

The Pescadero Opera Society presents  
**Der Ring des Nibelungen**

# Das Rheingold



Libretto and Music by  
Richard Wagner

Opera in One Act [Four Scenes]

Setting: In the Rhine River in Germany  
Time: Ancient German & Norse Mythology

## Characters

Wotan, head god (bass-baritone) ..... Bryn Terfel  
Fricka, Wife of Wotan (mezzo-soprano) ..... Stephanie Blythe  
Freia, goddess of youth and beauty (soprano) ..... Wendy Bryn Harmer  
Fasolt, a giant (bass-baritone) ..... Franz-Josef Selig  
Fafner, a giant (bass) ..... Hans-Peter König  
Loge, demi-god of fire (tenor) ..... Richard Croft  
Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf and brother of Mime (bass-baritone) ..... Eric Owens  
Mime, a Nibelung dwarf and brother of Alberich (tenor) ..... Gerhard Siegel  
Froh, god of sun, rain and fruits (tenor) ..... Adam Deigel  
Donner, god of thunder (bass-baritone) ..... Dwayne Croft  
Erda, earth goddess (contralto) ..... Patricia Bardo  
Rhinemaidens:  
    Woglinde (soprano) ..... Lisette Oropesa  
    Wellgunde (soprano) ..... Jennifer Johnson  
    Flosshilde (mezzo-soprano) ..... Tamara Mumford  
Nibelung dwarfs

Conducted by James Levine  
the Orchestra Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

Première performance of *Das Rheingold*: September 22, 1869 in Königliches Hof und Nationaltheater, Munich, Germany  
Première performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: August 13, 1876 in Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, Germany

# Synopsis

## Background



In legendary times, Northern Europe consisted of three realms: (1) the underworld, where the Nibelung dwarfs lived; (2) the earth's surface, inhabited by giants and mortals; and (3) the cloudy heights, home of the gods. Wotan, king of the gods, wandered the earth's surface in search of knowledge.

The World Ash Tree (Yggdrasil) in Norwegian mythology, is the tree upon which the world rests. At the foot of the tree, there is the Spring of Mimir, source of all wisdom and power. Wotan, in search of wisdom, asked the three Norns, tenders of the World Ash Tree, to drink from the spring so that he could acquire all knowledge of the past, present and future. The Norns agreed, but only if Wotan would give up one of his eyes in payment. Wotan agreed to the conditions, and then drank from the spring. He then broke off a branch from the tree in order to fashion a spear on which to carve records of his binding treaties (runes or laws). By breaking off this branch from the

tree, Wotan started the slow decay of the tree, causing it to begin to wither and die, leading to the eventual destruction of the gods.

## Scene 1

### In the depths of the River Rhine



The music begins the tetralogy with a simple E-flat chord, depicting the depths of the Rhine, and also suggesting the birth of the world, the act of creation itself. Following the E-flat chord is a 136-bar unmodulating prelude based on the chord of E-flat major that is meant to represent the eternal unchanging motions of the River Rhine and lasts approximately four minutes, as the music grows in power. The curtain quickly rises, revealing an underwater scene deep in the Rhine itself.

Three Rhinemaidens guard a golden treasure left there by their father. They laugh and frolic in the water, scarcely noticing that Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf, is emerging from a dark chasm below. Seized by desire for the Rhinemaidens, the dwarf tries to catch one of the water nymphs as they dart through the waters, but his clumsy attempts only lead him to frustration. The Rhinemaidens decide to reward his lubricious advances by teaching him a lesson. They each in turn lead him on, offering him love and consolation, then mocking and ridiculing him. While in pursuit, Alberich slips on the rocks, his cries of lust eventually turning to cries of rage and humiliation.

Suddenly sunlight illuminates the summit of a large rock, revealing a golden mass. The Rhinemaidens sing a joyous hymn to the precious treasure they guard. Alberich asks about the gold. Wellgunde, astonished that Alberich doesn't know what the gold represents, impulsively explains to him that the Rhinegold is all-powerful and, if one were to fashion the gold into a ring, the wearer would become Master of the Universe and would rule the world. Smugly feeling that they have nothing to fear from the lascivious dwarf, the Rhinemaidens add that whoever would steal the treasure must also renounce love.



Enraged by the humiliation of their teasing, Alberich scrambles up the rock, renounces love, wrests the gold free and escapes with it down to Nibelheim. The waters are plunged into darkness as the Rhine-maidens lament their loss.

## Scene 2

### An open space high in the mountains



As the sun rises over a mountainous plateau, Wotan and Fricka slumber on a bank of flowers. The vision of Valhalla, Wotan's newly built fortress, gleams in the distance. Fricka, waking first, rouses her husband, and reproaches him that it was her sister, Freia (goddess of love and beauty), that was rashly offered to the giants in payment for building their castle. She chides Wotan for trading love and the virtues of woman in exchange for power and dominance. Wotan brushes aside her fears, replying that he had never meant to keep the bargain, and that Loge (god of fire) is off trying to find a substitute to replace Freia as payment for building the castle, something the giants would be satisfied with.

Even as Wotan speaks, Freia approaches in terrified haste, pursued by the giants, Fasolt and Fafner. Wotan, standing protectively between Freia and the giants, refuses to hand her over as payment. He protests that he had made the pact in jest, and that the giants must settle for a different fee for building the castle. Fasolt indignantly reminds Wotan that the runes on his spear symbolize his contracts, and it is they that legitimize his power. Fasolt feels tenderness towards Freia, but Fafner is interested in Freia only as a possible ransom. He knows that without Freia's daily ration of golden apples the gods will wither and die.

As the giants prepare to leave with Freia, her brothers, Froh (god of fruit and prosperity) and Donner (god of thunder), suddenly appear to bar their path. Wotan, preventing Donner from exercising force with his hammer, is relieved to finally see Loge arrive. Loge had originated the contract with the giants and, at Wotan's command, has been trying to find a suitable payment for the castle in lieu of Freia.

Loge has been circling the world, trying to find out what men hold more dear than the virtues of a woman. He tells how Alberich had stolen the gold from the Rhine-maidens and then had forged it into a ring through which to rule the world. Loge's description of the ring's power gets the giants thinking. Wotan is also enthralled by the absolute power of the ring and Fricka, hoping to use the ring to keep her husband faithful to her, urges Wotan to obtain it. Loge suggests that perhaps the Rhinegold might be an acceptable substitute for Freia and proposes that they steal the gold from Alberich. Fafner agrees to the offer of the gold in payment for building Valhalla.



The giants grab Freia, taking her as hostage back to Riesenheim with them. They plan on returning that evening to claim the gold. No sooner do they disappear than a mist descends upon the gods who, denied Freia's golden apples, begin to wilt with age.

Wotan commands Loge to accompany him down to Nibelheim to steal Alberich's treasure. Together they descend through a sulfur cleft in the rocks.

## Scene 3

### The subterranean caverns of Nibelheim

The clang of anvils pervades the dark caverns of Nibelheim, Alberich's domain, where he drives the Nibelung dwarfs to mine gold to enlarge his hoard. Wearing the all-powerful ring, Alberich torments his weaker brother, Mime, demanding that he finish the magic Tarnhelm that he ordered him to make. Mime, who covets this latest marvel for himself, has no choice but to submit. Alberich tries on the magic helmet, which will transform the wearer into any size or shape. Alberich uses the Tarnhelm to make himself invisible and thrashes Mime with great delight. Alberich eventually leaves Mime to torment the other dwarfs.

Wotan and Loge descend through a shaft in the rocks. They find Mime cowering in fear and complaining of Alberich's tyranny. He confides in them that he had hoped to outwit his brother by means of the Tarnhelm, thus regaining the ring Alberich had forged. Wotan and Loge, unrecognized by Mime, are amused by the sniveling dwarf and offer to help him.

Alberich returns, driving the Nibelung dwarfs with his whip to pile up more gold. He brandishes the ring, and the dwarfs scream in fear and scatter in all directions. Alberich now turns his attention to the strangers. Alberich immediately recognizes Wotan and Loge, and boasts to them about his newfound power. Showing no intimidation, he threatens to one day vanquish the gods and force his favors on their women.



Loge, bemused by Alberich's threat, pretends to flatter him. He asks the Nibelung what would happen if someone stole the ring while he slept. Alberich confidently replies that they couldn't get very far with the powers of the Tarnhelm. Loge then feigns disbelief and asks for a demonstration. Alberich transforms himself into a large serpent, then returns back into his old form. Loge, pretending to be terrified, then challenges Alberich to turn himself into something small. Obliging, Alberich transforms himself into a toad, whereupon Wotan traps him under his foot and Loge seizes the Tarnhelm.

As Alberich resumes his normal shape, he is tied and dragged by his captors back up to the surface of the earth.

## Scene 4

### An open space high in the mountains

Loge and Wotan ridicule Alberich's dreams of world domination. They inform him that he will have to relinquish the gold. Though outraged, Alberich acquiesces to hand over the treasure, certain that, through the power of the ring, he will be able to replenish his fortune. Loge unties Alberich's right hand, enabling Alberich to kiss the ring so that he can summon the Nibelungs to haul up the gold. Loge then adds the Tarnhelm to the pile of gold and, to Alberich's horror, Wotan then demands the ring on his finger as well, reminding the dwarf that it was not rightfully his to begin with. Outraged, Alberich retorts that Wotan is as much a thief as he is. Wotan wrests the ring from him by force, at which Alberich places a fateful curse

upon the ring: “The ring will bring death to whoever owns it. Those who possess it will be racked with torment, and those who do not will be consumed with envy.” Alberich then angrily returns to Nibelheim.

The atmosphere clears. Donner, Froh and Fricka welcome back Wotan and Loge, who proudly display the Nibelung hoard of gold — Freia’s ransom. The giants return with Freia. Saddened at losing the goddess, Fasolt agrees to accept the hoard only if it completely hides her from his view.



The brothers thrust their clubs into the ground and order Freia to stand between the two clubs. They then demand that the gold be piled up in front of Freia until she is completely hidden from view. Fafner checks over the pile, and then complains that he can still see Freia’s hair through a chink in the gold. He tells Loge to add the Tarnhelm to the hoard to plug the chink. Fasolt checks the pile again, and then complains that he can still see the gleam of Freia’s eye through another chink in the gold. Fafner demands that Wotan fill the chink with the gold ring on his finger. Wotan refuses to give up the ring. Angrily, the giants pull Freia from behind the hoard and begin to leave with her.

The Rhinemaidens’ lament is heard from the water below. Loge reassures the Rhinemaidens that Wotan will be returning the ring back to them soon. But Wotan refuses to yield the ring, remaining impervious both to the giants, who threaten to take away Freia again, and to the other gods, who beg him to relent.

Suddenly darkness covers the mountaintop and a cleft in the ground opens. Erda, the earth goddess, materializes, roused from perpetual sleep by the conflict. She warns Wotan to yield the ring, and foretells the destruction of the gods. Erda then disappears. Wotan reluctantly heeds Erda’s advice and tosses the ring onto the hoard, whereupon Freia is joyfully released.

The giants begin to quarrel over the treasure. Fasolt complains that Fafner is taking more than his share of the gold. Loge whispers to Fasolt to just take the ring and the Tarnhelm. When he does, Fafner becomes enraged and bludgeons Fasolt with his club, claiming the ring, the Tarnhelm and the gold for himself. Alberich’s curse has claimed its first victim.

After Fafner has gone, taking the gold with him, the gods prepare to enter Valhalla. Donner swings his hammer, summoning lightning and thunder to dispel the thick mist that has enveloped the mountaintop. As the skies clear, Froh shows the gods a rainbow bridge, leading to the fortress. Noting how the setting sun gilds the noble structure, Wotan tells Fricka that their new home will be called Valhalla, or War Hall.

Wotan leads the gods across the rainbow bridge, with the exception of Loge, who remains behind, muttering that the gods are all going to their doom. The Rhinemaidens are heard from the valley below, grieving for their lost treasure.



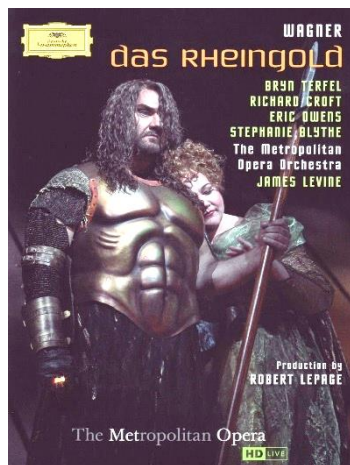
# Das Rheingold

*Das Rheingold*, the first opera in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, marks a dramatic break in style of Wagner's first four operas. Wagner actually called *Das Rheingold* a "prologue" to the other three operas, which he saw as the main operas of the Cycle.

Wagner's ultimate goal was to incorporate drama and music into an all-encompassing art-form, which he termed *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He felt that music could enhance the dramatic experience in a way that mere words and actions never could. His principal method of combining opera and drama into a new form was through the elimination of set pieces like arias, and the introduction of liberal use of the *leitmotif*. This allowed Wagner to use music to express actions, ideas, and even the innermost thoughts of the characters. *Das Rheingold* is the first opera that truly exhibits this new musical form. The music is beautifully written to fit every person and every situation, giving each character in the opera his or her own musical *leitmotif*, which can change and combine to show their changing moods and situations. There are big, heavy chords for the giants; creepy chromatic winding music for Loge, the god of fire, who is supposed to be very crafty; dignified music for the earth goddess, Erda, etc. There is a special *leitmotif* for the curse, which is heard at various times in all four operas.

The famous opening of *Das Rheingold* starts with a low chord of E-flat, which describes the bottom of the river Rhine. At first the notes of the chords are held on, then gradually a ripple of broken chords and arpeggios suggest the ripples of the water. The harps make a sound like the waves. The harmony just consists of the same E-flat chord for the first 136 bars until the Rhinemaidens start to sing.

## Das Rheingold: the Video (2011) Starring Bryn Terfel, Stephanie Blythe, Eric Owens; James Levine conducting



The new production of *Das Rheingold* was created for the Met by the Canadian theatrical polymath and Cirque du Soleil director, Robert LePage and, with a few qualifications, it was a triumph.

The performances were as glorious as was to be expected. Bryn Terfel, in his celebrated role of Wotan, the lord of the gods, was brooding and dark. He was powerfully supported by Stephanie Blythe as his wife Fricka. Eric Owens made a skin-crawling Alberich, and Franz-Josef Selig and Hans-Peter König, as the giants Fasolt and Fafner, loomed menacingly over the stage.

The centerpiece of the production is a rack of 24 planks built out of fiberglass-covered aluminum that can rise and fall powered by hydraulics and can revolve through 360 degrees. The overall set was so heavy the Met had to reinforce its stage, a massive undertaking that is said to have pushed the cost of the four-part Ring Cycle as a whole to \$15 million.

LePage certainly made the stage do extraordinary things. During the prelude, as the orchestra played the Rhine motif, the stage comes alive, undulating like the moving waters. As the Rhinemaidens appear, the stage lifts itself high into the air and becomes the sea within which they float, replete with video-projected bubbles. Later, the planks twist and turn into a bridge that leads down into the underworld lair of the Nibelung, or reforms itself into two massive hands upon which the giants stand.

For the most part LePage has been careful to pay homage to the music, keeping the gadgetry low-key and respectful, intelligently enhancing Wagner's mood rather than imposing his own. The production itself is surprisingly literal to Wagner's interpretation, which will please the Wagner traditionalists.