

# Synopsis

## Act I

*Mythical times.* In his cave in the forest, the dwarf Mime forges a sword for his foster son Siegfried. He hates Siegfried but hopes that the youth will kill the dragon Fafner, who guards the Nibelungs' treasure, so that Mime can take the all-powerful ring from him. Siegfried arrives and smashes the new sword, raging at Mime's incompetence. Having realized that he can't be the dwarf's son, as there is no physical resemblance between them, he demands to know who his parents were. For the first time, Mime tells Siegfried how he found his mother, Sieglinde, in the woods, who died giving birth to him. When he shows Siegfried the fragments of his father's sword, Nothung, Siegfried orders Mime to repair it for him and storms 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 about the Nibelungs, the giants, and 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 inquiring about faraway matters when he knows nothing about what closely concerns him. Then he departs, leaving the dwarf's head to "him who knows no fear" and who will re-forged the magic blade.

When Siegfried returns demanding his father's sword, Mime tells him that he can't repair it. He vainly tries to explain the concept of fear to the youth and, in order to teach him, 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, Siegfried smashes the anvil in half and runs off into the forest.

## Act II

The same night, Mime's brother Alberich is hiding by the entrance to Fafner's cave, obsessed with winning back the ring for himself. The Wanderer enters and tells the Nibelung to watch out for Mime. He then wakes Fafner and warns him that a young hero is on his way to kill him. Unimpressed, the dragon goes back to sleep.

As dawn breaks, Mime and Siegfried arrive. Caught up in the peaceful beauty of the woods, Siegfried thinks about his parents. He tries to imitate the song of a bird on a reed pipe but fails and blows his horn instead. This awakens Fafner,

and in the ensuing fight, Siegfried fells the dragon. With his dying words, Fafner warns him 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, which directs him to the gold in the cave. Alberich and Mime appear, quarreling, but withdraw as Siegfried returns with the ring and the Tarnhelm. The bird warns Siegfried not to trust Mime, and when the dwarf offers him the potion, Siegfried kills him. The bird then tells Siegfried of a beautiful woman named Brünnhilde asleep on a mountain surrounded by fire. He sets out to find her.

### Act III

High on a mountain pass, Wotan 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. When Siegfried approaches, making fun of the god whom he takes for a simple old man, Wotan attempts to block his path. With a stroke of his sword, Siegfried shatters Wotan's spear—the same spear that smashed Nothung to pieces years before. Defeated, the god retreats.

Siegfried reaches the mountaintop where Brünnhilde sleeps. Never having seen a woman before, he thinks that he has discovered a man. When he removes Brünnhilde's armor, he is overwhelmed by the sight of her beauty and finally realizes the meaning of fear. Mastering his emotions, he awakens her with a kiss. Hailing the daylight, Brünnhilde is overjoyed to learn that it is Siegfried who has brought her back to life. She tries to resist his declarations of passion, realizing that earthly love will end her immortal life, but finally gives in and joins Siegfried in praise of love.

## In Focus

*Richard Wagner*

# Siegfried

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*Premiere: Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, 1876*

The third opera in Wagner's four-part *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Siegfried* is the coming-of-age story of the ultimate hero and his role in the struggle for supreme power, which is embodied by the magic ring introduced in *Das Rheingold*. Siegfried is an unusual hero by any standard: He is portrayed as an impetuous teenager who knows no fear, and Wagner made little attempt to make him likable in a conventional sense. While characters from earlier parts of the saga return in *Siegfried*, the emphasis is clearly on the human title hero and, eventually, on Brünnhilde in her mortal incarnation. Wotan, leader of the gods, appears as well, but in the distinctly human shape of the Wanderer. The opera's earthly ambience is also represented in its focus on nature: There are references to animals and their behavior in the libretto, and the sublimely lyrical depiction of the forest landscape in Act II is among Wagner's most striking achievements.

### *The Creator*

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was the complex, controversial creator of music-drama masterpieces that continue to be performed by all the world's greatest opera houses. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he was an artistic revolutionary who reimagined every supposition about music and theater. Wagner wrote his own libretti and insisted that words and music were equal in his works. This approach led to the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art," combining music, poetry, architecture, painting, and other disciplines, a notion that has had an impact on creative fields far beyond traditional operatic territory.

### *The Setting*

*Siegfried* is set in mythical times, when gods and other creatures contend for dominion over the Earth while humans are emerging as a new power. No location is specified in the libretto, but the Teutonic mythology on which Wagner based his story and the significance of the Rhine River in the epic suggest a Germanic setting.

### *The Music*

Much of the drama of *Siegfried* is expressed in the orchestra: Wagner's system of leitmotifs (characteristic themes associated with a character, object, or emotion) that was begun in *Das Rheingold* and elaborated in *Die Walküre* is taken to a new level here as events and ideas overlap and evolve. The orchestra creates one of the most delicate and enchanting soundscapes in opera—the evocative

Forest Murmurs in Act II. The preponderance of male voices throughout most of the work, including three bass roles, creates a dark and murky atmosphere appropriate to the setting of forest caves throughout the first half of the work. This gloom is scattered by the bright soprano voice of the Woodbird, which emerges from the Forest Murmurs. Her melody recalls the music of the Rhinemaidens in *Das Rheingold* and evokes a sense of unsullied nature. The vocal demands of this opera are extreme even by Wagner's monumental standards. The title role is especially daunting, both for its sheer length and for encompassing an astonishing range of dynamics—from the heroic to the reflective to the tender and romantic. Wagner makes ingenious (if spare, in terms of time) use of female voices in *Siegfried*: The extremes are covered by the deep-voiced Erda, the Earth Mother, in Act III and the graceful lyricism of the Woodbird. But the complete feminine principle remains unexplored until the final half-hour of the opera, when Siegfried awakes the sleeping Brünnhilde. The two then share one of the most exciting love duets in opera, a carefully constructed surge of sound and emotion that leads to a tremendous musical and dramatic climax.

### *Met History*

The Met gave the U.S. premiere of *Siegfried* in 1887, conducted by Anton Seidl (who had worked with Wagner at the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876). The cast included Max Alvary, Lilli Lehmann (another Bayreuth veteran), Marianne Brandt, and Emil Fischer—a quartet that did much to popularize Wagner's music in America. A new production in 1896 featured Jean de Reszke as Siegfried and his brother Edouard as the Wanderer. Two more productions followed in 1904 (with Gustav Mahler conducting five performances in 1908) and 1913. Famous Brünnhildes during those early decades included Lillian Nordica, Milka Ternina, Johanna Gadski, and Olive Fremstad. Lauritz Melchior was the dominating interpreter of the title role from 1926 until 1948, while the legendary Kirsten Flagstad sang 19 performances of Brünnhilde from 1937 to 1941, as well as an additional one after her return to the Met in 1951. Friedrich Schorr, a great German bass who, along with many other singers, fled Europe in the time of the Third Reich, gave 46 performances as the Wanderer in this era. Fritz Stiedry conducted a new production in 1948 featuring Set Svanholm and Helen Traubel. Herbert von Karajan's staging, based on his Salzburg production, premiered in 1972, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting Jess Thomas, Birgit Nilsson, and Thomas Stewart. James Levine led the premiere of Otto Schenk's 1988 production with Wolfgang Neumann, Hildegard Behrens, and Sir Donald McIntyre. James Morris appeared as the Wanderer 16 times from 1989 through 2009. Robert Lepage's production, which opened on October 27, 2011, and was conducted by Fabio Luisi, starred Jay Hunter Morris, Deborah Voigt, Patricia Bardon, Gerhard Siegel, and Sir Bryn Terfel.

## Program Note

In May of 1857, Richard Wagner wrote to his friend and patron Julie Ritter:

Although I completed only the first act of *Siegfried* this winter, it has turned out better than I could ever have expected. It was completely new ground for me. Now that this act has turned out as it has, I am convinced that *Young Siegfried* will be my most popular work, spreading quickly and successfully, and drawing all the other dramas after it. ... But it seems increasingly probable that the first performance of the whole thing will not take place before 1860.

As things turned out, the first performance of the “whole thing”—Wagner’s four-part cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*—did not take place until 1876. The orchestration of *Siegfried* was not completed until February of 1871, after one of the most troubling gestations in the history of music.

It all started in the autumn of 1848, when Wagner wrote “The Nibelung Myth: As Sketch for a Drama,” a short plot outline based on his own reweaving of ancient Germanic and Norse myths. His tale of the rise and fall of the gods, the origins of the hero Siegfried (“the most perfect human being”), and Siegfried’s union with Brünnhilde eventually grew from one opera to four. By 1857, Wagner had completed the libretto to the entire work and composed the music to the first two operas, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*.

But only a month after his letter to Julie Ritter, Wagner informed another friend, the composer Franz Liszt:

I have finally decided to abandon my obstinate attempts to complete my Nibelungs. I have led my young Siegfried into the beautiful forest of solitude; there I have left him beneath a linden tree and have said farewell to him with tears of heartfelt sorrow: He is better there than anywhere else.

Wagner—as usual—was in desperate need of money, and the publisher who had agreed to buy the score to *Siegfried* and the last opera of the cycle, *Götterdämmerung*, had withdrawn the offer. Wagner explained to Liszt:

And so, I am now resolved upon a course of self-help. I have conceived a plan to complete *Tristan und Isolde* without further delay; its modest dimensions will facilitate a performance of it, and I shall produce it in Strasbourg a year from today. ... I am thinking of having this work translated into Italian and offering it to the theater in Rio de Janeiro. ... I shall dedicate it to the emperor of Brazil ... and I think there should be enough pickings from all this to enable me to be left in peace for a while.

It was a mad plan and, like many of Wagner’s attempts to make money, came to nothing. Wagner had not yet finished the prose sketch for *Tristan*, to say nothing of the actual libretto or the music. His original idea “of leaving Siegfried alone in the forest for a year, in order to give myself some relief in writing a *Tristan und*

*Isolde*" (as he told Ritter in July of 1857) eventually stretched to 12 years. During that time, he not only finished *Tristan*, but revised his opera *Tannhäuser* for Paris and wrote *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as well. Bavaria's new king, Ludwig II, took the throne in 1864 and became Wagner's patron. Wagner also began an affair with Liszt's daughter Cosima while she was still married to the conductor Hans von Bülow. Wagner and Cosima eventually married but not before setting off a major scandal in Munich that threatened his standing with the king.

More than once during this chaotic 12-year hiatus, Wagner turned back to *Siegfried*, but it was not until February 1869 that he "put the finishing strokes to the second act," as he informed King Ludwig. By September, he had completed the music to Act III, but to avoid having a performance of the work given in Munich (as had happened very much against his will to the first two operas in the *Ring*), he delayed finishing the orchestration until February of 1871, making excuse after excuse to the king.

There are numerous logical external reasons that kept Wagner from doing any significant work on *Siegfried* for 12 years, but more than likely the true reason for the postponement lay within Wagner himself. Deep in his psyche, he undoubtedly realized that he needed to gain a more complete mastery of his compositional style before writing the music for the great confrontation between Siegfried and Wotan or Siegfried's awakening of Brünnhilde.

*Siegfried* is the comic opera of the *Ring*, but it is also the great turning point of the entire cycle, where Wotan, whose concerns dominated the first two operas, gives way to Siegfried and Brünnhilde. As Wagner wrote to his good friend August Röckel:

Following his farewell to Brünnhilde [at the end of *Die Walküre*], Wotan is in truth no more than a departed spirit: True to his supreme resolve, he must now allow events to *take their own course* [the italics are Wagner's], leave things as they are, and nowhere interfere in any decisive way. That is why he has now become the "Wanderer": Observe him closely! He resembles us to a tee; he is the sum total of present-day intelligence, whereas Siegfried is the man of the future whom we desire and long for but who cannot be made by us, since he must create himself on the basis of *our own annihilation*.

Of all the major characters in the *Ring*, Siegfried is probably the one who has been most misunderstood. Comedian Anna Russell's description ("He's very young, and he's very handsome, and he's very strong, and he's very brave, and he's very stupid—he's a regular Li'l Abner type") is the one many operagoers have heard, but it is not accurate. Siegfried is not a badly socialized adult; he is a teenager—boisterous one minute, brooding and introspective the next. Emotionally, he's more on par with Cherubino in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* or Octavian in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* than with Wagner's Tristan or Siegmund. His only influence, other than nature itself (which he reveres) has been Mime, an

evil, manipulative dwarf who plans to use Siegfried to kill Fafner and regain the Nibelung treasure. "Even speech I'd scarcely have mastered, had I not wrung it out of [you]," Siegfried tells him, which tells us just how caring Mime has been.

Like most mythic heroes, Siegfried does not know his true parents, has never experienced their nurturing love, and has been forced to trust his own, inner instinct for survival. This instinct has made him hungry for knowledge, distrustful of Mime, and it is this instinct that leads him to melt down the fragments of his father's sword to re-forged it into his own, rather than trying to patch them together with solder as Mime has tried to do. "I've grown as old as cave and wood but never saw the like!" Mime mutters as he watches Siegfried at work. Psychologically, it's a masterstroke on Wagner's part to show Siegfried forging his own manhood (of which the sword is a symbol) rather than simply accepting someone else's sword (identity) and using it as his own, as his father, Siegmund, did in *Die Walküre*. Siegmund simply accepted Wotan's sword, so when he tried to use it in opposition to Wotan's wishes, it broke. But when Siegfried uses it against the Wanderer in Act III, he is successful because the sword is no longer borrowed from Wotan—Siegfried has made it his own. He has become his own man, a hero. And that is why he can easily pass through the magical fire surrounding the sleeping Brünnhilde, awaken her, and claim her as his mate.

It is through Wagner's astonishing music that we can truly intuit the complex truth of his characters. While working on *Siegfried*, Wagner wrote to Liszt:

Only in the course of composing the music does the essential meaning of my poem [the libretto] dawn on me: Secrets are continually being revealed to me that had previously been hidden from me. In this way, everything becomes much more passionate and more urgent.

For Siegfried's exuberant Act I entrance and laughter, Wagner wrote scampering eighth notes that eventually climb to a high C. But only a few minutes later, Siegfried's music is tender as he speaks of the birds in the forest, and it becomes filled with longing when he thinks of his mother's death. At the moment when Mime finally shows Siegfried the pieces of his father's sword, Wagner tells us unmistakably what a significant event this is: The very sound of the orchestra instantly becomes brighter. A listener does not need to intellectually know that the trumpet plays the musical motif associated with the sword, countered by the motif representing Siegfried's youthful strength in the strings, in order to emotionally experience the great burst of energy and enthusiasm that explodes from the orchestra at that moment. It's the perfect depiction of Siegfried suddenly understanding, deep inside, that *this* is what he needs to take the next step in life.

The music of the first two acts is dominated by the dark sound of the lower instruments in the orchestra. Act I takes place in Mime's cave deep in the woods.

Act II is set next to Fafner's cave in another part of the forest. Until we meet the Woodbird toward the end of Act II, all the singers are male. This means that Wagner's musical palate has been largely the equivalent of a late Rembrandt self-portrait—predominantly dark but filled with subtle hues. So when Siegfried defeats the Wanderer and climbs the mountain to find Brünnhilde, the change in Wagner's music is nothing less than astonishing. It's the equivalent of stepping outside and taking a deep breath of fresh, clean air after being in a cramped room. The sound of the orchestra changes as the woodwinds, violins, and harps (Wagner asks for six of them) become more prominent. The higher Siegfried climbs, the higher and more transparent the music becomes, until he finally reaches the summit and only the first violins are playing, their music going still higher up the scale. "He looks around for a long time in astonishment," the stage directions say, and just as the violins approach a sustained C above high C, four trombones—very softly—sound the three chords that make up the fate motif, the same three chords that accompanied Wotan's standing in the very spot where his grandson now stands. At the end of *Die Walküre*, Wotan stopped to look back with infinite regret at the sleeping Brünnhilde. Now, Siegfried stands in wonder, filled with awe and eagerness to continue his heroic journey.

—Paul Thomason

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