

Das Rheingold: The Beginning of the End

Friday, April 10, 2026 · 18:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Kirill Petrenko, conductor

approximately 150 minutes

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

150 minutes

Das Rheingold (The Rhinegold)

THE COMPOSER

Richard Wagner transformed opera more radically than any composer before or since. Born in Leipzig in 1813, he grew up in a family steeped in theater and from an early age was drawn to the dramatic rather than the purely musical. Apart from a spell of lessons with the Leipzig cantor Theodor Weinlig, he was largely self-directed as a composer, absorbing Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller alongside Beethoven, developing a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a “total work of art” synthesizing poetry, drama, music, and visual spectacle.

Wagner’s path was turbulent. An active participant in the 1849 Dresden uprising, he spent years in political exile, fleeing creditors and nursing turbulent love affairs. Yet his genius attracted patrons, most notably the eccentric King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose financial support made possible Wagner’s ultimate achievement: the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, a theater designed specifically for his works. There, in 1876, his monumental four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* received its first complete performance.

Wagner’s musical innovations (the seamless orchestral flow, the system of *leitmotifs* or recurring themes associated with characters, objects, or ideas, and the extreme chromaticism that strained the boundaries of tonality) influenced virtually every composer who followed, from Strauss and Mahler to Schoenberg and beyond.

ABOUT THE WORK

Vorabend (Preliminary Evening) to Der Ring des Nibelungen

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Wagner’s *Ring* is woven from dozens of musical motifs that identify characters, objects, and ideas. Here are some of the most important in *Das Rheingold*:

The Rhine/Nature Motif: The rising arpeggios of the opening: pure, elemental, innocent. This motif represents nature before corruption.

The Rhinegold Motif: A brilliant, fanfare-like figure in the brass when the gold catches the sunlight. It returns whenever the treasure is mentioned.

The Ring Motif: A dark, descending phrase that will haunt the entire cycle. Listen for how it transforms into...

The Valhalla Motif: A majestic, noble brass theme representing the gods' fortress. The theme grows out of the Ring motif, as if the gods' glory were built on stolen power.

The Renunciation of Love: A bleak, falling phrase heard when Alberich curses love. It recurs whenever characters sacrifice love for power.

The Curse Motif: A savage, angular figure that sounds whenever the ring's curse manifests, most dramatically when Fafner murders Fasolt.

Loge's Motif: Flickering, chromatic music representing the fire god's dancing flames and slippery nature.

Erda's Motif: A solemn, rising phrase in the low brass when the Earth Mother appears with her warning.

The Rainbow Bridge: Shimmering harps and strings as the gods cross to Valhalla. Then listen for the Rhinemaidens' lament rising from below, a reminder that this triumph is hollow.

ABOUT THE WORK

Das Rheingold is the shortest opera in the *Ring*, roughly two and a half hours performed without interval, but it sets in motion the catastrophe that will unfold over the three following evenings. Wagner called it a *Vorabend*, a "preliminary evening," meaning that the main drama is yet to come. Yet *Rheingold* is a complete and self-contained work, a brilliantly constructed myth about the origins of power, corruption, and doom.

The opera opens with one of the most famous passages in all music: 136 bars built entirely on an E-flat major chord, representing the primordial depths of the Rhine. From this sonic image of nature's original innocence, the drama unfolds: a dwarf's frustrated lust leads

him to steal gold and forge a ring of absolute power; a god's reckless bargain with giants threatens to destroy his family; and a curse is laid that will echo through generations.

Wagner drew above all on Norse mythology, especially the Icelandic *Eddas*, along with Germanic legend, but transformed these sources into something entirely his own: a drama that many have read as a critique of a world ruined by politics and capital, a psychological drama of desire and self-deception, a cosmological tragedy about the corruption that power brings.

The premiere took place in Munich on September 22, 1869, against Wagner's wishes, at the insistence of King Ludwig II; Wagner wanted to wait until the entire cycle could be performed together. That complete premiere finally occurred at the newly built Bayreuth Festspielhaus on August 13, 1876, conducted by Hans Richter.

THE CHARACTERS

The Gods: - **Wotan** (baritone): King of the gods, ruler by law and contract. His spear, carved from the World Ash Tree, bears the runes of all his treaties. He is cunning, ambitious, and increasingly trapped by his own bargains. - **Fricka** (mezzo-soprano): Wotan's wife, goddess of marriage. She sees through his schemes and holds him to his promises. - **Freia** (soprano): Goddess of youth and love. Her golden apples keep the gods immortal. - **Donner** (baritone): God of thunder, brother of Freia and Fricka. - **Froh** (tenor): God of spring and joy, brother of Freia and Fricka. - **Loge** (tenor): Demigod of fire, Wotan's crafty advisor. He serves the gods but feels no loyalty to them. - **Erda** (contralto): The Earth Mother, goddess of wisdom. She knows the past, present, and future.

The Nibelungs (Dwarfs): - **Alberich** (baritone): A Nibelung dwarf who steals the Rhinegold and forges the Ring. His curse drives the entire cycle. - **Mime** (tenor): Alberich's brother, a skilled smith. He forges the Tarnhelm under his brother's brutal rule.

The Giants: - **Fasolt** (bass-baritone): The gentler of the two giants. He genuinely loves Freia. - **Fafner** (bass): The greedier brother. He will stop at nothing to possess the gold.

The Rhinemaidens: - **Woglinde, Wellgunde, Floßhilde** (soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto): Water nymphs who guard the Rhinegold. Their lament for the stolen treasure frames the opera.

SCENE 1: THE DEPTHS OF THE RHINE

The opera begins in primordial darkness. A low E-flat grows into shimmering chords, and we are beneath the Rhine, where three Rhinemaidens guard a treasure: gold that gleams on a rock when sunlight strikes the water.

Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf, enters and tries to catch one of the maidens. They mock his ugliness and clumsiness, leading him on and rejecting him. Laughing, they reveal a secret: whoever forges the gold into a ring will gain unlimited power, but only if he first renounces love forever.

Alberich, bitter from their cruelty, makes his choice. He curses love, seizes the gold, and plunges into darkness. The Rhinemaidens' laughter turns to cries of despair.

SCENE 2: AN OPEN SPACE ON MOUNTAIN HEIGHTS

Dawn reveals a magnificent castle: Valhalla, the new home of the gods, built by the giants Fasolt and Fafner. Wotan admires his fortress, but Fricka reminds him of its terrible price: he promised the giants Freia, her sister, as payment.

The giants arrive to collect. Wotan stalls, hoping his advisor Loge can find another solution. Loge reports that he has searched the world and found only one treasure valuable enough to substitute for a woman: Alberich's ring, forged from the stolen Rhinegold.

The giants agree to accept the gold instead, but they take Freia as hostage until payment is delivered. Without her golden apples, the gods begin to age and weaken. Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim to steal the treasure.

SCENE 3: NIBELHEIM (THE REALM OF THE NIBELUNGS)

In the underground realm, Alberich has enslaved his fellow dwarfs, forcing them to mine gold. His brother Mime has forged a magic helmet, the Tarnhelm, which allows its wearer to change shape or become invisible.

Wotan and Loge arrive. Through flattery, Loge tricks Alberich into demonstrating the Tarnhelm's powers. First Alberich transforms into a giant serpent; then, fatally, into a toad. Wotan stamps on the toad, and they drag the captive dwarf back to the surface.

SCENE 4: RETURN TO THE MOUNTAIN HEIGHTS

To ransom himself, Alberich orders the Nibelungs to pile up the treasure. Wotan demands the Tarnhelm as well, and then the ring itself. As Wotan tears the ring from his finger, Alberich pronounces a terrible

curse: everyone who possesses the ring will be consumed by anxiety; everyone who does not will be consumed by envy; and everyone who wears it will be marked for death. No one will have joy from it.

The giants return with Freia. They demand enough gold to hide her completely from view. The treasure is piled up, but a gap remains. Wotan must add the Tarnhelm, and finally the ring.

Wotan refuses to part with it, until Erda, the Earth Mother, rises from the ground. “Yield it, Wotan!” she commands. “A dark day dawns for the gods. I counsel you: shun the ring!” Shaken, Wotan surrenders it.

Immediately the curse takes effect. Fafner clubs his brother Fasolt to death to possess the ring alone, then drags away the gold. The gods stand paralyzed.

Donner summons a thunderstorm to clear the air. A rainbow bridge appears, leading to Valhalla. The gods begin their procession to their new home. But Loge, watching them go, muses that they are hastening to their end. From the valley below rise the Rhinemaidens’ voices, mourning their lost gold.

Wotan commands them to be silent. But their lament continues as the curtain falls.

TONIGHT'S CAST

- **Christian Gerhaher** as Wotan
- **Catriona Morison** as Fricka
- **Sarah Brady** as Freia
- **Gihoon Kim** as Donner
- **Thomas Atkins** as Froh
- **Brenton Ryan** as Loge
- **Jasmin White** as Erda
- **Leigh Melrose** as Alberich
- **Thomas Cilluffo** as Mime
- **Le Bu** as Fasolt
- **Patrick Guetti** as Fafner
- **Louise Foor** as Woglinde
- **Yajie Zhang** as Wellgunde
- **Jess Dandy** as Floßhilde

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung**

Roger Scruton, Penguin Books 2017

A philosopher's passionate reading of the ideas in the Ring, beginning with the theft of the gold and the bargain over Valhalla in Das Rheingold.

ACCESSIBLE **Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth**

Barry Millington, Oxford University Press 2012

A modern biography of Wagner that sets the Ring within his life and his plans for Bayreuth, where the first complete cycle opened with Das Rheingold in 1876.

DEEPER **I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring**

Deryck Cooke, Oxford University Press 1979

Deryck Cooke's unfinished study of the Ring; the part he completed concentrates on the text and sources of Das Rheingold and Die Walküre.

SOURCES

1. Kirill Petrenko conducts Wagner's "Das Rheingold", Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56312/>
2. Kirill Petrenko conducts Wagner's "Das Rheingold", Digital Concert Hall. <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56312>
3. Programme Note: Richard Wagner, Das Rheingold, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/richard-wagner-das-rheingold>
4. Das Rheingold, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das_Rheingold
5. Richard Wagner, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Wagner
6. The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780141980720>
7. Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199933761>
8. I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780193153189>



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