die Walkure is there (with Italian and English subtitles) at

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDPro_EYpeI (Acts 1 and 2)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=olrZqDvwj9g (Act 3)

A total of 4 hours viewing

Happy searching.

PS. Alternatively, the Barenboim/ Kupner recording is still available on DVD (7DVDs).