

Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen"

(The Ring of the Nibelung)

Background

Illustration

The **Ring of the Nibelung** (or "The Ring" for short) is a sequence of four closely connected operas and one of the most remarkable pieces of art. **Richard Wagner** (1813–1883) is the guy who made it.

- He not only composed the music but also wrote the libretto (= text of an opera) and directed first performances in a opera theatre he had built to his specification in Bayreuth, Bavaria.



Mad **King Ludwig II** of Bavaria was the sucker who paid for all that. With his support of Wagner (who had expensive tastes) and his other extravagances (e.g. building the Neuschwanstein "Fairy Tale" castle plus two others like it) he all but ruined the state finances of Bavaria. This was frowned upon then but today we profit. His dream castles provide an inexhaustible source of income from millions of tourists every year. More important, without Ludwig there would be no "Ring", "Tristan", Meistersinger" and so on. Thank you, Ludwig!

- The "Ring" consists of four operas, always played on different days. We have:

1. **The Rhine Gold.** ("Das Rheingold"). Goes on for about 2½ hours without a break.
2. **The Valkyrie.** ("Die Walküre"). About 4 hours, not counting the 2 breaks.
3. **Siegfried.** Also about 4 hours not counting 2 breaks.
4. **Twilight of the Gods.** ("Götterdämmerung") Around 5 hours, 2 breaks.

The "Ring" has a lot in common with the "Lord of the Rings". Both tell one continuous tale but are too long for just one opera or movie. While really dedicated opera nuts might live through a 16 hour performance, it would be impossible for the singers. They barely make it through one of the three longer ones.

The "Ring" is much louder than the "**Lord of the Rings**" since there is no volume button with which you can turn down the volume of a very large orchestra. Wagner's "Ring" is also much better. It certainly would rank very high in the "best piece of (dramatic) art ever" competition. As far as I'm concerned it would even take this (silly) price. Both authors compounded pieces and bits of old (Northern) sagas, and that's why in both pieces a magic ring and a broken sword are central to the tale. Wagner actually stays rather close to the core of the many ["Siegfried" sagas](#).

	
<p>Siegfried (?)</p>	<p>Brünnhilde with dead Siegmund</p>
<p>This is actually my Grandfather Wilhelm around 1900. The guy on the right is not Mime but his Boss.</p>	<p>Siegmund is still clutching part of Notung. Old record cover. Note the (magical?) forged bra.</p> <p>Large picture</p>

The Story

- ▶ The major guy with the magical sword is **Siegfried**, a mythical northern hero figuring in several old tales (sometimes known as *Sigfried*, *Sigurd*).
- ▶ His magical sword (called **Notung** by Wagner; otherwise known as **Gram** or **Balmung**) comes directly from **Wotan**, the CEO of **Valhalla**, the abode of the Northern Gods.
- Siegfried's father is **Sigmund**, an illegitimate son of Wotan (there are some [parallels to Zeuss](#) here). **Sigmund** got the sword by pulling it out of a tree where Wotan (in disguise) had stuck it. Of course that only works for the Appointed One, and Wotan had some ideas of his own about what Sigmund was supposed to do with it. Sigmund gives the sword the name "**Notung**".
 - Sigmund doesn't enjoy Notung very long, however. That's because he did not only take the sword from a tree that belonged to his foe **Hunding**, he also took his wife **Sieglinde**. When he met her he was dead tired and in a rush to get away from Hunding but could still muster sufficient time and energy for the task at hand. Talk about love at first sight. "Sieg", by the way, is German for "victory"; "hund" equals dog. So just by the names we can tell the goodies from the badies. Right after pulling out the sword, Sigmund and Sieglinde go at it quite enthusiastically (singing a lot, of course, while doing it). Technically this was adultery but nobody cared, least of all Wotan. He didn't even care about Sieglinde being his daughter and thus Sigmund's sister, which adds incest to adultery. Those were the good old times. **Fricka**, Wotan's sharp-tongued wife, did care, however. Very much so. She takes a rather dim view on adultery and incest and gives Wotan such a tongue lashing (in long and high notes) about his inferior morals, what good Gods are supposed to do, that she is just sick and tired of him, and so on, that Wotan finally gives up in disgust. Originally he planned to have Sigmund win the upcoming fight with Hunding (that's why he planted Notung in the tree), but now he is forced to send the head **valkyrie**, one **Brünnhilde** (Brunhild), to help Hunding win the upcoming fight. Brünnhilde hates to do this but must obey. Wotan is not just her superior within some pseudo-military organization that she runs, he is also her father. Fricka, however, is not her mother. During the actual fight Brünnhilde disobeys her Boss-Father and starts to help Sigmund. Wotan needs to get involved personally, and Sigmund's new sword breaks when Wotan interferes with his power.spear. That is the end of Sigmund (and of Hunding, whom Wotan kills just for good measure because he is majorly pissed by now). Brünnhilde quickly grasps the parts of the broken sword plus Siegliede (pregnant by now) and takes off to the woods to hide from Wotan's rage. Later Wotan rounds her up and sentences her to a long sleep on the summit of some mountain that is encased by eternal fire. Only a guy without fear, capable to make it through the fire, will be able to wake her up and do whatever pre-christian young men, full of testosterone and without decadent hang-ups about chastity, tend to do after they rescued supremely beautiful young ladies from distress. It's actually OK because that's what Wotan decreed for her anyway: First one up there shall have you. We are now at the end of the second opera: **The Valkyrie**.

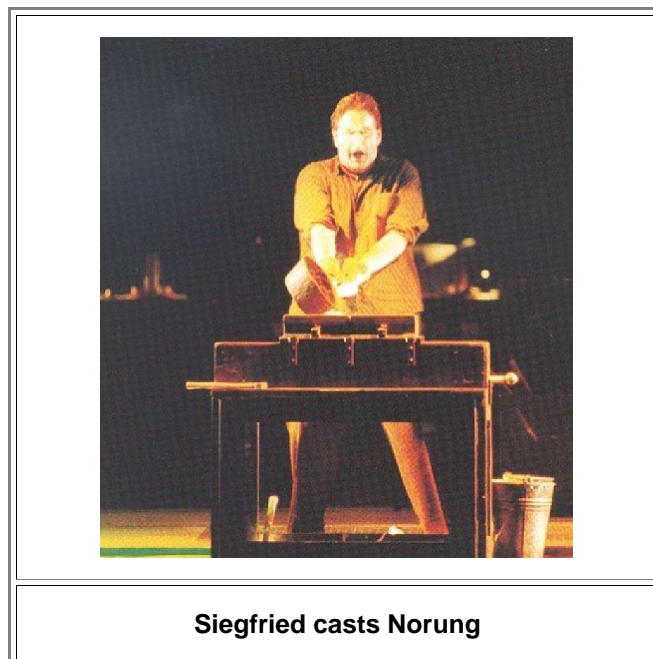


- I watched and listened to the "Ring" in my hometown Kiel several times. The opera people actually let me have Siegfried's sword Notung for several years. I used it to demonstrate a few things to students; otherwise it hung over my desk; reminding some students taking an oral exam in my office, what Damocles sword was all about. If you want to know more (including quite possibly stuff you never wanted to know) about Notung, click [here](#). Germany, by the way, has more than 80 full-time opera theatres, about as much as the rest of the world.
- ▶ Why was Wotan fucking around (besides for the obvious reasons)? He hopes that thusly he would eventually generate an innocent hero who, equipped with a magical sword provided for him at the right moment, could do his dirty work for him. You see, Wotan had lost that important but evil **ring of power** to some giant named **Fafner**. He had to pay him for building Valhalla, his home.

- How Wotan came into possession of the ring of power (by craft and corruption), and why he had to give it up to Fafner, is a long story by itself and related in "*The Rhinegold*". The Rhinegold also features 3 blond and beautiful "daughters" of the Rhine from whom the ring originates - it symbolizes the [female principle](#), after all. Then we have an evil dwarf called **Alberich** who got the ring by swearing off (bodily) love forever, something the Maidens of the Rhine could not match, plus assorted giants, dwarfs, Gods and Goddesses. Anyway, Fafner (after he killed his brother) is now the legal owner of the ring. Wotan can't just take it back by force; he has to obey some rules that he had made himself, or else he loses power. Fafner eventually mutates into a dragon (the ring is evil, after all), and it's not so easy to take the ring from him. Wotan thus is bent on raising a line of heroes, hoping that one would go out, kill the dragon, and take the ring of power without him having to get involved. The hero then was supposed to give the ring back to the real owners: the beautiful Rhinemaidens. Well, it might have worked if Fricka would have been a bit more relaxed about extramarital sex and so on, but the plot was a bit unrealistic from the outset if you ask me.

Now comes "*Siegfried*", the third opera of the "Ring".

- Young Siegfried, the son of Siegmund and Sieglinde, grows up in the smithy of **Mime**, Alberich's brother and thus an evil dwarf by association as far as stereotypes go. That's where Brünnhilde dumped Sieglinde and the sword parts for unclear reasons. Mime is the single substitute father of Siegfried (Sieglinde conveniently died soon after giving birth) and teaches Siegfried his trade. Mime, while the most outstanding smith of his time, has tried but failed to forge the pieces of Notung together. When young Siegfried finds the pieces, he forces his reluctant foster father to tell him the story going with it. Then he decides to make Notung whole again. Wagner gives the act of reforging Notung a lot of time and attention (and some of the better known musical pieces of the ring). Siegfried takes a file and turns Notung into filings. *Then he melts down the stuff and casts the blade anew.* Are you hearing alarm bells ringing in your brain now? If not, you have to read up on this topic in the [backbone part](#) of the Hyperscript. Or [this module](#). After Siegfried "pulls the sword out of the stone (= mould)" the blade is actually more or less finished. Nevertheless, Siegfried now goes through all the proper moves of *forging* a sword. He bangs it, heats it up, quenches it in cold water, and so on. It's rather realistic and fun to watch (and hear). To prove Notung's prowess, he uses it to cut Mime's anvil in half. Of course, he also sings while doing this, mostly on the top of his voice (he is a tenor, of course).



- Did the Kieler Siegfried (above John Treleven), just as all opera Siegfried's, make a mistake? Here he can be seen *casting* Notung; something certainly not done in *Siegfried's time*. Was it done in Wagner's time? Find out [here](#).

Armed with Notung Siegfried decides that it is time to go out on a quest and to kill whatever needed killing. His first victim is Fafner, the dragon. Not that Fafner did anything to deserve that, he is just in the way, somehow. From Fafner Siegfried takes the ring of power (without knowing what it is) and some other cool things like a helmet that makes him either invisible or looking like somebody else (greetings to **Harry Potter**). To make a clean cut of his past, he now kills Mime (under the pretense that Mime poisoned the tea he had made for him; a little bird has told him so). Next he encounters Wotan (his grandfather), quarrels with him and cuts Wotan's staff of power in half. So Wotan isn't dead yet but guess what that staff symbolized. No more adultery for Wotan. Nothing is between Siegfried and Brünnhild's fiery rock anymore, and a bit of fire can't scare off our hero. After finding

Brünnhilde he promptly disrobes her (by using Notung to cut through the armor Brünnhilde is wearing), claiming that she needs to breath more freely (hah).

● But now he suddenly finds himself at the end of his ken. While he knew what to do with dragons, dwarfs, Gods and so on when he met them (kill them), he isn't so sure of what to do with a beautiful and scantily clad woman. In other words, he knows how to wield a sword but is not so sure about how to wield that part of his anatomy that is [symbolized](#) by a sword as far as Siegmund (sic!) Freud is concerned. Well, Siegfried works in an opera, so he takes the easy way out and just sings for a while.

Brünnhilde, a bit miffed at first about what she perceives is going to happen (we might also assume that Siegfried was a bit smelly by now and that she needs to go to the bathroom quite urgently), finally comes around (a lot of singing is required for that), and what needed to happen now happens. It should come as no surprise anymore that Siegfried's first lover is also his aunt; families back then stuck together, it seems.

Essentially the "love forever after" bit could start now, and the tale could have had a happy end.

Wagner decided otherwise. He had still enough good music in him to last for 5 hours of "[Götterdämmerung](#)", so the story must go on. Also, for serious opera, far too many people are still alive.

● When we meet Siegfried again on the rock with Brünnhilde, he is no longer in need of his **phallus symbol** Notung, he now uses the real thing. A sleek sports car would have been more useful now as symbol of male prowess but unfortunately cars haven't been invented yet.

Getting bored from just making out with Brünnhilde all the time, Siegfried eventually leaves her on her rock, paddles down (or up) the Rhine (it had to come in somewhere, after all), and ends up at the court of [King Gunther](#), where he promptly falls in love with Gunther's sister **Gudrune**. Supposedly some magic potion made him forget Brünnhilde but we know better.

He even sets out (disguised as Gunther by his magic helmet) to get Brünnhilde for Gunther (he was not opposed to recycling) and forces her to come with him. Traveling back with her, he faithfully puts his trusty (and by now probably rusty) double-edged Notung between Brünnhilde and himself, and [you know](#) what that means. So it's no wonder that Brünnhilde is pissed off in a major way after she finds out that the guy who got the better of her and forced her on some [weakling](#), was her only true love who doesn't recognize her any more (as he says).

Not very surprising either, Brünnhilde and Gudrune don't really hit it off, and Brünnhilde commissions **Hagen**, Gunther's half-brother and chief of staff, to kill Siegfried. Hagen is actually the son of the evil dwarf [Alberich](#) whom we have met before. Alberich, having the ring stolen from him by Wotan, could renege on his swearing off love, and somehow impregnated a queen, Gunther's Mom. He still wants his "precious" back, and keeps bugging his son Hagen to do something about it.

So Hagen goes along with Brünnhilde's proposal because he figures that killing Siegfried might get him the ring. At the first suitable opportunity (hunting party) he drives his big spear into Siegfried's back. Siegfried takes his time to die (he has a major aria to sing while doing it) but when it's finally over the mood is somber and a bit depressed.

When Hagen wants to take the ring from dead Siegfried's finger, Brünnhilde beats him to that. She throws the ring into the Rhine (where it actually belongs) and jumps on Siegfried's funeral [pyre](#) to be with him at least in death if not in life. Women can be like this.

The daughters of the Rhine come up and pull Hagen into the depth of the Rhine. Since most everybody is dead by now, Wagner decides to go for a clean cut and the end of the world (= twilight of the Gods) commences (it's loud). Valhalla, the fortress of the gods, lights up and crumbles, the sky comes down, the last survivors drop dead, and so on and so forth. The orchestra goes at full blast for quite a while until it's finally over.

What do We Learn?

For guys like you and me the most important message is: Be careful with close-minded but powerful women's-lib nuts like Fricka. You can't win in the long run. One thing leads to another and in the end the world goes down the drain with you in it.

We also learn that the knowledge of metallurgy, the art of making metal things like rings and swords, is a central topic in the myths of many cultures. Possession of the magic (= steel) sword gives you real power, and slightly doofy guys (all brawn, no brain) like Siegfried figure in many tales of old. Yes indeed! Swords (and rings) [are powerful symbols](#) with [sexual](#) undertones. I like to make fun of that [on occasion](#) but it is real enough.

● It also becomes clear that Wagner had some revolutionary ideas of how to deal with iron and steel. Wagner must have seen a smith doing his thing many times, so the forging part of Notung is quite correct in his tale—for the 19th century! However, he probably just [assumed](#) that steel things could be cast, he has most likely never seen that done. Steel casting was just starting in his time. During Siegfried's time (around 600 AD let's say) it most certainly was not done.

● Last, we learn that tall tales with rather improbable outcomes, involving magical rings, magical (or Laser) swords, other magical things, magicians, and supernatural powers but also courage, friendship, love (and ladies of uncertain persuasions and motives), are nothing new.

● And let's not forget: Nothing from our present times comes even remotely close to beating the soundtrack of Wagner's Ring!