

**SUMMER OPERA FILM FESTIVAL
AT UNIVERSITY LIVING, 2011**

AN AUDIENCE-FRIENDLY WAGNERIAN RING CYCLE

Inclusive Dates: August 1-5, 8-12

Location: University Living, 2865 S. Main, Ann Arbor, MI 48103

An Opera Performance Discussion Series¹

Co-Sponsored by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Michigan

- ✚ *Do the operas of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle intimidate, exhaust, enthrall, bore, and/or disgust you?*
- ✚ *Are they children's fairytales, political allegories, and/or principles of human nature expressed by music and drama?*
- ✚ *Are they sexist, feminist, communist, fascist, and/or anti-Semitic?*
- ✚ *Participate in the relaxed environment of our performance discussion series to learn how to enjoy the majestic music of these operas, as well as for their informal analysis.*

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Schedule

Monday, August 1, 7:00p, Introductory Discussion (2 hrs.)

Tuesday, August 2, 7:00p, *Das Rheingold*, (2½ hrs.)

Wednesday, August 3, 7:00p, *Die Walküre*, Acts 1/2 (2½ hrs.)

Thursday, August 4, 7:00p, *Die Walküre*, Act 3 (1½ hrs.)

Friday, August 5, 7:00p, Midpoint Discussion (2 hrs.)

Monday, August 8, 7:00p, *Siegfried*, Acts 1/2 (2½ hrs.)

Tuesday, August 9, 7:00p, *Siegfried*, Act 3 (1½ hrs.)

Wednesday, August 10, 7:00p, *Götterdämmerung*, Act 1 (2½ hrs.)

Thursday, August 11, 7:00p, *Götterdämmerung*, Acts 2/3 (2½ hrs.)

Friday, August 12, 7:00p, Concluding Discussion (2 hrs.)

Selected Ring Cycle Performance

The Metropolitan Opera and Chorus, conducted by James Levine; produced by Otto Schenk; filmed at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, New York, NY in March and April, 1990; Hildegard Behrens, Mari Anne Haggender, Siegfried Jerusalem, Gary Lakes, Hanna Lisowska, Christa Ludwig, Kurt Moll, James Morris, Jessye Norman, Anthony Raffell, Jan-Hendrik Rootering, Matti Salminen, Birgitta Svenden, Dawn Upshaw, Ekkehard Wlaschiha, Heinz Zednik; Deutsche Grammophon, 1990/2002

Introduction

Many people regard the operas of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle as the single greatest artistic accomplishment of human history. Its detractors are equally apparent. More volumes contemplate its musicological and humanistic analyses than for any other operatic production. Devotees travel world-wide to attend its performances and purchase numerous variations of its audio and

video productions and related paraphernalia. Its impact on contemporary culture beyond the world of opera ranges from musical score of feature film, to metaphorical reports of valkyrie-like powerful female figures in newspaper articles, to public protest by Nazi Holocaust survivors at symphonic performance, and more.

There are three fundamental objectives of this opera film festival about the Ring Cycle:

- 1) to enjoy the majesty of the music;
- 2) to emphasize the ability of the music to convey the conflict between the redeeming features of love and the corruption often associated with power; and
- 3) to maintain a relaxed and informal environment for constructive and friendly discussion.

A pre-requisite for optimal enjoyment of this opera film festival is observation of the DVD, *Wagner: The Complete Epic* (Richard Burton, Vanessa Redgrave, Sir Lawrence Olivier; Directed by Tony Palmer; London Philharmonic Orchestra & Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra & Budapest Symphony Orchestra, Sir Georg Solti; Kultur, 1983 / 2005 {8 hrs., 4 discs}).

Principal Characters of the Operas

Immortal Gods and Goddesses

- Wotan (King of the Gods, God of light, air and wind)
- Fricka (wife of Wotan, and Goddess of marriage)
- Freia (sister of Fricka, and Goddess of eternal youth)
- Loge (God of fire)
- Erda (Goddess of wisdom)
- Donner (brother of Fricka, God of thunder and lightening)
- Froh (brother of Fricka, God of fields and rain)
- The Norns (the weavers of fate, and daughters of Erda)

Giants

Fafner (brother of Fasolt)

Fasolt (brother of Fafner)

Nibelung Dwarfs

Alberich (a smith, brother of Mime)

Mime (brother of Alberich, Siegfried's foster father)

Rhinemaids

Woglinde

Wellgunde

Flosshilde

Valkyrie Sisters (daughters of Wotan and Erda)

Brünnhilde, Gerhilde, Helmwige, Waltraute,
Schwertleite, Ortlinde, Siegrune, Grimgerde, and
Rossweisse

Mortals

Sigmund (Wälung son of Wotan, and brother of Sieglinde)

Sieglinde (Sigmund's twin sister)

Hunding (Sieglinde's husband)

Gunther (King of the Gibichung tribe)

Hagen (son of Alberich, and Gunther's half-brother)

Gutrune (Gunther's sister)

Synopses of the Four Operas²

Opera #1, *Das Rheingold*

In Norse mythology, Northern Europe consisted of three realms: the underworld, inhabited by Nibelungs; the earth's

² Quoted or paraphrased from <http://archive.operainfo.org/broadcast/archive/>

surface, inhabited by giants and mortals; and the cloudy heights of Valhalla, inhabited by the gods. *Das Rheingold* is the story of Valhalla's creation.

Das Rheingold, Scene 1. The dwarf Alberich surprises three nymphs, or Rhinemaidens, playing in the waters of the Rhine. He tries to catch them as they dart through the waters.

He is unsuccessful and frustrated, but then sunlight suddenly strikes the summit of a rock, illuminating the Rhinegold, the all-powerful treasure the maidens guard. The nymphs explain that anyone who would take the gold and wear a ring made from it would rule the world, but would have to give up love. Scrambling up the rock, Alberich forswears love, wrests the prize free and escapes as the Rhinemaidens try to catch him.

Das Rheingold, Scene 2. In the cloudy heights, husband and wife Fricka and Wotan slumber on a bank within sight of their newly built castle. When the two gods awaken, Fricka reproaches her husband for having promised her sister Freia to the giants Fafner and Fasolt as payment for constructing the fortress – a promise Wotan never intended to keep. Instead, he will work with the god Loge to find a substitute payment for the giants' labor. Loge suggests the Rheingold, and entices Fricka and Wotan with tales of its power. Fafner wants the gold, but wants Wotan to retrieve it for him; Fasolt wants Freia, and insists on holding her hostage.

Das Rheingold, Scene 3. Wotan and Loge descend to the gnomes' underground domain and offer to help Mime, Alberich's brother, whom he has tormented since capturing the Rheingold, and who does not recognize the gods. Wotan and Loge confront the tyrannical Alberich, but he does not cower in fear of the gods; with the ring on, he is all powerful and plans to overthrow them. But what would happen if someone were to steal the ring? Alberich explains that Mime created the Tarnhelm, a helmet made from the treasure, which enables the wearer to change shape or become invisible. When Loge incredulously asks for a demonstration, Alberich shows the scope of the helmet's powers

by first turning into a dragon, and then into a toad – whereupon Wotan traps him under his foot and Loge takes the Tarnhelm. Alberich resumes his usual form and is tied and brought back to the gods' home.

Das Rheingold, Scene 4. Loge and Wotan offer Alberich his freedom in exchange for the golden treasure. Begrudgingly, he agrees to surrender the hoard, thinking he will keep the ring and use it to get his riches back. Loge unties his right hand, enabling Alberich to kiss the Ring to summon his slaves, who deliver the gold. When Loge and Wotan keep the Tarnhelm and insist the ring be included, Alberich curses the ring so that envy and death befall all who possess it.

Alberich disappears as the other gods approach, followed by the giants Fasolt and Fafner with their hostage, Freia. Fasolt accepts the hoard of gold as substitute payment only if it hides his beloved Freia from his view. But the load of treasure is not quite enough: he can still see her hair through a crack. Loge adds the Tarnhelm to the hoard, but Fasolt can see the gleam of her eye through a chink. Fafner demands the ring, now on Wotan's finger, be added to the pile. Wotan refuses, but then darkness covers the mountaintop as Erda, the earth goddess, warns Wotan of the ring's curse. Wotan tosses the ring onto the hoard, whereupon Freia is released, and Alberich's curse takes effect: Fafner then kills Fasolt, claiming the entire treasure for himself.

Fricka bids Wotan turn his thoughts better things – like their new home. The god of thunder dispels the mists that have enveloped the mountaintop, leaving a rainbow bridge to the fortress. Wotan leads the gods across, but Loge remains, muttering that they are going to their doom. As the gods cross into Valhalla, the Rhinemaidens are heard from below, grieving the loss of their treasure.

Opera #2, *Die Walküre*

Die Walküre, Act 1. As a storm rages, Siegmund, pursued by enemies, stumbles exhausted into an unfamiliar house. Sieglinde finds him lying by the hearth, and the two feel an immediate attraction. But they are soon interrupted by Sieglinde's husband, Hunding, who asks the stranger who he is. Calling himself "Woeful," Siegmund tells of a disaster-filled life, only to learn that Hunding is a kinsman of his foes. Hunding, before retiring, tells his guest they will fight to the death in the morning.

Left alone, Siegmund calls on his father, Wälse, for the sword he once promised him. Sieglinde reappears, having given Hunding a sleeping potion. She tells of her wedding, at which a one-eyed stranger thrust into a tree a sword that has since resisted every effort to pull it out. Sieglinde confesses her unhappiness to Siegmund. He embraces her and vows to free her from her forced marriage to Hunding. As moonlight floods the room, Siegmund compares their feeling to the marriage of love and spring. Sieglinde hails him as "Spring" but asks if his father was really "Wolf," as he said earlier. When Siegmund gives his father's name as Wälse instead, Sieglinde recognizes him as Siegmund, her twin brother. He pulls the sword from the tree and claims Sieglinde as his bride, rejoicing in the union of the Wälsungs.

Die Walküre, Act 2. High in the mountains, Wotan, leader of the gods, tells his warrior daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, that she must defend his mortal son Siegmund in his upcoming battle with Hunding. Leaving joyfully to do his bidding, the Valkyrie passes Fricka, Wotan's wife and the goddess of marriage. Fricka insists that Wotan must defend Hunding's marriage rights against Siegmund. She ignores his argument that Siegmund could save the gods by winning back the Ring from the dragon Fafner. When Wotan realizes he is caught in his own trap—his power will leave him if he does not enforce the law—he agrees to his wife's demands. After Fricka has left in triumph, the frustrated god tells the returning Brünnhilde about the theft of the gold and Alberich's

curse on it. Brünnhilde is shocked to hear her father, his plans in ruins, order her to fight for Hunding. Then, alone in the darkness, she withdraws as Siegmund and Sieglinde approach.

Siegmund comforts his distraught bride, and watches over her when she falls asleep. Brünnhilde appears to him as if in a vision, telling him he will soon go to Valhalla. He tells her he will not leave Sieglinde and threatens to kill himself and his bride if his sword has no power against Hunding. Brünnhilde, moved, decides to defy Wotan and help him. She vanishes. Siegmund bids farewell to Sieglinde when he hears the approaching Hunding's challenge. When Siegmund is about to win, however, Wotan appears and shatters his sword, leaving him to be killed by Hunding. Brünnhilde escapes with Sieglinde and the broken sword. Wotan contemptuously fells Hunding with a wave of his hand and leaves to punish Brünnhilde for her disobedience.

Die Walküre, Act 3. On the Valkyries' Rock, Brünnhilde's eight warrior sisters – who have gathered there briefly, bearing slain heroes to Valhalla – are surprised to see her enter with Sieglinde. When they hear she is fleeing Wotan's wrath, they are afraid to hide her. Sieglinde is numb with despair until Brünnhilde tells her she bears Siegmund's child. Eager to be saved, she receives the pieces of the sword from Brünnhilde and thanks her rescuer, then rushes off into the forest to hide from Wotan. When the god appears, he sentences Brünnhilde to become a mortal woman, silencing her sisters' objections by threatening to do the same to them. Left alone with her father, Brünnhilde pleads that in disobeying his orders she was really doing what he wished. Wotan will not give in: she must lie in sleep, a prize for any man who finds her. But as his anger abates she asks the favor of being surrounded in sleep by a wall of fire that only the bravest hero can pierce. Both sense this hero must be the child that Sieglinde will bear. Sadly renouncing his daughter, Wotan kisses Brünnhilde's eyes with sleep and mortality before summoning Loge, the god of fire, to encircle the rock. As flames spring up, the departing Wotan invokes a spell forbidding the rock to anyone who fears his spear.

Opera #3, Siegfried

Siegfried, Act 1. In his cave deep in the forest, the dwarf Mime forges a sword for his foster son Siegfried. He hates the boy but hopes that Siegfried will kill the dragon Fafner, who guards the Nibelungs' treasure, so that Mime can get the all-powerful ring and rule the world. Siegfried runs in, picks up the new sword and smashes it, raging at Mime's incompetence. The dwarf, acting innocently, offers him food and kind words, but Siegfried doesn't want any of it. He knows he cannot be Mime's real son, as there is no physical resemblance between them, and demands to know who his parents were. For the first time, Mime tells Siegfried how he found his mother, Sieglinde, in the woods and how she died giving birth to him. Siegfried is moved by the story but asks for proof. When Mime shows him the fragments of his father's sword, Nothung, Siegfried orders Mime to repair it for him and rushes out.

As Mime sinks down in despair, a stranger enters. It is Wotan, lord of the gods, in human disguise as the Wanderer. He challenges the fearful Mime to a riddle competition, in which the loser forfeits his head. The Wanderer easily answers Mime's three questions—who lives under the earth (the Nibelungs), on it (the giants), and above it (the gods). Mime in turn knows the answers to the traveler's first two questions but gives up in terror when asked who will repair the sword Nothung. The Wanderer admonishes Mime for enquiring about faraway matters when he doesn't know about the things that closely concern him. Then he departs, leaving the dwarf's head to "him who knows no fear" and who will reforge the magic blade.

When Siegfried returns demanding his father's sword, Mime tells him that he can't repair it and tries in vain to explain the concept of fear to the boy. To teach him, he proposes a visit to Fafner's cave. Siegfried agrees and enthusiastically begins to forge the sword himself. While he works, Mime prepares a sleeping potion to give to Siegfried once he has killed Fafner. Flashing the

finished sword, the boy smashes the anvil in half and runs off into the forest.

Siegfried, Act 2. That same night, Mime's brother Alberich is hiding by the entrance to Fafner's cave, obsessed with thoughts of winning back the ring. The Wanderer enters, assuring the startled Nibelung that he is not after the ring. Instead, he warns Alberich to watch out for Mime. He then wakes Fafner and tells him that a young hero is on his way to kill him. Unimpressed, the dragon goes back to sleep. The Wanderer and Alberich disappear. As dawn breaks, Mime and Siegfried arrive. The youth sends Mime away and, caught up in the peaceful beauty of the woods, thinks about his parents (Forest Murmurs). Listening to the song of a bird, he tries to imitate it on a reed pipe but fails and blows his horn instead. This awakens Fafner, who comes out of the cave, and in the ensuing fight Siegfried kills the dragon. With his dying breath, he warns the boy of the destructive power of the treasure. When Siegfried accidentally touches a drop of Fafner's blood to his lips, he suddenly understands the singing of the bird, directing him to the gold in the cave. Alberich and Mime appear quarreling but withdraw as Siegfried comes out with the ring and the Tarnhelm. The bird warns Siegfried not to trust Mime, and when the dwarf returns with the potion, Siegfried kills him. The bird then tells Siegfried of a beautiful woman named Brünnhilde, asleep on a mountain surrounded by fire. He immediately sets out to find her.

Siegfried, Act 3. On a wild mountain pass, the Wanderer summons Erda, goddess of the Earth, to learn the gods' fate. She evades his questions, and he resigns himself to the impending end of the gods' reign. His hope now rests with Brünnhilde and Siegfried and the redemptive power of their love. When Siegfried approaches, making fun of the god whom he takes for a mere old man, the Wanderer attempts to block his path. With a stroke of Nothung, Siegfried shatters the Wanderer's spear (the same one that smashed Nothung to pieces years before) and advances.

Dawn breaks on the mountaintop where Brünnhilde sleeps. Siegfried, who has never before seen a woman, thinks he has

discovered a man. When he removes Brünnhilde's armor, he is overwhelmed by the sight of her beauty. For the first time he feels fear. Mastering his emotions, he awakens the girl with a kiss. Hailing the daylight, Brünnhilde is overjoyed to learn that it is Siegfried who has brought her back to life. At first she resists his declarations of passion, realizing that earthly love must end her immortal life. Finally understanding that her vanished godhood has left her a mortal woman, she says goodbye to Valhalla and joins Siegfried in praise of love.

Opera #4, *Götterdämmerung*

Götterdämmerung, Prologue. By a cave on the Valkyries' rock, the three Norns, daughters of Erda, weave the rope of destiny. They tell how Wotan ordered the world ash tree, from which his spear was once cut, to be felled and its wood piled around Valhalla. The burning of the pyre will mark the end of the old order of the gods. When one of the Norns mentions Alberich and the theft of the Rhinegold, the rope breaks. The Norns' wisdom has ended. Terrified, they descend into the earth. At dawn, Siegfried and Brünnhilde emerge from the cave. The former Valkyrie has given Siegfried her armor and taught him all her wisdom. Now she sends him into the world to do heroic deeds. As a pledge of his love, Siegfried gives her the ring he took from the dragon Fafner, and she offers her horse, Grane, in return. They say goodbye and Siegfried sets off on his travels (Rhine Journey).

Götterdämmerung, Act 1. In the hall of the Gibichungs on the banks of the Rhine, Gunther and Gutrune discuss the royal family's diminishing glory with their half-brother, Hagen. Hagen envies Gunther his position as legitimate heir, while the cowardly Gunther wishes he had Hagen's cleverness. Hagen advises Gunther and Gutrune to strengthen their rule through marriage, suggesting Brünnhilde as Gunther's bride and Siegfried as Gutrune's husband. Since only the strongest hero can pass through the fire on

Brünnhilde's rock, Hagen proposes a daring plan: a magic potion will make Siegfried forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune. To win her as his wife, he will get Brünnhilde for Gunther. When Siegfried's horn is heard from the river, Hagen calls him ashore. Gutrune offers the potion to Siegfried, who salutes Brünnhilde as he takes the cup but the moment he drinks loses all memory of her and confesses his love for Gutrune. Gunther describes the bride he has chosen for himself: a girl on a mountain, surrounded by fire. Siegfried offers to walk through the flames, using the Tarnhelm to transform himself into Gunther. The two men take an oath of blood brotherhood but Hagen declines to join, declaring his own blood impure. Siegfried and Gunther leave, with Hagen staying behind, keeping watch on the banks of the river. On the mountaintop, Brünnhilde waits for Siegfried's return, when the sudden arrival of her sister Waltraute interrupts her thoughts. Horrified by the impending destruction of Valhalla, Waltraute has come to ask for Brünnhilde's help. The only way to save the gods, she says, is for Brünnhilde to give the ring back to the Rhinemaidens, its rightful owners. Brünnhilde angrily refuses, declaring that Siegfried's love is more important to her than the fate of the gods. Waltraute leaves in despair. When Siegfried's horn sounds in the distance, Brünnhilde is overjoyed. Her happiness quickly turns into confusion and terror when a strange figure appears before her, claiming her as Gunther's bride and tearing the ring from her hand.

Götterdämmerung, Act 2. As Hagen sits sleeping outside the Gibichungs' hall at night, Alberich appears as if in a dream and reminds his son that he has to win back the ring. Dawn breaks and Siegfried arrives, telling Hagen that Gunther and Brünnhilde will follow soon by boat. Hagen summons the Gibichung clan to welcome their king, and Gunther enters with the humiliated Brünnhilde. When she sees Siegfried, her initial astonishment immediately turns into anger and she furiously accuses him of betraying her. Still under the spell of the potion, Siegfried innocently tells her he is to marry Gutrune and that she will

become Gunther's wife. Noticing the ring on Siegfried's finger, Brünnhilde demands to know who gave it to him, since only the night before it was taken from her hand, supposedly by Gunther. Hagen urges Brünnhilde to explain further and tells the men to listen well. Accusing Siegfried to have stolen the ring, Brünnhilde declares he is her husband. Siegfried protests, swearing on Hagen's spear that he has done no wrong. He dismisses Brünnhilde's accusations and leads Gutrune and the men into the hall to celebrate. Beside herself with fury, Brünnhilde can only think of vengeance. Hagen offers to kill Siegfried, but Brünnhilde tells him he is invincible: she has protected him with magic—except for his back, which he would never turn to an enemy. Gunther hesitates to join the conspiracy, but when Brünnhilde calls him a coward and Hagen explains the ring's power to him, he gives in. Hagen suggests that the murder should be made to look like a hunting accident. While Gunther and Brünnhilde ask the gods for help, Hagen invokes Alberich.

Götterdämmerung, Act 3. Siegfried, separated from his hunting party, meets the three Rhinemaidens by the banks of the river. The girls ask him to return the ring to them and he almost agrees, but when they tell him of Alberich's curse he decides to keep it to prove he is not afraid. Predicting Siegfried's imminent death, the Rhinemaidens disappear as Hagen, Gunther, and the other hunters enter. Asked by Hagen to tell them about his youth, Siegfried describes his life with Mime, the forging of the sword Nothung, and his fight with the dragon. While he is talking, Hagen offers him wine containing an antidote to the potion of forgetfulness. His memory restored, Siegfried continues his tale, describing how he walked through the fire and woke Brünnhilde. At the mention of her name, Hagen stabs Siegfried with his spear. When the shocked Gunther asks what he has done, Hagen replies that he avenged a false oath. Remembering Brünnhilde with his last words, Siegfried dies and is carried off (Funeral Music). Back at the Gibichungs' hall, Gutrune wakes from a bad dream, wondering what has happened to Siegfried. When his body is

carried in, she accuses Gunther of murder, who replies that Hagen is the guilty one. The two men fight about the ring and Gunther is killed. As Hagen reaches for the ring, the dead Siegfried threateningly raises his arm, terrifying everyone. Brünnhilde enters and calmly orders a funeral pyre to be built on the banks of the Rhine. She denounces the gods for their guilt in Siegfried's death, takes the ring from his hand and promises it to the Rhinemaidens. Putting the ring on her finger, she lights the pyre and leaps into the flames. The river overflows its banks and destroys the hall. Hagen, trying to get to the ring, is dragged into the water by the Rhinemaidens, who joyfully reclaim their gold. In the distance, Valhalla and the gods are seen, surrounded by flames.