

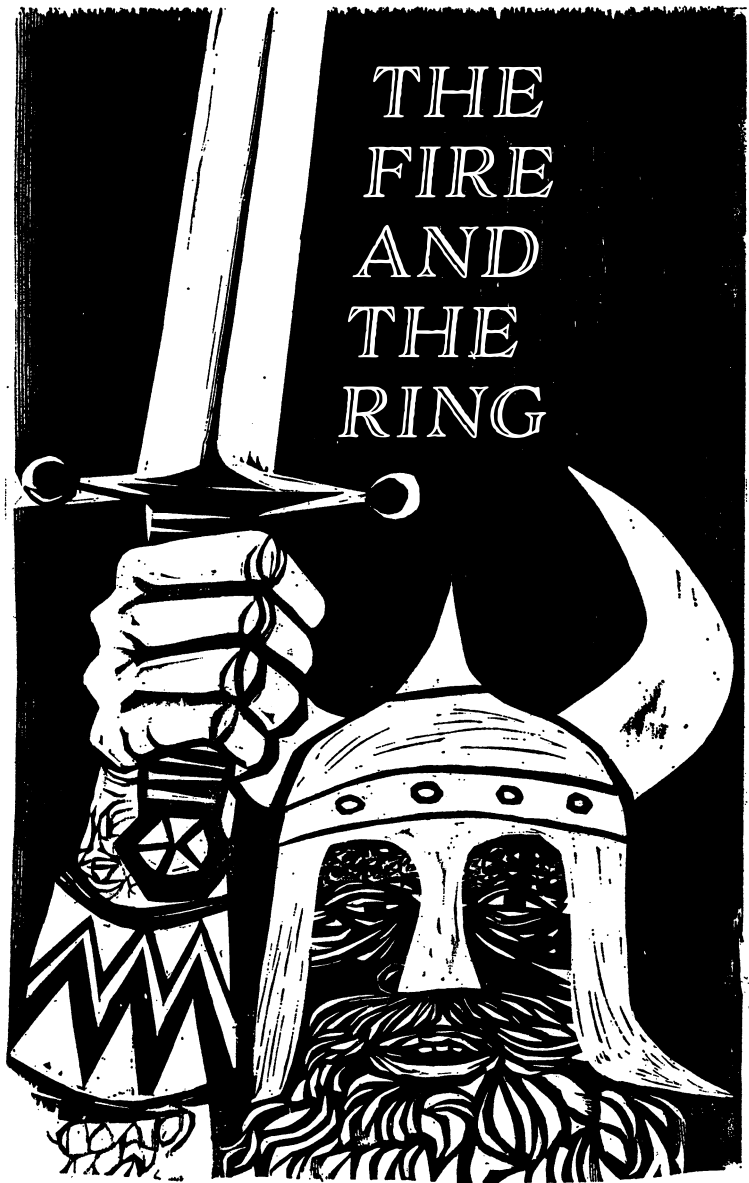


THE RING AND THE FIRE

stories
from
Wagner's
Nibelung
Opera

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CLYDE ROBERT BULLA



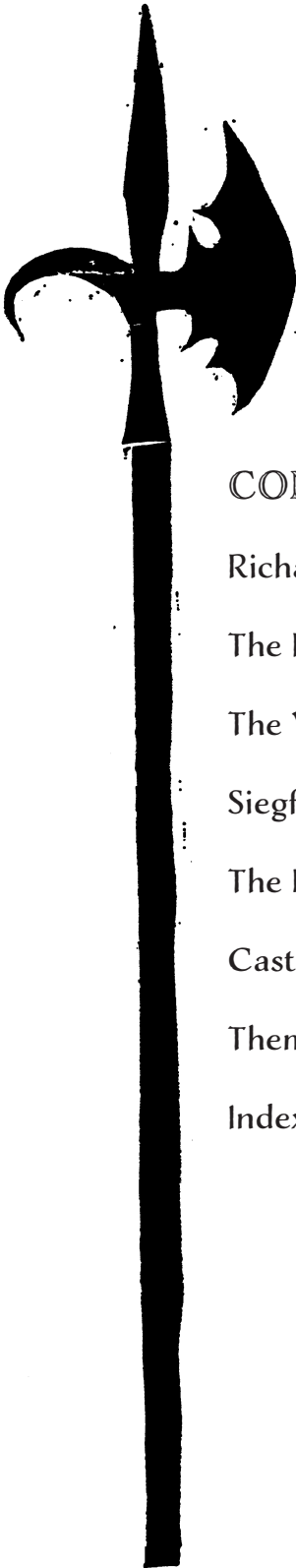
THE
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stories from Wagner's Nibelung Operas

CLYDE ROBERT BULLA

woodcuts by Clare and John Ross

Purple House Press
Kentucky



CONTENTS

Richard Wagner	1
The Rhinegold	9
The Valkyrie	35
Siegfried	59
The Dusk of the Gods	86
Casts of Characters	114
Themes from the Operas	116
Index	123



RICHARD WAGNER

RICHARD WAGNER was born in Leipzig, Germany, on May 22, 1813. His father, a clerk in a Leipzig police court, died the following November, leaving the widow with seven children. In the summer of 1814 she married Ludwig Geyer, a family friend, and she and the children moved with him to Dresden.

Geyer was a portrait painter, playwright, actor, and musician. He sang at the Dresden opera house. Richard was taken to opera performances when he was still very young, and music was a part of his home life, but at first he showed little musical talent. He was more interested in literature. By the time he was eleven, he was writing poetry and reading the works of Shakespeare.

After Geyer's death in 1821, the family stayed on in Dresden for several years, then went back to Leipzig. Richard began to study composition so that he could write music to his poems. This, in turn, led him to realize how music could add strength and meaning to his words.

He entered the University of Leipzig for courses in literature and fine arts. He composed a symphony and some shorter works, but his main interest was opera. As a composer, he was largely self-taught. His formal training lasted only about six months.

In 1833, when he was twenty, he became conductor and chorus master for a small opera company in Würzburg. In the next few years he held similar posts in Magdeburg, Königsberg, and Riga. The work was hard and poorly paid, but it gave him valuable theatrical experience. In the crowded years between 1833 and 1836 he managed to write two operas. The first, *The Fairies*, was never produced during his lifetime. The second, *The Ban upon Love*, had only one performance.

In Königsberg he met a young actress, Minna Planer, and married her on March 24, 1836.

In Riga he wrote the libretto and part of the music for his third opera, *Rienzi*. (Wagner wrote both the librettos and music for all his operas.) Production facilities were limited in the small German opera houses, and he had conceived the work on a grand scale. He decided to take it to Paris.

He and his wife left for France in the autumn of 1839. They sailed by way of England. The ship ran into one storm after another, and the long, wild voyage furnished Wagner with inspiration for what was to be his next opera, *The Flying*

Dutchman, the story of a sea captain doomed to sail the seas forever.

Wagner and his wife lived in Paris for two and a half years. He earned a meager living by arranging and proofreading for a music publisher and by writing articles on music for various publications, but he could find no one in Paris to produce his operas.

He had finished *Rienzi* and *The Flying Dutchman*. In the summer of 1841 word came that *Rienzi* was to be produced in Dresden.

He and his wife returned to Germany to be in Dresden for the first performance of the opera. *Rienzi* was so successful that the company produced *The Flying Dutchman* a few months later.

The usual opera of the day was an entertainment made up of arias, ensemble numbers, dances, and often a procession or some other colorful spectacle. The music was far more important than the drama. In *The Flying Dutchman* Wagner had begun to break away from this form. He had come to believe that the drama should be of first importance, with the music growing out of it. The new opera was a step toward the “music drama” which he perfected in his later works and which changed the course of opera composition.

Audiences were not yet ready to accept *The Flying Dutchman*. They found it strange and gloomy.

Wagner’s opera *Tannhäuser*, produced in 1845, had only a fair success. In 1848 he finished the opera *Lohengrin*, and could find no one to produce it

He had made many enemies, partly because of his musical

ideas, partly because of his political views. In 1848-49 there were uprisings against the German government, and Wagner sided with the revolutionists. A warrant was issued for his arrest. His friend Franz Liszt, the pianist-composer, helped him escape to Switzerland.

For the next ten years Wagner was an exile. Most of this time he lived in Switzerland. He had become interested in tales of the legendary hero Siegfried, and in 1848 he had finished a libretto called *Siegfried's Death*.

Afterward it seemed to him that the poem contained too much material for a single opera. During his exile he wrote a poem, *Young Siegfried*, telling of the hero's early life.

Feeling that *Young Siegfried* needed further explanation, he wrote a poem *The Valkyrie*, which told of events leading up to the hero's birth. This called for still another poem, *The Rhinegold*, which told of happenings before the beginning of *The Valkyrie*.

These were the librettos, written in reverse order, for the opera cycle called *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Wagner changed the title *Siegfried's Death* to *The Dusk of the Gods*. Young Siegfried became Siegfried.

Wagner based his *Ring of the Nibelung* on tales of Norse and German mythology. Some of the stories appeared more than a thousand years ago in the *Edda*, a collection of Norse legends. Others were collected in the *Nibelungenlied*, an epic poem of the twelfth century.

In the legends, as in Greek mythology, gods mingled with mortals and took part in affairs of the earth. Mightiest of the gods was Wotan, also known as Odin or Woden. He roamed

the earth in various disguises, and sometimes he appeared as an old one-eyed man wearing a robe and a wide-brimmed hat. Ravens and wolves were associated with him.

Fricka, Wotan's wife, was the goddess of married love,

Freia, her sister, was the goddess of youth and beauty.

Loge, or Loki, the fire god, was pictured as handsome and cunning.

Donner was the impetuous god of thunder.

Erda, the earth goddess, was guardian of wisdom.

The Valkyries ("Choosers of the Slain") were daughters of Wotan and Erda. These half-savage warrior maidens hovered over battlefields, gathered up the bodies of slain heroes, and carried them off to Valhalla.

Valhalla ("Hall of the Slain") was the fortress and dwelling place of the gods.

Giants and water nymphs lived on earth.

Gnomes lived in an underground realm.

Among these gods, half-gods, and earthly beings moved the hero Siegfried.

Wagner planned *The Ring* as a cycle of three operas and a prelude, to be given on four successive evenings. The prelude, as he called *The Rhinegold*, was meant to be performed without pause, although in today's productions it is sometimes divided into four separate scenes.

Between 1853 and 1856 he composed *The Rhinegold*, *The Valkyrie*, and part of *Siegfried*. Then, in the second act of *Siegfried*, he gave up in despair. No opera company was equipped to perform such a monumental work. He had little hope that it could ever be produced.

He turned to another opera, *Tristan and Isolde*, and finished the score in 1859, although it was not performed until six years later. In 1861 Wagner went to Paris to conduct *Tannhäuser*. He would not bow to public demand and add a ballet to his opera, and the production was a disaster.

It was during this time of disappointment and discouragement that he wrote the libretto of his only comic opera, *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. The opera was finished in 1867. Its first performance was in Munich the following year.

By this time he was no longer an exile. In 1864 King Ludwig of Bavaria had called him to Munich. The eighteen-year-old monarch was an ardent admirer of Wagner's music, which had been widely performed in Germany during the composer's banishment.

Wagner and the king planned to transform Munich into a world music center. A magnificent theater was designed, and it was to be linked to the royal palace by a new avenue and a bridge.

But Wagner had powerful enemies in Munich. Politicians attacked his extravagance and his political views. In 1865 so much pressure was brought to bear on King Ludwig that he asked his friend to leave Munich.

Wagner went back to Switzerland and lived for a while near Lucerne. He was still in the royal favor, and the king insisted on having *The Rhinegold* and *The Valkyrie* given in Munich. This was against Wagner's wishes. He had not wanted any of the *Ring* operas given until they could be produced in a theater specially built for the cycle. King Ludwig was ready to have the theater built in Munich, but the composer's enemies kept the plan from being carried out.

Wagner's wife, Minna, died in 1866. Four years later he married Cosima, daughter of his friend Franz Liszt.

Meanwhile, he had gone back to *The Ring*, and the cycle was finished in 1872. The special theater was built at last not in Munich, but in the town of Bayreuth. The complete *Ring of the Nibelung* was given there in the summer of 1876.

In 1879 he finished *Parsifal*, his last opera. Its first performance was in the Bayreuth theater in 1882.

Wagner's health had begun to fail. He became suddenly ill during a visit to Venice, and he died there on February 13, 1883.



THE RHINEGOLD

SCENE 1

IN THE DAYS when gods and lesser supernatural beings inhabited the earth, three water nymphs lived a carefree life in the River Rhine. Their father had charged them to guard a mysterious treasure that lay on a peak at the bottom of the stream, and they watched over it faithfully, although they had little fear that it would ever be stolen from them.

The treasure was the Rhinegold. It was small in size, but its magical powers were great. If the gold were fashioned into a ring, he who possessed it might rule the world. But only one who had renounced love forever had the power to seize the Rhinegold and shape it into a ring.

So the nymphs guarded the treasure lightheartedly, for who in all the world could live without love?

One day the nymph Woglinde swam alone about the rocky peak on which the Rhinegold had been placed for safekeeping. On all sides were smaller peaks rising out of the dark depths into the greenish twilight of the river.

Woglinde's sister, Wellgunde, called from above, "Do you watch alone?"

"Yes," answered Woglinde, "until you come."

Wellgunde dived down to the high rock beside her. Woglinde darted away. Playfully the two tried to catch each other.

The third maiden, Flosshilde, swam down from above and came between her sisters.

"You guard the sleeping gold badly," she reproved them, but almost at once she joined in the game. Laughing and shouting, the three went swimming back and forth like fish.

A gnome crept out of a chasm in the river bed. He was Alberich, a Nibelung from the underground realm of Nibelheim. He watched the Rhinemaidens in delight.

"Ho, ho, you nixies!" he called out to them.

The maidens peered down through the water and were alarmed to see the hairy, misshapen figure leering up at them.

"Look to the gold!" cried Flosshilde, and the sisters gathered protectingly about the rock where the treasure lay.

"Do I spoil your sport?" asked Alberich. "Dive deeper then. A Nibelung longs to frolic with you."

The Rhinemaidens were bewildered.

"Is this his joke?" asked Wellgunde.

Alberich continued in a languishing voice, "How soft and fair you seem! How sweet to circle a maid with my arm, if she should kindly descend!"

“Our foe is in love!” Flosshilde said to her sisters, and the stranger was no longer someone to fear, but only a ridiculous creature to be scorned and despised.

“Let us content him,” said Woglinde mischievously, and she dived to a lower rock and invited the gnome to come closer.

Eagerly he climbed toward her. His hands and feet slipped on the slimy stone. The chill of the water crept up his nose, and he sneezed.

“See how nicely my sweetheart can sneeze!” said Woglinde.

“Be mine, you beautiful child!” panted the gnome, toiling to the summit of the rock.

But Woglinde swam away and alighted on another rock.

“Alas, you are lost! Come nearer!” pleaded Alberich.

She darted from rock to rock, and as he went floundering after her, she laughed and moved out of reach.

Wellgunde swam to a low rock.

“My hero!” she called to Alberich. “Come to *me!*”

The gnome decided at once that she was more beautiful than the other, and he went stumbling toward her.

But she, too, slipped away from him. “Horrible imp!” she taunted him. “Look for a sweetheart fit for your shape!”

“Chilly, slippery fish!” bellowed Alberich. “Go and let eels be your lovers!”

Flosshilde spoke. “You have sought only two. Now try the third one.”

“Your song sounds sweet in my ear,” the gnome said warily, “but before I believe you, come nearer.”

Flosshilde dived down to him. Her sisters were senseless, she said, not to recognize his charms. Tenderly she drew him to her, calling him “dearest of men.”

“Sweetest of maidens!” he said in ecstasy.

“Were you but mine!” she said. “Your staring-eyed brow and your straggle-haired beard—if only I could keep them forever!”

Woglinde and Wellgunde had drawn near, and at this tender speech of their sister’s they burst out laughing.

Alberich started. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Yes,” said Flosshilde. “That is the end of my song,” and she pushed him away.

She and her sisters rose through the water, and Alberich screamed after them in rage. He sprang from rock to rock, trying to catch first one then another. Always they kept just beyond his reach, until at last he gave up the chase.

As he stood, speechless with exhaustion and fury, a glow of light broke through the waters. He gazed in wonder. The light grew brighter, kindling a golden radiance on the peak of the highest rock.

It was the gold, exclaimed the Rhinemaidens. The gold was smiling, waking from its sleep.

The gnome gazed in fascination. “What is it,” he asked, “that glows and gleams?”

The maidens answered him, “Where is your home, you imp, if you have never heard of the Rhinegold?”

“If it shines only to light your play,” said Alberich, “it would do me small good.”

“You would indeed prize the gold if you knew of its wonders,” Woglinde told him.

“The one who can shape the Rhinegold into a ring can have measureless power,” said Wellgunde.

“This our father told us, and he bade us guard the treasure from all foes,” said Flosshilde.

“But,” said Woglinde, “only one who has renounced love shall be the ring’s master.”

“So we are safe and free from care,” said Wellgunde, “for surely no one can live without loving.”

“Least of all this lovesick gnome,” said Woglinde, and the sisters looked scornfully down on Alberich.

He had listened carefully to the Rhinemaidens’ words. A sudden, fierce resolve came to him. Love had been denied him—then he would renounce it and choose power instead.

He flung himself at the high rock and began to claw his way up. The maidens swam away, half-delirious with excitement.

“Save yourselves!” they cried to one another. “The monster is mad! Love has driven him insane!”

Alberich reached the summit of the rock. “Go in darkness—I put out your light,” he shouted, “and with a ring I shall have vengeance!”

In a terrible burst of strength, he tore the gold from the rock. With the treasure clutched in his hand, he plunged from the peak.

Darkness fell.

“Stop the robber! Rescue the gold!” shrieked the Rhinemaidens. “Woe! Woe!”

And as the darkness deepened, Alberich’s mocking laughter sounded from the depths.

SCENE 2

On a mountaintop overlooking the valley of the Rhine, Wotan, mightiest of the gods, lay sleeping. Fricka, his wife, slept nearby. Beyond the valley rose a cliff on which stood a magnificent castle with battlements and towers that glistened in the early morning light.



Fricka awakened, saw the castle, and started in surprise. She roused her husband.

Wotan raised his head and gazed at the shining fortress. "It is finished!" he said in rapture. This was the fulfillment of his dreams—a glorious dwelling place for the gods.

Fricka did not share his joy. "It is finished, the debt is now due," she reminded him. "Have you forgotten what you must give?"

Two giants, Fafner and Fasolt, had built the castle according to Wotan's plans. In return, he had promised them the lovely Freia, who was Fricka's sister and the goddess of youth and beauty.

Wotan reminded his wife in turn, "You yourself longed for this castle."

It was true, she admitted. She had hoped that in the new dwelling place he would be content to stay at home beside her. Now she realized that he had wanted the castle as a means of making himself more powerful in the world.

"If you would keep me near you at home," said Wotan, "then I must have my own way in the world. I am a god, and I cannot give up my pleasures."

Fricka became bitterly accusing. "You love me no longer. A woman's love means nothing to you."

"As you well know," answered Wotan gravely, "I wagered and lost an eye to win you for my wife." He denied that he cared nothing for a woman's love. "I worship women. I worship them too much for your happiness. I'll not let Freia be taken from us. That was not my plan."

"Then protect her now," said Fricka, "for here she comes."

Freia came in sight, crying out in terror. "Help me! Fasolt is coming to carry me away!"

Wotan asked her, "Did you not see Loge?"

It was Loge, crafty god of fire, who had helped Wotan bargain with the giants Fasolt and Fafner.

At the mention of Loge's name, Fricka exclaimed angrily, "Still you believe in him, after the mischief he has already made!"

"When strength alone is needed, I ask for no help," said Wotan, "but when a situation calls for keenness and cunning, I turn to Loge. He is sure to rescue Freia from the bargain."

"Then where is he now?" asked Fricka.

"And where are my brothers?" asked Freia. Desperately she called their names: "Donner! Froh!"

The tramp of heavy footsteps sounded, and Fasolt and Fafner appeared on the mountaintop. They were huge men dressed in animal skins and carrying heavy wooden staves. For all the roughness of their manner and appearance, they were not without dignity.

Fasolt spoke to Wotan, "While you slept we heaped the heavy stones to build your castle yonder. Now pay us our wage."

"Name your wage," said Wotan.

The giant was puzzled. "We fixed the price beforehand — have you forgotten so soon? It was agreed that we would carry the holy Freia home with us."

"Name another price," said Wotan shortly. "Freia is not for sale."

Fasolt was stunned. "What are you saying! The contract was written on your spear to bind our solemn bargain."

"My trusting brother," said Fafner, "do you not see that he is false?"

Fasolt looked into Wotan's face. "You made a promise."

"It was made in sport," said Wotan. "This goddess is not for such dolts as you."

Fasolt's anger rose. "We giants toiled and sweated to build your castle so that we might win a fair and gentle woman to brighten our poor lives. Would you break the bond now?"

Fafner stopped him. "Talk will gain us nothing. We must take the goddess by force."

Wotan looked uneasily about for Loge.

The giants were moving toward Freia. "You, there—come with us," ordered Fafner.

Once more Freia cried out for help. This time her cry was answered. Her brothers, Donner and Froh, rushed forward, and Froh clasped Freia in his arms.

Donner, god of thunder, was armed with a hammer. He planted himself before the giants.

"Why do you threaten us?" asked Fafner.

"We want no more than our wage," said Fasolt.

Donner swung his hammer fiercely. "Come here, and I'll pay your wage with a generous hand!"

Wotan stretched his spear between Donner and the giants. "Hold!" he said. "This is not the time for force," and Freia cried in dismay, "He forsakes me!"

But Wotan had only been marking time, waiting for Loge to come to his aid. Now the fire god appeared. He had made his way up from the valley of the Rhine.

"Are you ready to unravel the bad bargain you made?" Wotan asked him.

Loge gave him a look of injured innocence. "What bad bargain? Have not the giants built the castle just as you planned it?"

"Of all the gods, I alone have been your friend," said Wotan. "Would you fail me now? You know I pledged Freia to the giants only because you promised to save her afterward."

"I promised only that I would *seek* to save her," said Loge.



CASTS OF CHARACTERS

THE RHINEGOLD

Woglinde	Soprano
Wellgunde	Soprano
Flosshilde	Mezzo-soprano
Alberich	Bass-baritone
Fricka	Mezzo-soprano
Wotan	Bass-baritone
Freia	Soprano
Fasolt	Bass
Fafner	Bass
Froh	Tenor
Donner	Baritone
Loge	Tenor
Mime	Tenor
Erda	Mezzo-soprano

THE VALKYRIE

Siegmond	Tenor
Sieglinde	Soprano
Hundig	Bass
Wotan	Bass-baritone
Brünnhilde	Soprano
Fricka	Mezzo-soprano
The Valkyries	Sopranos and Contraltos

SIEGFRIED

Siegfried	Tenor
Mime	Tenor
The Wanderer	Bass-baritone
Alberich	Bass-baritone
Fafner	Bass
Erda	Mezzo-soprano
The Forest Bird	Soprano
Brünnhilde	Soprano

THE DUSK OF THE GODS

First Norn	Contralto
Second Norn	Mezzo-soprano
Third Norn	Soprano
Siegfried	Tenor
Brünnhilde	Soprano
Gunther	Bass-baritone
Gutrune	Soprano
Hagen	Bass
Alberich	Bass-baritone
Waltraute	Mezzo-soprano
Woglinde	Soprano
Wellgunde	Soprano
Flosshilde	Mezzo-soprano

THEMES FROM THE OPERAS

THE RHINEGOLD

The River Rhine theme:



Song of the Rhinemaidens:



The Rhinegold theme:

Theme of the Ring:



Theme of Valhalla:



The Treaty theme:



Freia's plea for help:



Approach of the giants:



Freia's theme:



Loge's fire-music:

Music of the anvils:



Tarnhelm theme:



Mime's theme:



Dragon theme:



Alberich's curse:



Erda's theme:

Sword theme:



Rhinemaidens' lament:



THE VALKYRIE

Storm music:



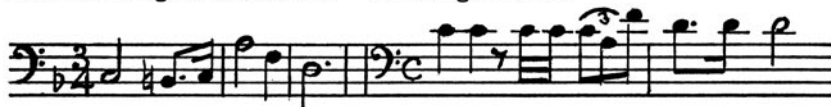
Sieglinde's tenderness:

Love theme:



Theme of Siegmund's sorrow:

Hunding's theme:



Theme of the Walsungs:



Cry of victory:

Siegmund's love song:



Theme of Sieglinde's love:

Theme of Siegmund's love:



Naming of
the sword:

Ride of the Valkyries:



Valkyries' battle cry: Theme of Fricka's anger:



Theme of Wotan's grief:

Theme of death:

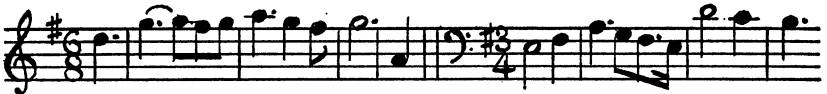


Theme of Siegfried, the hero:



Theme of love's redemption:

Wälungs' love theme:



Theme of Brünnhilde's exile:

Brünnhilde's slumber music:



Wotan's farewell to Brünnhilde:



Magic Fire music:



SIEGFRIED

Theme of the treasure hoard:



Siegfried's horn-call:

Theme of Siegfried's youth and vigor:



Siegfried's song of freedom:



Wanderer's theme:

Theme of the gods:



Siegfried's forging song:



Forest murmurs:



Song of the forest bird:



Theme of Wotan's heritage:



Brünnhilde's awakening:



Themes from the love duet of Brünnhilde and Siegfried:



THE DUSK OF THE GODS

Theme of the Norns:



Theme of the gods' downfall:



Siegfried, the hero:



Brünnhilde, the woman:

Love theme:



Theme of Hagen:



Theme of the Gibichungs:



Theme of the friendship

of Siegfried and Gunther:

Theme of Guttrune:

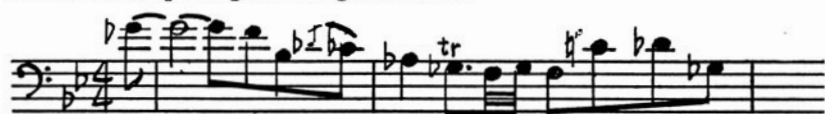


The magic potion:

Oath of brotherhood:



Theme of the plot against Siegfried's life:



Song of the Rhinemaidens:



The Rhinemaidens' warning:



Siegfried's funeral march:



Theme of love's redemption:



- Alberich, 10, 19, 21, 89
- Ban upon Love, The*, 2
- Bayreuth, 7
- Brünnhilde, 44
 awakened by Siegfried, 83
 betrayal by Siegfried, 96
 betrayal of Siegfried, 102
 disobeys Wotan, 50
 immolation of, 112
 punishment by Wotan, 57
- Donner, 5, 16
- Dusk of the Gods, The*, 4
- Erda, 5, 30, 44, 79
- Fafner, 15
 as dragon, 43
 slain by Siegfried, 75
- Fairies, The*, 2
- Flosshilde, *see* Rhinemaidens
- Flying Dutchman, The*, 2-3
- Forest bird, 73, 76, 81
- Freia, 5, 15
 abducted by Fafner, 19
 return to Valhalla, 29
- Fricka, 5, 13
 defends Hunding, 45
- Froh, 16
- Geyer, Ludwig, 1
- Gibich, 89
- Grane, 53, 84, 88, 112
- Gunther, King, 89, 109
- Gutrune, 89, 109
 wedding feast of, 103
- Hagen, 89, 112
 promise to Alberich, 97
- Hunding, 36, 52
- Liszt, Cosima, 7
- Liszt, Franz, 4, 7
- Loge (Loki), 5, 16, 57, 112
- Lohengrin*, 3
- Ludwig of Bavaria, King, 6
- Mastersingers of Nuremberg, The*, 6
- Mime, 21, 59
 treachery and death of, 67, 78
- "Music drama," 3
- Mythology used by Wagner, 4-5
- Nibelheim, 10, 21
- Nibelungs, 10
 Wotan's visit to, 22
- Norns, the, 79, 86
- Nothung, 40, 42, 50, 59
- Odin, *see* Wotan
- Parsifal*, 7
- Planer, Minna, 2, 7
- Rainbow bridge, 33

- Rhine River, 9, 89
 Rhinegold, 9, 19, 43, 60, 88, 104
Rhinegold, The, 4, 5, 6
 Rhinemaidens, 95, 104, 113
 song of the, 10-13
Rienzi, 2, 3
 Ring, (made from Rhinegold)
 9, 13, 19, 76, 88
 Alberich's curse on, 28
 forfeited to Fafner, 31
 recovery by Wotan, 28
 returned to Rhinemaidens, 113
 won by Siegfried, 76
Ring of the Nibelung, The, 4, 5
 7
- Siegfried, 4, 55, 60
 awakens Brünnhilde, 83
 betroths Gutrune, 92
 forges Nothung, 68
 gives ring to Brünnhilde, 88
 murdered by Hagen, 108
 slays Fafner, 75
 understands bird's speech, 76
Siegfried, 4, 5
Siegfried's Death, 4
 Sieglinde, 36, 41, 42, 60
- Siegmund, 36
 death of, 52
 declares love to Sieglinde, 41
 Spring song, 42
Tannhäuser, 3, 6
 Tarnhelm, 22, 76, 96
Tristan and Isolde, 6
- Valhalla, 5, 15, 33, 44
 destruction of, 113
Valkyrie, The, 4, 5, 6
 Valkyries, 5, 44, 52
- Wagner, Richard, 1-7
 Wälsung, *see* Siegfried;
 Sieglinde; Siegmund
 Wanderer, the, 63, 79, 82
 Wellgunde, *see* Rhinemaidens
 Woden, *see* Wotan
 Woglinde, *see* Rhinemaidens
 Wolfe (Wälse), 40-43, 50
 World ash tree, 87, 95
 Wotan (*see also* Wanderer;
 Wolf), 4, 13, 46
 spear of, 43, 82, 87
- Young Siegfried*, 4