

Rattle: Wagner's Siegfried Idyll and Scenes from Götterdämmerung

Sunday, May 24, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Sir Simon Rattle, conductor · Anja Kampe, soprano · Elizabeth DeShong, mezzo-soprano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Götterdämmerung: Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey</i>	8'
2	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Götterdämmerung: Waltraute's Narration</i>	32'
3	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Siegfried Idyll</i>	18'
4	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Götterdämmerung: Siegfried's Funeral Music</i>	12'
5	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Götterdämmerung: Immolation Scene</i>	18'
TOTAL MUSIC		88'

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

Götterdämmerung: Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey

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.

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8 minutes

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ABOUT THE WORK

This is one of the most exhilarating orchestral passages in all of Wagner: the music that opens the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung* ('Twilight of the Gods'), the fourth and final opera of the great Ring cycle. After a night together on the mountain-top ringed by magic fire, the hero Siegfried and the former Valkyrie Brünnhilde greet the dawn; Siegfried then sets off down the Rhine to seek adventure, leaving Brünnhilde with the cursed ring as a pledge of his love. In the concert hall, the orchestral 'Dawn' music and the famous 'Rhine Journey' are run together (in a familiar concert arrangement) to make a thrilling symphonic showpiece, opening this all-Wagner evening with radiant optimism and surging energy, the calm before the cycle's catastrophe.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first for the 'Dawn' music: a slow, mysterious build as day breaks over the mountain, the orchestra glowing into warmth and light, with the lovers' great themes rising up. Then comes the transition into the 'Rhine Journey' proper: listen for the surging, rippling string figures depicting the flowing river, the heroic horn-call associated with Siegfried, and the brilliant orchestral sweep as the music gathers tremendous momentum. Listen, too, for the recurring leitmotifs (themes for Siegfried, for the ring, for the Rhinemaidens and the Rhinegold) woven through the texture. The excerpt ends in a blaze of orchestral splendour, a glorious curtain-raiser brimming with the energy and promise that the rest of the opera will so devastatingly betray.

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

Götterdämmerung: Waltraute's Narration

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ABOUT THE WORK

This is one of the great dramatic scenes for mezzo-soprano in all of Wagner, a tense, urgent monologue from Act I of *Götterdämmerung*. Brünnhilde, now living as a mortal woman, is visited on her mountain-top by her sister, the Valkyrie Waltraute, who has secretly left Valhalla in desperation. In a long, impassioned narration, Waltraute describes the terrible state of the gods: Wotan, their father, sits in Valhalla in despair, having gathered the heroes around him and surrounded the hall with the wood of the felled World Ash Tree, awaiting the end of the gods. The only hope, Waltraute pleads, is for Brünnhilde to return the cursed ring (Siegfried's love-pledge) to the Rhinemaidens, lifting the curse. But Brünnhilde, treasuring the ring as the token of Siegfried's love, refuses, and Waltraute flies off into the storm in despair. The scene sets in motion the tragedy's final descent.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is a scene of mounting tension and dread. Listen for Waltraute's growing urgency and fear as she paints her vivid picture of the gods' doom; Wagner gives her music great dramatic sweep, ranging from hushed, awe-struck description to anguished pleading. Listen especially for the orchestra, which functions almost like a second narrator: a web of leitmotifs conjures Valhalla, Wotan's spear, the World Ash Tree, the gods' twilight and the all-important ring and curse motifs, so that the orchestra 'shows' what Waltraute describes. Listen for the contrast between Waltraute's desperation and Brünnhilde's unyielding refusal, and for the way the music darkens toward the inevitable catastrophe. The mezzo-soprano (here Elizabeth DeShong, as Waltraute) carries this gripping monologue, a tour de force of Wagnerian narrative singing.

Richard Wagner

18 minutes

1813–1883

Siegfried Idyll

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Siegfried Idyll is Wagner at his most tender and intimate: a glowing, gentle orchestral serenade utterly unlike his vast music dramas, and the most personal music he ever wrote. It was a birthday present, and a love-letter in sound. On Christmas morning 1870 (the day his wife Cosima celebrated her birthday), Wagner assembled a small group of musicians on the staircase of their villa at Tribschen, on Lake Lucerne, and woke Cosima with the first performance of this piece, a private gift celebrating their love, their home, and the birth of their son, Siegfried, the previous year. Cosima recorded the morning in her diary. Originally a chamber-sized work for a small ensemble, it is now usually played by a slightly larger string-and-wind group, as here.

The music weaves together themes associated with the opera Siegfried (especially the radiant love music from its final scene), a German lullaby ('Schlaf, Kindlein, schlaf'), and motifs of private significance to the couple. The result is a work of serene, sunlit happiness, a domestic, loving counterpart to the cosmic drama of the Ring excerpts that surround it on this programme, and a moment of profound peace at the heart of the concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the hushed, dawn-like opening: a gentle, rising string melody that seems to wake slowly into being (the same music that crowns the love duet at the end of the opera Siegfried). The whole piece has the quality of a tender, glowing reverie, unfolding without drama or conflict.

Listen for the moment, partway through, when the oboe gently introduces a simple folk lullaby ('Sleep, little child, sleep'), a touchingly domestic touch for a new father. Listen, too, for the warm horn calls and the way the various themes intertwine and grow, building to a few radiant climaxes before subsiding into peace. This is music of pure contentment and love; let its intimacy and warmth wash over you, a serene island of private happiness between the grandeur and tragedy of *Götterdämmerung*.

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

Götterdämmerung: Siegfried's Funeral Music

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ABOUT THE WORK

Siegfried's Funeral Music (or Funeral March) is one of the most overwhelming orchestral passages Wagner ever composed, a vast, tragic threnody marking the death of the hero. In Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried, his memory of Brünnhilde erased by a magic potion and ensnared by the schemes of the villainous Hagen, is treacherously stabbed in the back. As his body is borne away from the riverbank in solemn procession, the orchestra erupts in this stupendous funeral march, a heart-stopping summation of Siegfried's whole story and lineage. It is not merely background music for a stage procession; it is a symphonic eulogy, recalling in turn the great leitmotifs associated with Siegfried, his parents Siegmund and Sieglinde, the sword, the love of the Volsungs and the hero's own valour, building to shattering climaxes of grief and grandeur.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the hammer-blows of fate: the great, crashing chords and the relentless, tread-like funeral rhythm in the timpani that underpin the march. Then listen for the procession of leitmotifs, which Wagner deploys here like a series of memorial portraits: the themes of the Volsung race, of Siegmund and Sieglinde (Siegfried's tragic parents), of the sword Nothung, of Siegfried's love and his heroism, each rising up in turn, blazing out on the brass.

Listen for the way the music builds in wave after wave to two tremendous climaxes, the brass proclaiming Siegfried's heroic themes in overwhelming splendour, before sinking back into desolate grief. This is Wagner using the orchestra alone to mourn a hero and to recall an entire saga in a few unforgettable minutes; it is music of crushing emotional power, and it leads directly toward the cataclysm of the opera's final scene.

Richard Wagner

18 minutes

1813–1883

Götterdämmerung: Immolation Scene

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Immolation Scene is the tremendous final scene of *Götterdämmerung*, and so the climax of this opera and of the entire fifteen-hour Ring cycle, the moment toward which everything has been building. Brünnhilde, now understanding the whole tragic story of the cursed ring and Siegfried's betrayal, takes command. She orders a huge funeral pyre built for the dead Siegfried, reclaims the ring (which will be cleansed by fire and returned to the Rhinemaidens), bids a moving farewell, and then rides her horse Grane into the flames to join her beloved in death. As she does so, the fire spreads: Valhalla and the gods are consumed, the Rhine overflows, the Rhinemaidens reclaim their gold, and a corrupt old order is swept away so that a new, redeemed world may begin. It is one of the most overwhelming and cathartic conclusions in all of opera: a vast scena for dramatic soprano and huge orchestra.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the journey from grief and solemnity to transcendence. Brünnhilde's farewell begins gravely; listen for the great soprano line riding over the orchestra as she addresses the dead Siegfried, the gods and the Rhine. Listen for the procession of leitmotifs that Wagner gathers up here: themes of the ring, the curse, the gods, Siegfried, and, crucially, the soaring melody often called the 'Redemption' theme, which will have the very last word.

Listen for the great orchestral conflagration as Brünnhilde leaps into the flames: the 'Magic Fire' music blazing up, the 'Rhine' music swelling as the river rises, the crashing collapse of Valhalla (the 'Valhalla' theme overwhelmed). And listen, finally, for the extraordinary closing pages, where, out of all the destruction, the orchestra rises to a hushed, glowing statement of the redemptive theme, sublime and consoling, bringing the entire cycle to rest. Anja Kampe sings Brünnhilde; this is one of the supreme challenges and glories of the dramatic-soprano repertoire, and an overwhelming close to the concert.

Tonight's artists

Anja Kampe *soprano*

The Immolation Scene that crowns the concert is one of the ultimate tests for a dramatic soprano: a vast final scena demanding stamina, power and the ability to ride a huge Wagnerian orchestra while conveying Brünnhilde's grief, understanding and final transfiguration. Anja Kampe, one of today's foremost Wagner sopranos and an acclaimed Brünnhilde, brings the vocal heft and dramatic depth this culminating role requires.

Anja Kampe, born in Zella-Mehlis in the former East Germany, is one of the leading Wagner and dramatic sopranos of her generation. She trained in Dresden and in Turin, and made her international breakthrough as Sieglinde (in *Die Walküre*) opposite Plácido Domingo at Washington National Opera in the early 2000s, going on to sing the great Wagner roles (Sieglinde, Isolde, Senta, the Walküre Brünnhilde) at the world's foremost houses and festivals, including Bayreuth, the Salzburg Easter Festival, the Vienna State Opera, the Bavarian State Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. She was named Bavarian Kammersängerin in Munich in 2018. Admired for the warmth, intensity and dramatic truth of her singing, she is an ideal Brünnhilde for the overwhelming demands of the Immolation Scene.

Elizabeth DeShong *mezzo-soprano*

Waltraute's Narration is one of the most gripping mezzo-soprano scenes in Wagner, a long, mounting monologue of fear and pleading as Waltraute describes the doom of the gods and begs her sister to give up the cursed ring. Elizabeth DeShong, celebrated for her rich tone and dramatic intelligence, brings the urgency and vocal richness this tour-de-force of Wagnerian storytelling demands.

Elizabeth DeShong, born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, is an acclaimed American mezzo-soprano admired for the richness and evenness of her voice, her musicianship and her commanding stage presence. A graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory and the Curtis Institute, she has built an international career at houses including the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera and the Bavarian State Opera, in a repertoire ranging from Rossini and Handel to Verdi, Strauss and Wagner. Praised as one of the most intelligent singing actresses of her generation, she brings dramatic urgency and a sumptuous lower register to Waltraute's great narration.

FURTHER READING

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

Roger Scruton, Penguin Books 2017

A philosopher's guide to the meaning of Wagner's Ring, useful for following the story that ends in Götterdämmerung's Immolation Scene.

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

Barry Millington, Oxford University Press 2012

A readable, illustrated life of Wagner that covers the Ring and the domestic story behind the Siegfried Idyll, written for Cosima's birthday.

DEEPER **Richard Wagner's Music Dramas**

Carl Dahlhaus, Cambridge University Press 1992

A classic study of how Wagner's music dramas work, including the leitmotif technique that ties Götterdämmerung to the whole Ring.

SOURCES

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6. Götterdämmerung: explore the final part of Wagner's Ring cycle, BBC Music Magazine (classical-music.com). <https://www.classical-music.com/features/works/guide-wagners-gotterdammerung>
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11. Siegfried's Funeral March, Wind Repertory Project. https://www.windrep.org/Siegfried%27s_Funeral_March
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15. Biography | Mezzo-Soprano Elizabeth DeShong, Elizabeth DeShong (official site). <https://www.elizabethdeshong.com/bio>
16. Elizabeth DeShong (Mezzo-soprano): Short Biography, Bach Cantatas Website. <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/DeShong-Elizabeth.htm>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-05-24-rattle>

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