

# Der Ring des Nibelungen

by Richard Wagner



Richard Wagner, already an accomplished composer, conductor and essayist, had long wanted to develop a work based on the Norse legend of Siegfried, the mythical figure who defeated the Romans in 9 AD in the Teutoburger Wald, a forest in Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen). However, excessive personal debt and his political activism exiled Wagner in 1849 from his native Saxony (a separate German kingdom at the time). While in exile, however, it gave Wagner the time to develop his massive music-drama of good and evil.

*Der Ring des Nibelungen* has been called the most ambitious and most profound work of art ever created, and one of the most remarkable and influential works in Western music. Considered to capture all aspects of the human condition, it is also one of the most challenging productions to stage and sing. The four separate operas are designed to be performed as a “Music Festival,” an immersion into Wagner’s music-drama, spread out over six days (a total of over 18 hours, not including intermissions).

This four-opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, is based on the Nibelung saga from ancient Teutonic mythology. Wagner adapted the myths from several major sources: The Icelandic works, *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Volsunga Saga* and the German *Nibelungenlied*. Siegfried would portray the decadence of Germany through the lust for gold and the deceit of the gods. Only through a total cleansing could mankind once again prosper.

Wagner wrote both the music and the libretto of the *Ring*, spending over 26 years (from 1848 to 1874) to complete what he called his “master artwork of the future.” In 1848 he started writing a prose text he called *Siegfrieds Tod* (*Siegfried’s Death*). In it he included extensive narration to explain its mythical background. However, it soon became apparent to Wagner that he needed to present the events leading up to Siegfried’s death in more detail and in dramatic form, and it needed to be acted in full on stage, rather than told as a narrative. So, he began writing a “prequel” to *Siegfried Tod*, which he called *Der Junge Siegfried* (*Young Siegfried*), and which was eventually renamed *Siegfried*. Wagner’s overall conception began to take shape — an operatic tetralogy. He next wrote the text to *Die Walküre*, and finally added a prologue, *Das Rheingold*, thus completing the four-part cycle.

Wagner began composing the music to *Das Rheingold* in 1854, and completed *Die Walküre* in 1856, but work on *Siegfried* was halted in the middle of the second act. Disillusioned, and feeling that his work was getting stale, Wagner put the *Ring* aside, leaving Siegfried alone in the forest. A month later he completed Act II, but then Wagner put the entire *Ring* aside to work instead on other operas — *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-59), the Paris revisions to *Tannhäuser* (1860-61) and *Die Meistersinger* (1862-67).

During that time Wagner became influenced by 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. In the last half of the *Ring* cycle Wagner commanded a new security and a new confidence — his music became more complex, denser and more dissonant than ever before.

Wagner resumed work on the *Ring* in 1868, twelve years later. He added touches to Act II of *Siegfried*, completed the last act of *Siegfried*, and composed the music to *Götterdämmerung*. He finally completed his masterpiece in 1874.

Much against Wagner's wishes, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* were both premiered in Munich before the rest of the operas were finished. King Ludwig insisted on this "preview," while the furious composer looked on helplessly in the face of the King's privileges and his own dependence on the King's funds. Wagner had a special theater built in the small town of Bayreuth to perform this monumental work. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was produced in its entirety at the opening of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus on August 13, 1876. Although Wagner himself would have been more than competent to conduct the world première of the *Ring*, he chose instead to remain on stage and become the first stage director.

Artistically, the Festival was an outstanding success. "Something has taken place at Bayreuth which our grandchildren and their children will still remember," wrote Tchaikovsky, attending the Festival as a Russian correspondent. Financially, however, it was an unmitigated disaster. Wagner abandoned his original plan to hold a second festival the following year, and instead traveled to London to conduct a series of concerts in an attempt to make up the deficit.

## Structure of *The Ring*

### The Music

Wagner's artistic and philosophical vision of opera transcended the romantic operas that were commonly produced in the 19th century, which were organized as a string of individual "numbers" — arias, duets or choruses — held together by dialogue that was either spoken or sung. Wagner viewed opera more as a music-drama, where poetry, music, staging, orchestra and art were all united. Wagner would change the structure of opera by unifying these elements — under his artistic influence they would all become one.

**Leitmotifs.** The music in the *Ring* is one vast symphonic web of recurring musical themes (*leitmotifs*) spun into ever-varied patterns and forms. A *leitmotif* is generally a short melody only a few notes long. It can represent a character, thing, idea or feeling; or it can also be a chord progression or even a simple rhythm. The *Ring* uses hundreds of *leitmotifs*, some occurring in only one of the operas, most occurring throughout the entire cycle. These *leitmotifs* bind the *Ring* together into a coherent whole, enabling the music to independently relate the story without the use of words — the music knows everything, even if the characters don't. These *leitmotifs*, when welded together, produce a united whole that is rich in variety, beauty and meaning — a glittering texture of harmony and counterpoint.

Wagner also demanded that duets and other groups, as in real speech, were not to be sung at the same time, since people do not talk at the same time. Their dialogue would alternate, as in normal conversation.

In making such artistic leaps, Wagner transformed and furthered the world of opera. Above all, Wagner's music impressed itself on the late 19th century because it was able, by its sheer overwhelming power, to suggest, arouse or create in its listeners that all-embracing state of ecstasy, at once sensuous and mystical, toward which all Romantic art had been striving.

## The Singers

It takes a special kind of voice to sing in a Wagnerian opera. Wagner selected singers with exceptional vocal prowess and extraordinary stature. He wanted voices that were “big, beautiful and dramatically expressive.” His singers would not have thin accompaniments, but rich symphonic orchestration, with the dynamics of a Greek chorus — they would be in partnership with the orchestra, not just accompanied by it.

**Heldentenor.** The demanding role of the tenor was taken by a new type of tenor — the Heldentenor, or heroic tenor. The Heldentenor voice differs from what most people are accustomed to in timbre and strength; his demeanor is strong and warlike, as opposed to the warmth and expressiveness of the Italian lyric tenor. His voice has great weight and tone quality, particularly in the middle and bottom of the voice. Heldentenors are considered to be rare, usually developing with age, and most often created from a high baritone voice.

**Dramatic Soprano.** The range for the dramatic soprano is generally somewhat lower than that of the Italian lyric soprano, but she is often called upon to sing high passages for dramatic emphasis, making these roles quite strenuous. Her voice is rich, powerful and emotive, and uses a heavier tone color.

Because of the length of Wagner’s operas, the singers also had to be able to hold up under stress — both physically and mentally — for an extended period of time, saving their best for their most demanding aria, which usually came at the end of the opera.

The Wagnerian singer also had to be an actor. For some of his singers this entailed a substantial retraining. Wagner’s tendency was towards realistic postures and gestures. Because the characters had intensely human feelings, musical ways of expressing those feelings needed to be complemented by the action on the stage. The looks and movements of the singers needed to convey the wildly conflicting feelings, the ecstatic bliss or the desperate fear which the orchestral melody was voicing.

## The Orchestra

A standard symphonic orchestra consists of about 104 players, but Wagner’s orchestra was enlarged to over 200 players. The Bayreuth Festspielhaus was specifically designed to house Wagner’s music-dramas, because his works for the stage were scored with unprecedented scope and complexity. Indeed, the score to *Das Rheingold* calls for no less than eight harps. Thus, Wagner envisioned an ever-more-demanding role for the conductor of the Bayreuth orchestra, as he elaborated in his influential work, *On Conducting*. This brought about a revolution in orchestral composition, and set the style for orchestral performance for the next eighty years. Wagner’s theories re-examined the importance of tempi, dynamics, bowing of string instruments and the role of principals in the orchestra. Conductors who studied his methods would go on to be influential themselves.

**The Wagner Tuba.** Wagner redesigned and introduced instruments never before heard in opera, such as the Wagner tuba, a comparatively rare brass instrument that combined elements of both the French horn and the tuba. Wagner wanted an instrument that could intone the Valhalla motif somberly like a trombone, but with a less incisive tone, like that of a horn. That effect was obtained by a conical bore (like a horn) and the use of the horn mouthpiece (tapered, as opposed to a cup mouthpiece, such as on a trombone). The instrument is built with rotary valves like those on the French horn, which are played with the left hand. The sound of the Wagner tuba is mellower than that of the horn and sounds more distant, yet also more focused. The Wagner tuba comes in two sizes, tenor in B-flat and bass in F, and both are transposing instruments.

Some horn players dislike playing the Wagner tuba because it is inherently out of tune, and requires lots of fussing and a very good sense of intonation to



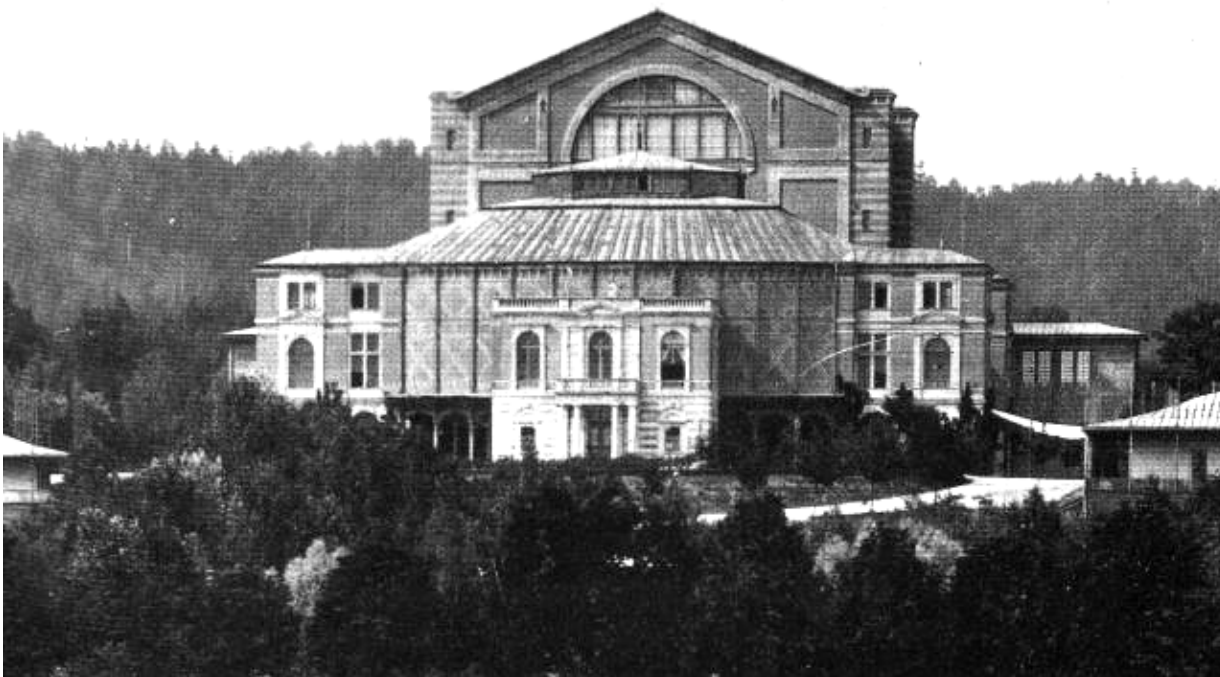
play it well. Others love that challenge, especially because, on most engagements where they are asked to play on both horn and Wagner tuba, the contract specifies that the player be paid “doubling” fees — an extra percentage (up to 50%) higher than the basic rate paid for the engagement if playing on just one instrument.

## **Festspielhaus (Bayreuth Festival Theater)**

The Festspielhaus is a unique place. Its singular world status begins with the fact that it is the only theater built from the ground up to the strict specifications — and whims — of one creative talent who was not even an architect, but a composer of music. Further the place was erected to present exclusively the handful of works of this composer.

The Festival that takes place at Bayreuth every summer is a mixture of time-honored tradition and adventuresome experimentation. So powerful are the festival’s contrasting values that, at times, its dichotomy has threatened its very existence. However, the Festspielhaus survived two world wars, and it celebrated one hundred years of existence in 1976. Now in its second century it is still thriving as the one and only, ideal place to experience Richard Wagner’s operas.

In Wagner’s view, the magnitude of his artistic concept for the *Ring* called for a venue that was beyond the capability of existing buildings for the performing arts. Wagner felt that most opera houses in existence at the time were too small and too old-fashioned to live up to the incredible demands of *The Ring*. Guided by this principle and his desire to fulfill his artistic vision, Wagner embarked on a project to build a new theater in the small town of Bayreuth, in the German kingdom of Bavaria.



**The Stage.** Wagner adapted the design of the Greek theater as much as was possible, to the necessity of a proscenium arch, the area located between the curtain and the orchestra. The stage area in the Festspielhaus features a double proscenium, which gives the audience the illusion that the stage is farther away than it actually is. The double proscenium and the recessed orchestra pit both create, in Wagner’s term, a “mystic gulf” between the audience and the stage, which gives a dreamlike character to performances, and provides a physical reinforcement of the mythic content of most of Wagner’s operas.

**The Seating.** Wagner wanted a large hall without aristocratic loges, so that all people would be given equal status. Compared to other world famous opera houses, the Festspielhaus is quite small and plain — an amphitheatrical auditorium with a mere 1,925 seats. There is one continuous bank of seating, steeply raked so there are clear sightlines over the heads of those below, and with each row arranged as a continuous segment of a circle. In direct contrast to such plush opera houses as La Scala in Milan or Covent Garden in London, its thirty rows of seats are wooden, un-upholstered, and do not even have arm rests. Following Richard Wagner’s specifications, the floors are also made of wood and, to this day, remain uncovered in fear that carpeting might absorb the fabled sound and thus disturb the famous acoustics of the theater.

Pricing of tickets is based simply on the distance of a spectator’s seat from the stage, and the only concession to social strata is the set of boxes (the central one for the pathologically shy King Ludwig) that was placed at the rear of the auditorium. Unlike the boxes of a conventional 19th century theater, they furnish a relatively distant view of the stage, and they are not in a conspicuous place where less privileged members of the audience can observe the privileged spectators who occupy them.

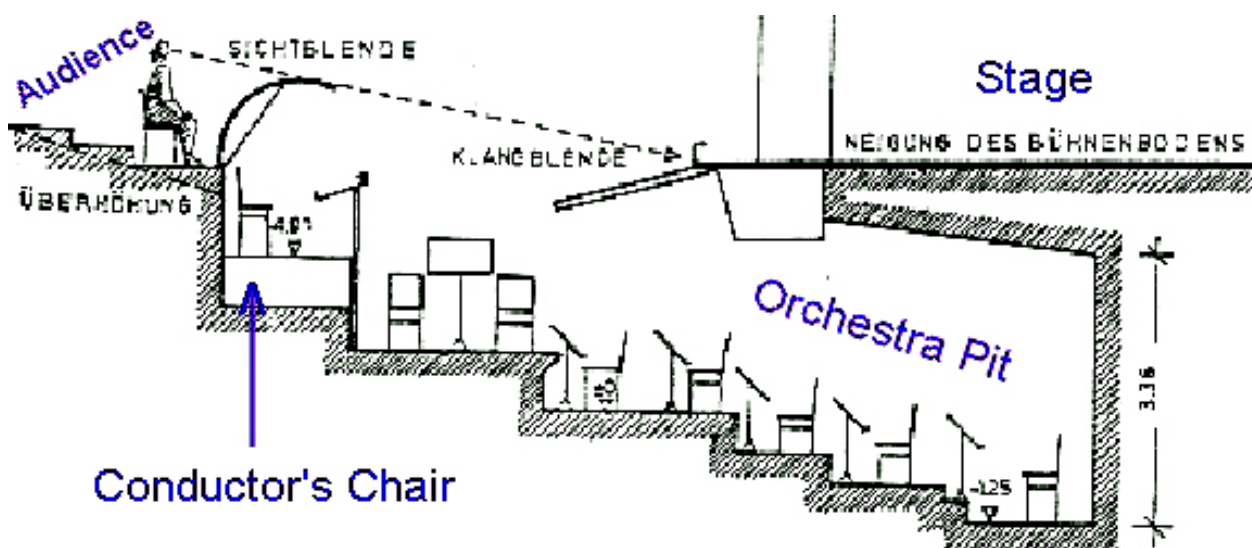
**The Audience.** Wagner’s reforms to the audience were as wide-ranging as his new demands on the singers. He saw himself as fulfilling their legacy by becoming a master-manipulator of their emotions. The audience, first had to get used to being plunged into almost total darkness — this was a startling experience at first. When the house lights go down at Bayreuth, there is almost none of the light spill that is such a distraction in most conventionally designed opera houses — the sunken orchestra pit and hood remove almost all of the light from the orchestra. The audience is little consciousness of its neighbors, or indeed of any of the rest of the audience. Its attention is entirely focused on what is happening in the only source of light — the stage behind the proscenium arch — and on the hypnotic power of the music emanating from the “mystic gulf.”





**The Orchestra Pit.** The most revolutionary and significant feature of the Festspielhaus is its unusual orchestra pit. Before Wagner all theaters were built with the orchestra pit in front of the stage. To make the audience focus on the drama onstage, rather than the distracting motion of the conductor and musicians, Wagner placed the orchestra below the stage, so that no view of the stage would be obscured. The orchestra was then covered by a hood, so that it was completely invisible to the audience as well. This feature became a central preoccupation for Wagner.

Also, because Wagner used such huge orchestras in his operas, in a normal theater, the singer would have been completely drowned out. By placing most of the orchestra under the stage, the sound of the orchestra resulted in an especially well-balanced acoustic mixture of voices and orchestra in the auditorium, which allowed the singer to be heard. This corrected the balance of volume between singers and orchestra, and created ideal acoustics for Wagner's operas. Indeed, the acoustic quality of the Festspielhaus is extraordinary — the climaxes can be overwhelming without being abrasive, and the delicate orchestration for solo instruments in many parts of the work remains crystal clear.



On the downside, this orchestra pit arrangement made it the most challenging venue in which to conduct, even for the world's best conductors. Not only is the crowded pit enveloped in darkness, but the acoustic reverberation makes it difficult to synchronize the orchestra with the singers. Conductors therefore had to retrain themselves to ignore cues from singers. Most, if not all, of the Festival's conductors have found the Festspielhaus venue to be the most challenging of their careers.

The Festspielhaus remains the venue of the annual Bayreuth Festival, during which Wagner's operas, such as the *Ring Cycle* and *Parsifal*, are given on a repertory basis.

## Fanfares

Playing leitmotifs from “The Ring” on the balcony above Ludwig’s extension is a great Bayreuth tradition. Fifteen minutes prior to the curtain, a brass ensemble arrives on the balcony and signals the time with a leitmotif taken from the act to follow. Five minutes later, the brass repeats the leitmotif twice. Five minutes prior to the curtain, the ensemble plays the leitmotif three more times. For *Das Rheingold*, there is only the single set of fanfares, as there is no intermission.

### Fanfare Motifs

#### Das Rheingold

The Gold

#### Die Walküre

Act I — The Sword (short form)

Act II — Sword (long form)

Act III — Ride of the Valkyries

#### Siegfried

Act I — Siegfried’s Horn Call (short form)

Act II — Siegfried’s Horn Call (long form)

Act III — Siegfried the Hero

#### Götterdämmerung

Act I — Alberich’s Curse on the Ring

Act II — Gibichung Horn Call

Act III — Valhalla

