

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Der Ring des Nibelungen

Siegfried

**Libretto and Music by
Richard Wagner**

Opera in Three Acts

Setting: Germany

Time: Ancient German & Norse Mythology

Characters

Siegfried, son of Siegmund and Sieglinde (heldentenor) Jay Hunter Morris
Mime, Nibelungen dwarf (tenor)..... Gerhard Siegel
The Wanderer, Wotan in disguise (bass-baritone) Bryn Terfel
Alberich, Nibelungen dwarf (bass-baritone) Eric Owens
Fafner, giant turned dragon (bass)..... Hans-Peter König
Erda, Earth mother (contralto)..... Patricia Bardon
Brünnhilde, favorite daughter of Wotan (dramatic soprano) Deborah Voight
Forest Bird (soprano) Mojca Erdmann

Conducted by Fabio Luisi
the Orchestra Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

Première performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: August 16, 1876
in Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, Germany

Synopsis

Background

Fafner, the giant, used the magic Tarnhelm to transform himself into a fierce dragon. He lies in a cave called Niedhöhle guarding the Nibelung hoard. Mime, brother of Alberich, the Nibelung dwarf, found Sieglinde suffering in the woods. He took her back to his cave and nursed her as she lay dying giving birth to Siegfried. She gave him the pieces of Siegmund's sword and told Mime that the infant is named Siegfried. Mime has raised Siegfried as his son, hoping that eventually he will teach him to kill Fafner so that Mime can get the Ring for himself.

ACT I

Mime's cave in the forest



Mime complains bitterly as he toils at his anvil, trying to forge yet another sword for Siegfried, who has become a brash and surly adolescent. The Nibelung dwarf has forged many blades for Siegfried, but he always manages to shatter them into pieces when he tests them. Mime has secretly kept hidden from Siegfried the pieces of Siegmund's shattered sword, Nothung. Though an experienced welder, Mime lacks the skill to restore Siegmund's sword. If he could do so, and then get Siegfried to kill Fafner, the dragon, he would fulfill his dream of obtaining the Ring for himself and becoming ruler of the world.

A hunting horn announces the approach of Siegfried, who bounds in leading a huge bear that he has captured in the woods. He laughs as it chases Mime around the cave, terrifying him. Satisfied at the result, Siegfried releases the bear back to the forest.

Siegfried grabs Mime's latest sword out of his hands, only to have the weapon snap like a toy. To appease him Mime then offers Siegfried meat and soup to eat, which he rudely knocks out of Mime's hands. Mime tells Siegfried that he should show more gratitude to him for raising him, at which Siegfried retorts that he has never learned to tolerate the sight of Mime, nor does he know why he continues to live with him — they don't even resemble each other.

Siegfried then grabs Mime by the throat and demands to know who his real parents were. If Mime is his father, asks Siegfried, then where is his mother? He forcefully extracts the whole story from the Nibelung, who confesses that years ago he found a woman in distress in the woods and nursed her as she died giving birth. Her name was Sieglinde, and the baby's father, Siegmund, was killed in combat — Siegfried's name is a legacy from his mother. Moved by the story, Siegfried asks for proof of what he has been told, at which



Mime reveals the splintered remnants of Siegmund's sword, Nothung. Siegfried becomes excited and demands that Mime restore the weapon to its original form. He then rushes off into the forest, leaving Mime sitting dejectedly at the anvil, not knowing what to do.

Suddenly, the Wanderer [Wotan in disguise] appears, and asks for hospitality. The unwanted guest proposes a battle of wits in which he would forfeit his head should he lose. Mime, though suspicious of the stranger, reluctantly agrees to the challenge. He then proceeds to ask the Wanderer three questions: (1) What race lives under the earth? [the Nibelungs]; (2) Who lives on the face of the earth [the giants]; and (3) Who lives on the cloudy heights? [the gods]

The Wanderer answers all three questions correctly, and then, to Mime's horror, demands that Mime now also answer three questions from him in order to save his own head. The Wanderer asks Mime: (1) What is the race Wotan mistreats, but loves the most? [the Wälsungs]; (2) What is the sword Siegfried must use if he is to kill the dragon, Fafner? [Nothung]; (3) Who will forge the sword, Nothung, back together?

At this question Mime jumps up in alarm — he has no idea who will forge the sword. The Wanderer chides him for asking questions to which he already knew the answers. He then tells him that the sword can only be forged by one who has never known fear. He leaves Mime's head forfeit to the fearless one and then departs. Terrified, Mime imagines the dragon looming in the forest and panics, thinking Fafner is coming for him.

Mime's terror is immediately broken as Siegfried excitedly returns to see how Mime is coming with the pieces of his father's sword. Remembering Wotan's words, that the sword can only be forged by one who has never known fear, Mime is more determined than ever to teach Siegfried the meaning of fear. Mime plans to take Siegfried to visit Fafner's lair — convinced that he will surely learn fear from the dragon.

Eager to wield his father's sword, Siegfried once more demands that Mime to forge Nothung, but the Nibelung sobs that he lacks the skill to do so. In disgust, Siegfried grabs the sword from him and begins to forge the fragments of the sword himself, singing his exciting Forging Song: "Nothung! Nothung! Neidliches Schwert!" Mime can do nothing but look on in horror.

While Siegfried is at work forging the sword Mime begins to concoct a poisonous brew. Once Siegfried has killed Fafner, Mime schemes, he will offer him the lethal drink and then kill him with his own sword.

At last the forging is done, and Nothung is like new. Siegfried tests the sword's strength by bringing it down on the anvil, splitting it in two. Excited, he then rushes into the forest.



ACT II

In the depths of the forest

It is late at night, and Alberich is keeping vigil over Fafner's cave, brooding over his lost treasure, and determined to regain the Ring. The Wanderer suddenly approaches from the forest, and the surprised Nibelung immediately recognizes him as Wotan. Alberich taunts him with his ambitions for world supremacy, but the god assures him that he no longer cares about the Ring — he is now only an observer of destiny. He adds that it is his own brother, Mime, whom Alberich should instead fear, for Mime wants the gold and brings a valiant young hero to slay Fafner in order to get it. Alberich is perplexed that Wotan seems to be helping him. Wotan then challenges Alberich to rouse the sleeping Fafner to warn him of approaching danger, telling him that perhaps Fafner will then reward him with the Ring. Wotan calls out to Fafner, saying that a valiant hero is coming to slay him. But Fafner is unmoved, mumbling that he will devour any attacker, but would rather be left alone to sleep. Wotan has a hearty laugh at Alberich's expense. Wotan and Alberich then both disappear into the shadows to await Siegfried's arrival.

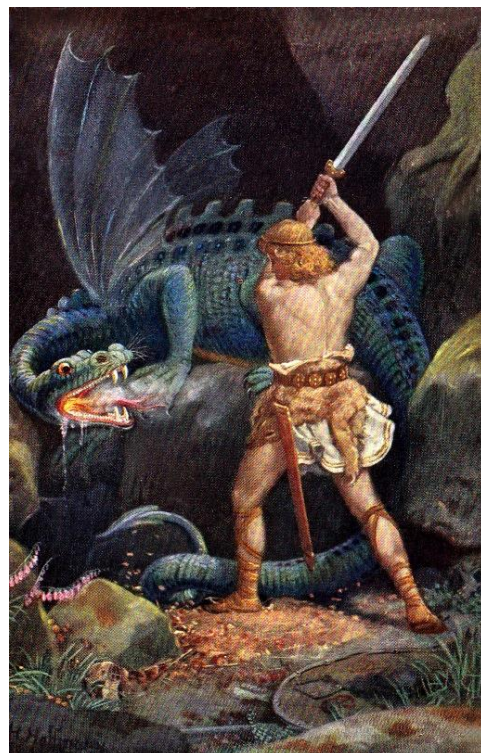
As dawn breaks, sunlight penetrates the dense foliage of the forest. Mime enters with Siegfried. He shows Siegfried Fafner's lair and describes the terrifying dragon to him. Eager as a young child, Siegfried only wants to know where the dragon's heart is, so that he can plunge in his sword. Mime leaves Siegfried alone in the woods to deal with Fafner. Watching him go, Siegfried expresses his relief that the ugly dwarf is not his father after all.

Siegfried then stretches himself comfortably on the ground under a linden tree. He is enchanted by the forest murmurs and yearns for the mother he never knew. [*The orchestra plays the "Forest Murmurs."*]

High in the branches overhead, a wood bird begins warbling a sweet song. Fascinated by the bird, Siegfried tries to imitate it by cutting a reed with his sword. He clumsily blows on it [*comically rendered by the English horn*]. After several unsuccessful attempts he becomes frustrated and tosses the reed aside. He takes his hunting horn and plays a tune, inadvertently awakens Fafner, who annoyingly drags himself out of his cave.

After a short exchange, Siegfried and Fafner fight. Siegfried draws his sword and stabs Fafner in the heart with Nothung. In his dying moments, Fafner asks Siegfried's name, and warns him that whoever put him up to this deed is plotting his death as well.

Siegfried pulls the sword from Fafner's body but, as he does so, Fafner's blood burns his fingers. Siegfried involuntarily puts his fingers into his mouth, tasting the dragon's blood. To his amazement, Siegfried can now understand the language of the wood bird, who tells him to go into the cave and take the Ring and the Tarnhelm. Obediently, Siegfried disappears into the cave.





With Siegfried in the cave Mime returns, only to be confronted by his brother, Alberich. They begin to quarrel over the hoard, but withdraw when Siegfried reappears. To both their astonishment, he is carrying the Tarnhelm, which he fastens to his belt, and the Ring, which he placed on his finger.

The wood bird then tells Siegfried to beware of Mime, who now approaches bearing a poisoned drink. She warns Siegfried that he now has the power to read the dwarf's true thoughts. Mime flatters Siegfried and offers him a cool drink to quench his thirst, but his actual words betray his true intention of killing him. *[Wagner apparently borrowed this comic device from a 19th-century farce on the Faust legend.]* Siegfried eventually loses patience with Mime and, in an act of revulsion, kills him with one blow of the sword. Siegfried then drags Mime's body into the cave and places Fafner's body over the entrance.

With Mime now gone, the only parent he has ever known, Siegfried becomes aware of his loneliness. The wood bird tells Siegfried of Brünnhilde, a sleeping maiden on a rock encircled by fire and that she can only become bride to a hero who knows no fear, which Siegfried recognizes as himself. Excitedly, Siegfried jumps up and follows the bird, as she leads the way through the forest to Brünnhilde's mountain.

[At this point Wagner put down his pen for twelve years before writing the remainder of the Ring. During that time he was influenced by the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who felt that music held a supreme role among the arts, since it was the only one unconcerned with the material world. Wagner quickly embraced this claim, despite its direct contradiction to his own arguments, which he wrote in Opera and Drama, that music in opera had to be subservient to the drama. With this new philosophy, Wagner assigned a more prominent role to the music than to the drama — the music knew everything. Wagner now commanded a new maturity and a new confidence — his music became more complex, denser and more dissonant than ever before.]

ACT III

Scene 1

A wild mountain gorge

[The technical advances from this point on are immediately evident. Powerfully conceived vocal lines are supported by an orchestral texture of unprecedented richness and leitmotifs of such expansiveness and autonomy, which are henceforth to play a major role in The Ring.]

Wotan [the Wanderer] summons Erda (the earth goddess) from sleep, demanding to know more of the earth's secrets. "Wache, Wala!" First she refers him to her daughters, the Norns, who weave their rope of destiny; then she refers him to the daughter that she bore him, Brünnhilde. When Wotan tells Erda that Brünnhilde is being punished for her disobedience, she expresses surprise that the one who taught defiance is now punishing it. Wotan resigns himself to Valhalla's doom, and now looks forward

to the end of the gods. He then bequeaths his inheritance to Siegfried, and to the redemptive power of Brünnhilde's love. Erda sinks back into the earth.

Scene 2

The path leading to Brünnhilde's rock

As the Wanderer waits, Siegfried comes into view, led by the wood bird, who flies away after recognizing Wotan. Encountering his grandson, the Wanderer humorously inquires about Siegfried's exploits and the sword that he wears. Siegfried tells him how he killed Fafner, the dragon, and about Mime's deceit, and how he had forged Nothung, the sword.

Siegfried eventually becomes irritated with the stranger's personal questions, and begins to treat him with disrespect. This angers the god, who tries to block Siegfried's path. Siegfried, not in the least intimidated, draws his sword and shatters the Wanderer's spear with a single stroke. Wotan now realizes that his power is at its end. He retrieves the broken pieces of his spear and vanishes to await his doom. Siegfried scales the fiery mountain and plunges into the flames to find his bride.

Scene 3

Brünnhilde's rock

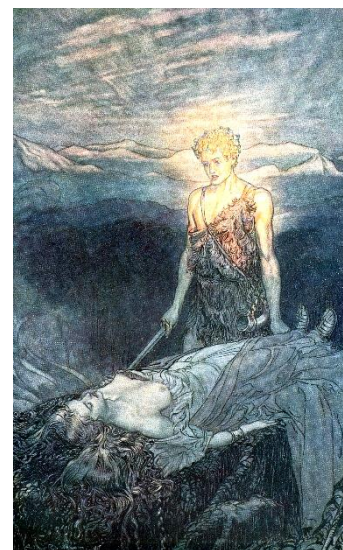
The scene changes to the same rocky summit seen at the end of *Die Walküre*, where Brünnhilde lies asleep. Reaching the summit, Siegfried discovers an armed, sleeping figure. He removes the Valkyrie's shield, helmet and breastplate and finds, to his astonishment, that this is *not* a man, but a woman. Sensing fear for the first time in his life, Siegfried desperately calls out for his mother. Frightened, but also excited, Siegfried longs to waken the sleeping maiden. He calls out to her to awaken. Getting no response he kisses her on the lips.





Brünnhilde opens her eyes and slowly raises herself to a sitting position, greeting the sunlight and her return to life: “Heil dir, Sonne!” Finding that it was indeed Siegfried who woke her, Brünnhilde reveals that she has always loved him, and that she was confined on the rock for shielding him.

When Siegfried tries to embrace her, she pushes him away in terror, protesting that earthly passion would destroy her immortality. She begs him not to destroy the purity of their love. Gradually she is won over by the intensity of Siegfried’s passion, and it is then that she is finally



able to accept her new mortal status. They embrace in ecstasy. Brünnhilde bids farewell to the world of the gods and, transformed by each other’s love, they invoke the “laughing death.”

Siegfried

Some preliminary musical sketches were made for *Jung Siegfried* (subsequently renamed *Der junge Siegfried*) in 1851. In February 1853, the final poem was incorporated into the private printing of the entire Ring text. In 1856, *Der junge Siegfried* and *Siegfrieds Tod* were renamed Siegfried and *Götterdämmerung*.

To avoid the problems he had experienced with *Die Walküre*, Wagner took each act through from first draft to score before embarking on the next. He also worked in tandem between the first complete draft (in pencil) and the second (in ink, on at least three staves — two instrumental and one vocal — elaborating details of the orchestral texture).

In June 1857, when Wagner was rather less than halfway through Act II of *Siegfried*, he decided, at least for the time being, to abandon *The Ring*. He wrote to Liszt: “I have led my young Siegfried into the beautiful forest solitude. There I have left him under a linden tree and, with tears from the depths of my heart, said farewell to him.” One month later he completed Act II, but then he put the entire *Ring* aside. It would be another twelve years before he would begin Act III. During that time he turned his attentions to writing *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*.

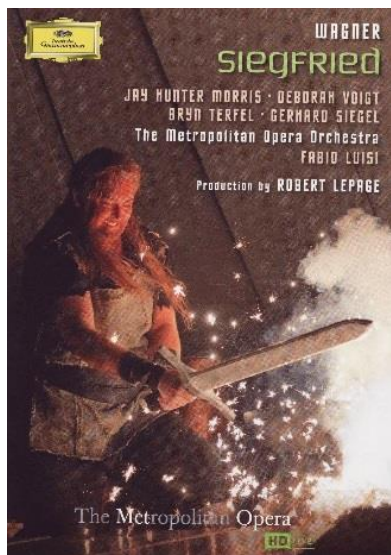
Almost twelve years later, in 1868, Wagner resumed work on *The Ring*. He added touches to Act II and then immediately started work on Act III. During this break Wagner was influenced by Arnold Schopenhauer, which caused him to assign a more commanding role to the music. This accounts for much of the stylistic inconsistency identifiable in the work. Acts I and II continue the style of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, but with some interesting experiments in formal structure. Act III, however, demonstrates a new-found flexibility and maturity.

Siegfried begins fearless, and expresses his wish to learn fear to his foster father Mime, who says the wise learn fear quickly, but the stupid find it more difficult. In a letter to his friend Theodor Uhlig, Wagner recounts *The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was*, about a boy so stupid he could not discover what fear was — and points out that the youth and Siegfried are the same character. Although Wagner did not include the connection, the boy is taught fear by his wife, as Siegfried learns it when he discovers the sleeping Brünnhilde.

The role of Siegfried requires the tenor to dominate the stage for the better part of four hours, culminating in a strenuous final scene with the newly awakened Brünnhilde. It is one of the most taxing in the tenor repertory.

Siegfried: The Video (2011)

Starring Jay Hunter Morris, Deborah Voigt, Bryn Terfel, Gerhard Siegel



This opera is about the maturing of a young, fearless and somewhat immature adolescent. The sheer length of the role is just one of its challenges. Jay Hunter Morris is marvelous, starting off as a youthful boy; by Act III he is the epitome of masculine strength. His voice has both the brutish strength of a heldentenor and the beautiful tone of a lyric tenor, full of brightness and attention to musicality. His singing is admirably clean and honest. He seemed to relish the feisty exchanges with Mime (Gerhard Siegel), the calculating, Nibelung dwarf who had raised Siegfried from an infant.

Bryn Terfel is a very strong Wanderer. His singing is firm and incisive. He is just as impressive in his acting, playing the Wanderer as both majestic and troubled. Whether ranting or brooding, he sang with chilling intensity and power. Eric Owens' Alberich has a presence that makes the skin crawl. His voice is booming and sonorous, deep and rich — a brilliant and quite creepy performance. Gerhard Siegel is Mime, Siegfried's guardian, which he plays with a twitchy nature and straggly hair. Siegel shows that he is a gifted actor

and that he has a well-projected voice.

In the last scene Siegfried finally learns fear, not from a monstrous dragon, but from a woman — Brünnhilde, whom he awakens from her sleeping spell. This scene is a shifting and rapturous 30-minute love duet. Deborah Voigt sings the role with a bright, penetrating sound and textured shadings. Her voice, though sometimes hard-edged, is exciting and expressive. She poignantly captures Brünnhilde's confusion as she grapples with the loss of her godhood and realizes that no armor will protect her from the threat of Siegfried's love, which she helplessly returns. In his guise as a dragon, the giant Fafner (Hans-Peter König) is a huge, puppet-like thing with scaly skin, spiky teeth and glassy eyes — a little too cute (a Kukla, Fran and Ollie-type dragon).

Robert Lepage's staging still continues to impress with his very technical and ambitious approach. He makes the most effective use so far of the malleable staging called "the machine" (a 45-ton apparatus with movable planks on a crossbar). For the most part the planks form stable surfaces for Pedro Pires's inventive video images, especially in Act II, set in the depths of the forest, with verdant trees and flowing streams. The forest bird appears in vivid 3D images.