

## Act I of *Die Walküre*

### Richard Wagner

Richard Wagner's earliest operas amalgamated the more or less standard traditions of German Romantic Opera (as codified in the works of Carl Maria von Weber and others) and French Grand Opera (a large-scale enterprise typified by Giacomo Meyerbeer and his contemporaries in Paris). He moved increasingly toward realizing his ideal of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a work synthesized from disparate artistic disciplines, including music, literature, the visual arts, ballet, and architecture. The operas of Wagner's maturity are so distinct that they are often referred to not as operas at all, but rather as "music dramas," in an attempt to underscore the singularity of his aesthetic goals. Nonetheless, Wagner was not averse to extracting sections from these closely woven works to present apart from their operatic context, and on various occasions he conducted such excerpts as stand-alone concert works.

*Die Walküre* is the second opera in the gigantic operatic tetralogy known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*). Taken as a whole it is surely the most imposing work in the canon of classical music. Wagner labored over it from 1848 until 1874, taking time out to write *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* along the way, and in the end its four pieces — *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* — would together have a running time of some 15 hours.

Wagner turned to medieval Germanic-Nordic legends for his material, most specifically to a group of Icelandic eddas and sagas, an Old Norse prose narrative, and the Middle High German epic *Das Nibelungenlied*. He processed this material through his own ultra-Romantic sensibilities to yield a highly stylized, in no way colloquial text that evoked ancient roots while rendering it captivating

to mid-19th-century audiences. He was nothing if not confident. In a letter to Theodor Uhlig, one of his closest friends and supporters, the composer spoke of his libretto-in-progress: "The whole will become — out with it! I am not ashamed to say so — the greatest work of poetry ever written."

A thumbnail summary of the *Ring's* plot would be an exercise in futility, but its complex strands broadly relate how a potent treasure of stolen gold, forged into a ring, passes through the hands of various gods, demigods, and mortals, bringing tragedy in its wake and ultimately leading to the downfall of the godly race. But one needn't think about the ring itself in Act I of *Die Walküre*. It opens with a brief orchestral prelude that sets the scene with musical suggestions of thunder and lightning. The hero Siegmund (tenor),

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### IN SHORT

**Born:** May 22, 1813, in Leipzig, Saxony (Germany)

**Died:** February 13, 1883, in Venice, Italy

**Work composed:** June 1854–March 1856

**World premiere:** June 26, 1870, at the Königliches Hof- und Nationaltheater in Munich, Franz Wüllner, conductor, Therese Vogl, soprano, Heinrich Vogl, tenor, and Kaspar Bausewein, bass

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** November 4, 1876, Leopold Damrosch, conductor, Eugénie Pappenheim, soprano, H.A. Bischoff, tenor, and Franz Remmert, baritone; this marked the work's U.S. Premiere

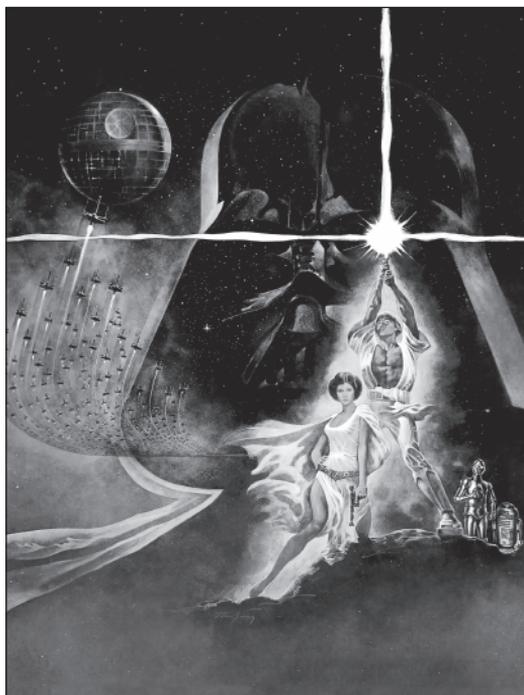
**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** February 5, 1985, Zubin Mehta, conductor, Eva Marton, soprano, Peter Hofmann, tenor, and Martti Talvela, bass

**Estimated duration:** ca. 67 minutes

## Wagner Rides On

The influence of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* on music, literature, and theater would become so pervasive that the ethos of his oeuvre has remained unusually durable through ensuing generations. Among later works that strongly evoke the spirit (and to some extent the structure) of *The Ring* are the films of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (with the original trilogy, 1977–83, having now expanded into a series of eight films and counting). Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) similarly mined a Wagnerian vein.

The role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (introduced in 1974) in which caves, dragons, and superheroes figure prominently, seems crafted from the rib of *The Ring*. In 1991 Wagner's *Ring* was reinterpreted by Roy Thomas and Gil Kane into a graphic novel, without music, of course, but the adaptation to a new medium fit Wagner's libretto as sword to sheath.



Counterclockwise, from top: elements of Wagner's Ring Cycle echo in a *Star Wars* poster for the original 1977 release; Therese Vogl as Sieglinde and Heinrich Vogl as Siegmund in the 1870 premiere of *Die Walküre*; the end of Act I in the 1876 Bayreuth production

weaponless and wounded, takes refuge in a hut built around an ash tree — the abode of Hunding (bass). He is not at home just then, but his wife Sieglinde (soprano) is. She and Siegmund sense a chemistry between them, and it starts to grow by the time Hunding arrives. He notes a curious physical resemblance between his wife and this stranger, who launches into an explanation of who he is. He goes by the name of Wehwalt (Woeful), he says. His mother is dead, his sister was abducted years ago, and he has been separated from his father since enemies fell upon them in the forest. Recently, he killed some men in a fight (they were related to a woman in a loveless marriage whom he hoped to aid). Hunding, realizing that those slain fellows were his own kinsmen, vows to battle Siegmund in the morning; but, for the time being, Sieglinde drugs her husband with a sleeping potion. Siegmund recalls that his father had

promised him a sword in a time of need, and Sieglinde points out the sword that has been embedded in the ash tree, waiting for a special someone to extract it. Things heat up between Siegmund and Sieglinde and the storm gives way to a beautiful spring night. As the act ends, carnal passion ignites between the long-separated brother and sister — and one can be sure there will be a price to pay.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (all doubling piccolo), three oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four Wagner tubas, three trumpets and bass trumpet, four trombones and contrabass trombone, timpani, six harps, and strings, in addition to the solo soprano, tenor, and bass.

*Titles courtesy of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, translated by Jason Smith.*

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## Listen for ... the Wagner Tubas

What is the sound of Valhalla? The question sent Wagner on a search for a timbre that could evoke the rich and noble world of the gods, a sound falling somewhere between that made by the horn and that of the trombone. His quest ended with the creation of a new instrument — the Wagner tuba. The composer conceived of the instrument while plotting his *Ring Cycle*, although efforts to create a model that could achieve the desired tone extended beyond the 1869 premiere of *Das Rheingold*. The instrument was introduced in 1875 and was used for the first performance of the *Ring Cycle* at Bayreuth in 1876. (Hence the alternate name sometimes applied, the Bayreuth tuba.)



In appearance, the Wagner tuba is similar to the horn, but more oval and with a smaller bell. Two forms of the Wagner tuba — tenor and bass — are generally played by hornists, as the instruments share the same mouthpiece and fingering. In Act I of *Die Walküre*, Wagner tubas are used to represent thunder in the storm scene.

Wagner tubas remain an uncommon instrument, but they are employed in works by composers who followed in Wagner's footsteps — in Bruckner's Symphonies Nos. 7, 8, and 9, and in Richard Strauss's *An Alpine Symphony* — and in music by such contemporary composers as Esa-Pekka Salonen, Sofia Gubaidulina, and HK Gruber.

— The Editors

*An early example of the Wagner tuba*