

Das Rheingold

A Guide for Educators



The Met
ropolitan
Opera

Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM *DAS RHEINGOLD*

DWARVES, DRAGONS, NORSE GODS, AND A RING WITH THE POWER TO DESTROY THE world—*Das Rheingold* is the glorious introduction to one of the most epic operatic stories ever told. The “prequel” to Richard Wagner’s trilogy of operas collectively known as *The Ring of the Nibelung* (or simply *The Ring*), *Das Rheingold*’s position in the cycle is equivalent to that of *The Hobbit* in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*: a short, fast-paced introduction to a longer epic that also stands as a gripping stand-alone story of intrigue, magic, and adventure.

With *The Ring*, writer-composer Richard Wagner created a world every bit as complex and compelling as Tolkien’s “Middle Earth” or George R.R. Martin’s “Westeros.” The action takes place in a world similar to, yet clearly distinct from, our own. The gods, giants, and dwarves that people this land have their own motivations and shortcomings. Yet the opera’s epic scope was not confined to the plot. To bring this mythical world to life, Wagner cultivated a new musical style, developed new instruments, and even built an entirely new opera house just for *The Ring*’s premiere. Today, this spirit of innovation still informs the Met’s dazzling *Ring* cycle, which features not only singers and musicians but also aerial acrobats, computer projections, and a ninety-ton piece of stage machinery custom-built for the Met. With water maidens floating high above the stage, a skeletal dragon coiling around gleaming mounds of gold, and a cast of gods whose weaknesses make them all too human, *Das Rheingold* is an operatic blockbuster destined to delight, enchant, and amaze.

This guide offers an in-depth introduction to *Das Rheingold*’s music, narrative, history, and themes. Intended to be used before, during, and after the Final Dress performance, it includes background information on Wagner’s life and work, plot synopses for young readers, and activities that will help your students engage with *Das Rheingold*’s music, stagecraft, and story. These materials are designed to inspire students’ creativity, foster critical thinking skills, and connect the opera to other classroom subjects—such as English and language arts, mythology, and history—while also inviting students to understand *Das Rheingold* through the films, TV shows, and novels they consume every day. Students should come away feeling like *Das Rheingold* experts, eager to offer their own insights and opinions about this Final Dress performance at the Met.

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THE WORK:

DAS RHEINGOLD

An opera in one act, sung in German
Music and libretto by Richard Wagner
Based on an original story inspired by
Norse mythology
First performed September 22, 1869
at the Court Theater, Munich, Germany

PRODUCTION

Philippe Jordan, Conductor
Robert Lepage, Production
Neilson Vignola, Associate Director
Carl Fillion, Set Designer
François St-Aubin, Costume Designer
Etienne Boucher, Lighting Designer
Boris Firquet, Video Image Artist

STARRING

Wendy Bryn Harmer
FREIA (soprano)

Jamie Barton
FRICKA (mezzo-soprano)

Karen Cargill
ERDA (contralto)

Norbert Ernst
LOGE (tenor)

Gerhard Siegel
MIME (tenor)

Greer Grimsley
WOTAN (bass-baritone)

Tomasz Konieczny
ALBERICH (bass-baritone)

Günther Groissböck
Fasolt (bass-baritone)

Dmitry Belosselskiy
FAFNER (bass)

In collaboration with Ex Machina

Production a gift of Ann Ziff and the Ziff
Family, in memory of William Ziff

Revival a gift of Ann Ziff

ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Photo: Johnathan Tichler/
Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, with its first opera house built on Broadway and 39th Street by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted their own theater. In the company's early years, the management changed course several times, first performing everything in Italian (even *Carmen* and *Lohengrin*), then everything in German (even *Aida* and *Faust*), before finally settling into a policy of performing most works in their original language.

Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the opera house on 39th Street did not have adequate stage facilities. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September of 1966, was equipped with the finest technical facilities of the day.

Each season the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York. More than 800,000 people attend the performances in the opera house during the season, and millions more experience the Met through new media distribution initiatives and state-of-the-art technology.

This guide includes several sections with a variety of background material on *Das Rheingold*.

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Das Rheingold***
- **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition
- **A Closer Look:** A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*
- **Guided Listening:** A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
- **Student Critique:** A performance activity, highlighting specific aspects of this production; and topics for wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
- **Further Resources:** Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print
- **Glossary:** Common musical terms found in this guide and in the concert hall

The materials in this guide will focus on several aspects of *Das Rheingold*:

- The Norse myths that inspired Wagner's story
- The Ring cycle as a whole, and the role of *Das Rheingold* in this monumental four-part opera
- Wagner's philosophy of Gesamtkunstwerk, or "Total Artwork"
- The Bayreuth Festival Theater, an opera house designed by Richard Wagner for *The Ring's* premiere
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Das Rheingold*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera. It includes materials for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds, and seeks to encourage them to think about opera – and the performing arts as a whole – as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.



Marty Sohl/
Metropolitan Opera

SUMMARY

At the bottom of the Rhine River lies a piece of gold with the power to destroy the world. The Norse gods have asked three water maidens to protect the gold, but when the greedy dwarf Alberich learns of the gold's amazing power, he decides to steal it for himself.

Wotan, the king of the gods, has hired two giants to build a fortress. He originally promised to give them his beautiful sister-in-law, Freia, as payment for the building project, but Freia is unhappy with this deal. Her siblings Froh, Donner, and Fricka (who is also Wotan's wife) convince Wotan that he needs to find something else to give the giants instead. Loge, the clever god of fire, tells Wotan that Alberich has made a ring from the gold found in the Rhine and suggests that Wotan pay the giants with this ring.

Wotan and Loge travel to Nibelheim, the dwarves' underground realm. Since stealing the gold, Alberich has become a cruel tyrant, constantly forcing the other dwarves to mine gold for him. When Wotan and Loge capture Alberich, he agrees to give them the mined gold but refuses to part with the ring. Wotan grabs it from his finger anyway. Alberich curses the ring, declaring that it will bring death and destruction to anyone who wears it.

The ring soon begins to work its dark magic. At first, Wotan wants to keep the ring for himself. When he reluctantly gives it to the giants, they fight over who will get to keep the ring and one of them is killed. Erda, the goddess of the earth, warns the gods that the ring may bring about the end of the world. Wotan refuses to listen. Dreaming of once again possessing the ring, he leads the gods into their new fortress.



Ken Howard/
Metropolitan Opera

THE SOURCE: AN ORIGINAL STORY BY RICHARD WAGNER, BASED ON NORSE MYTHS

Richard Wagner was fascinated by folk tales and medieval legends. Like many nineteenth-century intellectuals, he felt that these stories held profound truths about contemporary culture and society, and for much of his adult life he immersed himself in the great sagas of Norse mythology. Wagner was particularly intrigued by the story of the hero Siegfried, and when he decided to write an opera on the subject he turned to five thirteenth-century sources for inspiration: *The Poetic Edda*, an anonymous Icelandic collection of Norse myths; *The Prose Edda*, a collection by the medieval Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson; *The Nibelungenlied*, a German epic about the tribe of “Nibelungs”; the Norse *Völsunga Saga* (concerning Siegfried’s “Völsung” tribe); and the Old Norse narrative *The Saga of Didrek of Bern*.

Wagner freely adapted the Norse stories to suit his own artistic needs, yet parallels between his characters and their Norse counterparts remain. Wotan is based on Odin, the one-eyed king of the gods. Odin is one of the Aesirs, warrior gods who live the land of Asgard. The English word “Wednesday” comes from Odin’s name—if you say the phrase “Odin’s day” out loud you may hear the relation. Fricka is based on Frigg, the queen of the Aesir gods and Odin’s wife; her name gives us the word “Friday.” Fricka’s brother Donner is based on the god Thor, whose name is the basis of the word “Thursday.” Thor’s most famous attribute is his magic hammer, which produces thunder and lightning when it strikes things; in fact, Donner means “thunder” in German. In Norse mythology, Thor is Odin’s son (and not his brother-in-law, as he is in *Das Rheingold*). Fricka’s sister Freia is based on Freya, most beautiful of all the gods, while their brother Froh is based on the Norse god Frey. Freya and Frey are part of the Vanir tribe of harvest gods; after a battle between the Aesir and Vanir, Freya and Frey remained in Asgard to help establish a lasting peace between the two tribes. Loge is based on Loki, an extremely clever trickster who can change his shape at will. Since Loki is half god and half giant, his loyalties can waver. Nevertheless, his remarkable ability to solve even the trickiest of problems makes him a vital member of the gods’ society. And Erda is based on the goddess Jord, who in Norse mythology is Thor’s mother.



Ken Howard/
Metropolitan Opera

SYNOPSIS

In the depths of the river Rhine, three Rhinemaidens guard a piece of magic gold. The dwarf Alberich stumbles into the river and is dazzled by the glowing metal. The Rhinemaidens tell him that whoever forges the gold into a ring will gain power over the whole world—but only if they renounce love forever. At first, Alberich thinks he'd rather fall in love with one of the Rhinemaidens than possess the gold. But when the Rhinemaidens cruelly mock Alberich's ugliness, he decides that power is the better choice and steals the gold from the Rhinemaidens.

Wotan, lord of the gods, has hired the giants Fasolt and Fafner to build him a fortress, promising them his beautiful sister-in-law Freia as payment. Wotan's wife Fricka (who is also Freia's sister) is understandably furious about this deal. She tells Wotan that he must find something else to give the giants instead, especially since the gods' immortality comes from eating the magical apples that Freia grows in her garden. Wotan is not sure what to do. Finally Loge, the clever god of fire, offers a suggestion: Wotan should give the giants the ring Alberich forged from the Rhinegold. Wotan agrees, and he and Loge leave to find Alberich.

Meanwhile, in the underground home of the Nibelung dwarves (called "Nibelheim"), Alberich has become a cruel tyrant. Wielding the power of the ring, he has enslaved his fellow Nibelungs and makes them mine gold day and night. He has also forced his brother, Mime, to make him a golden helmet that allows its wearer to assume any shape at will. When Wotan and Loge arrive in Nibelheim, Alberich is nowhere to be seen, but they do meet Mime, who tells them about Alberich's cruelty. Suddenly Alberich appears. He mocks the gods, saying that he, too, is all-powerful and showing them his magic helmet. Loge asks Alberich to demonstrate the helmet's power. First, Alberich turns himself into a dragon. Loge says that turning into a large animal is easy; he'll only be impressed if Alberich turns himself into something small. So Alberich transforms himself into a toad, which the gods promptly capture.

Wotan and Loge bring Alberich back to the kingdom of the gods and demand his entire stash of gold in exchange for his freedom. Wotan sees the ring on Alberich's finger and says he must include it in the golden ransom. Alberich refuses, saying the ring belongs to him because he forged it. Wotan, suddenly greedy at the sight of the ring, violently pulls it off Alberich's finger. Furious at the loss of both his ring and his gold, Alberich curses the ring, declaring that it will bring death and destruction to anyone who wears it.

Fasolt and Fafner return and agree to accept the gold as payment instead of Freia. The gods give them everything, including the magic helmet, but Wotan refuses to part with the ring. Suddenly Erda, goddess of the earth, appears. She warns Wotan that if he keeps the ring it will ultimately destroy the gods. Wotan reluctantly gives the ring to the giants, who argue over who should get to keep it. In the ensuing fight Fafner kills his brother, who thus becomes the first victim of the ring's curse. As the voices of the Rhinemaidens are heard lamenting the loss of their gold, the gods walk across a rainbow bridge toward their new fortress home, which Wotan names Valhalla.

VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO

the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian "mezzo"=middle, medium)

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest male voice

WHO'S WHO IN *DAS RHEINGOLD*

Character		Pronunciation Guide	Voice Type	The Lowdown
The Rhinemaidens	Water nymphs who live in the river Rhine	RINE-maidens	soprano and mezzo-soprano	It is the Rhinemaidens' job to protect the powerful Rhinegold, yet they are easily distracted. When Alberich stumbles upon their pool, they are too busy teasing him to prevent him from stealing the gold.
Alberich	A dwarf, a member of the Nibelung tribe	ALL-beh-rick	bass-baritone	When Alberich learns of the Rhinegold, he is happy to renounce love in order to wield the gold's power. Under the influence of the ring, he becomes cruel and tyrannical, and ultimately loses everything.
Wotan	The king of the gods	VOEH-tahn	bass-baritone	Wotan is torn between his responsibility to the people he loves and his thirst for the ring's power.
Loge	The god of fire	LOE-guh	tenor	Clever and sneaky, Loge helps Wotan find and steal Alberich's gold, but he can't keep Wotan from falling prey to the allure of the ring.
Fricka	Wotan's wife	FRICK-uh	mezzo-soprano	The queen of the gods, Fricka is a strong, decisive woman frustrated by Wotan's tendency to put his own interests above the needs of the gods.
Freia	Fricka's sister	FRY-uh	soprano	Wotan's sister-in-law Freia is not happy about being used as a bargaining chip in his deals with the giants. She has a magical garden in which she grows the apples of immortality that keep the gods young.
Froh	Fricka and Freia's brothers	FROE	tenor	Freia's brothers are determined to protect their sister at any cost.
Donner		DON-ner	bass-baritone	
Fasolt	Giants	FAH-zohlt	bass-baritone	Wotan hired Fafner and Fasolt to build him the fortress Valhalla, promising them Freia as payment for their work.
Fafner		FAHF-ner	bass	
Mime	Alberich's brother	MEE-muh	tenor	Alberich uses the power of the ring to enslave his brother and the other Nibelungs. Mime's particular job is to make Alberich's magic helmet.
Erda	The goddess of the Earth	EHR-duh	contralto	Erda has lived since the beginning of time and knows everything that will happen in the future. She warns Wotan about the fate that will befall the gods if he tries to win back the ring.

— **1813** Richard Wagner is born on May 22 in Leipzig, a city in eastern Germany. Leipzig has long been one of Germany’s major musical centers, and as a young man Wagner takes music lessons at a church that once employed Johann Sebastian Bach.

— **1833** Wagner gets his first job, directing a theater chorus in Bavaria. He will return to Leipzig the following year.

— **1837** In desperate need of money, Wagner accepts a job as music director of a theater in Riga, the capital of modern Latvia. Fortunately, the move allows him to escape his debtors in Leipzig; unfortunately, he soon begins accruing new debts in Riga. This perpetual cycle of accruing and evading debt will plague Wagner for most of his life.

— **1841** After a series of intermediate moves, Wagner returns to Germany, taking up residence in the city of Dresden.

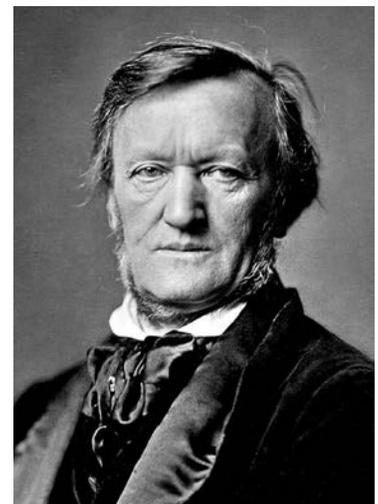
— **1848** Revolutions erupt across Europe. The political turbulence soon reaches Dresden, and Wagner, gripped by revolutionary fervor, produces a series of firebrand speeches and essays.

In October, Wagner begins working on an epic poem tentatively titled *Siegfried’s Death*.

— **1849** The Dresden revolution is decisively crushed. Wagner’s essays have marked him as a radical revolutionary, and he must flee the city. He will remain in exile for almost fifteen years.

— **1851** Realizing *Siegfried’s Death* will be more dramatically compelling if it includes the hero’s backstory, Wagner begins writing a prequel, *The Young Siegfried*.

— **1852** Still dissatisfied with the scope of his *Siegfried* saga, Wagner decides to turn the work into a “trilogy plus an introduction.” He writes *Die Walküre*, about the warrior goddess Brünnhilde, then adds the introductory work *Das Rheingold*. *The Young Siegfried* is renamed *Siegfried*, while *Siegfried’s Death* becomes *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*).



- **1853** With the text now complete, Wagner begins composing the music for *The Ring*.
- **1857** Wagner is once again broke. Although *The Ring* is far from finished, he puts the cycle on hold to focus on a short commercial opera based on the medieval legend of Tristan and Isolde. Brevity, however, has never been Wagner's strong suit, and *Tristan und Isolde* will ultimately run to over five hours in length.
- **1864** King Ludwig II ascends the throne of Bavaria. An idealistic eighteen-year-old and a great lover of music, Ludwig offers Wagner the financial support necessary to realize his grand artistic ambitions.

In the summer, Wagner takes up with Cosima Liszt von Bülow, the woman who will prove to be the love of his life. Wagner is by now divorced, but his affair with Cosima is nevertheless one of the great “soap opera moments” in the history of music, since she is not only the daughter of famed pianist Franz Liszt (one of Wagner's best friends) but also the wife of conductor Hans von Bülow (one of Wagner's early musical champions). Their daughter, Isolde, will be born in 1865; Wagner and Cosima will marry in 1870.

- **1869** After a hiatus of twelve years, Wagner once again begins working on *The Ring*. On September 22, *Das Rheingold* premieres at the court theater in Munich.
- **1872** Wagner has long hoped to build a new opera house designed specifically for *The Ring*, and he is finally able to realize his dream in the German town of Bayreuth (“BY-royt”). The foundation stone is laid on May 22, in celebration of Wagner's birthday.
- **1874** Wagner places the finishing touches on *The Ring*, yet construction of the Bayreuth theater is not going well. Several of Wagner's architectural innovations prove challenging (if not impossible) to execute, and the building almost bankrupts Wagner. Only with a sizable loan from Ludwig II is the construction able to continue.
- **1876** The entire *Ring* cycle finally premieres at Wagner's new opera house, formally called the Bayreuth Festival Theater. It has taken Wagner nearly thirty years to bring the work to fruition, and its epic scope does not disappoint: Spread across four nights, the opera takes eighteen hours to perform. Unfortunately, the first Bayreuth “season,” which consists of only three complete performances of *The Ring*, sets Wagner back some \$12.5 million in today's currency, and the opera house lies dormant for six years.
- **1882** The Bayreuth Festival Theater is resurrected for the premiere of Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*.
- **1883** On February 13, Wagner dies in Venice. His body is taken back to Germany and interred at his estate near Bayreuth.

A MAN, A PLAN, AND AN OPERATIC EXTRAVAGANZA: *THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG* AND WAGNER'S "TOTAL ARTWORK"

Opera is typically thought of as a collaborative art form. A poet or playwright crafts a "libretto" from an original or pre-existing story, and then a composer sets these lyrics to music. The theater director hires (and bankrolls) the singers and orchestra; costume and stage designers figure out what the production will look like; and a team of construction workers, tailors, and artists help realize the designers' vision.

Richard Wagner, however, had a different idea. Early in his career, he began to imagine a new style of opera, one in which a single creator would provide the story, the libretto, and the music. He called the resulting opera a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total artwork," because one individual was responsible for the "totality" of the final product. Wagner's earliest operas featured original librettos and music, but by the time he got around to writing *The Ring* he had taken the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* to an entirely new level. It was no longer enough for him to create "only" the opera's story, text, and music; now he wanted to design the theater in which this *magnum* opus would be performed. As such, he set about planning a new opera house near the German town of Bayreuth (pronounced "BY-royt"). This opera house, Wagner hoped, would feature the special effects he had imagined for his opera, such as steam rising from the stage floor; it would also force the audience to watch the opera in a specific way. Every seat in the Bayreuth Festival Theater faced forward and offered an unobstructed view of the stage. When the opera began, the audience lights were darkened to help viewers focus on the performance. The orchestra was hidden in one of history's first orchestra pits. Wagner even helped design the stage sets that would introduce nineteenth-century audiences to his imagined world. To put Wagner's achievement into perspective, imagine that Peter Jackson not only produced and directed *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* movies but also came up with the stories, wrote the screenplays, helped design costumes and scout out locations, developed the special effects, and built a movie theater specifically for the films' premiere. In fact, the total running time of the six *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* movies put together is more or less the same as a complete performance of *The Ring*!

Wagner was so invested in the inseparability of his opera and his opera house that he initially planned to destroy the theater after only three performances of *The Ring*. Fortunately, the Bayreuth Festival Theater was not demolished: To this day, it hosts a Wagner festival every summer. Moreover, many of Wagner's architectural ideas are now the norm in opera houses around the world. When you go to the Met, you will sit in a seat facing the stage, the theater will darken as the curtain rises, and the orchestra musicians will play from a pit beneath the stage. In other words, you will get hear and see *Das Rheingold* in the concert style inaugurated by Wagner himself.



The Bayreuth Festival Theater

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, teachers will need access to a recording of *Das Rheingold* and the libretto.

VORSPIEL - "WEIA! WAGA! WOGU, DU WELLE!" - "GARSTIG, GLATTER, GLITSCHRIGER GLIMMER!"

In the sparkling waters of the Rhine river, three Rhinemaidens splash and play. Suddenly the dwarf Alberich appears. He admires the Rhinemaidens' beauty, but the Rhinemaidens laugh at Alberich's ugliness and say they could never love someone like him.

What to listen for:

- How Wagner's music evokes the sounds of water
- The use of alliteration in Wagner's poetry

- (00:00) The entire opera begins with a short overture ("Vorspiel" in German) that sets the scene for the opening act. Your students do not need to listen to the entire overture, but they should listen long enough to offer creative responses to the music. As the overture begins, listen to the low-pitched rumblings in the strings. Slowly, these nebulous sounds coalesce into a flowing melody that rushes from low pitches to high pitches and back down again. Ask your students what they think this music illustrates: Water? A babbling brook? Bubbles? Crashing waves? A thunderstorm? Why?
- (04:39) The first Rhinemaiden begins singing. Draw your students' attention to the text and invite them to say the Rhinemaidens' first line out loud:
- Weia! Wage! Woge du Welle! VIE-uh! VAH-guh! VOGUE-uh doo VELL-uh!
Walle zur Wiege! Wagalaweia! VAHL-luh tsoor VEE-guh! VAH-ga-la-VIE-uh!
Wallala weiala weia! VAHL-la-la VIE-ah-lah VIE-ah!*
- Wagner was a huge fan of alliteration, a poetic technique in which two or more words all begin with the same sound. Look at this opening stanza and you'll notice that almost every word begins with a W (pronounced in German like our V).
- Next, ask your students what the poetry sounds like when they say it out loud. Does it sound like rolling waves? Like a rocking cradle? The last few words of this stanza (Wagalaweia...) are nonsense words that Wagner made up for the sake of this rocking, wave-like rhythm!
- (04:54) The second Rhinemaiden begins singing.
- (05:02) As the vocal melody briefly pauses, draw your students' attention to the music in the orchestra. Does it sound familiar? In fact, it's the "water" music from the overture!
- (05:16) Unlike the first two Rhinemaidens, who happily play and splash in the water, the third Rhinemaiden is worried about leaving the gold unattended. As she warns her fellow Rhinemaidens not to neglect their duty, the music suddenly becomes dark and somber.
- (05:31) Once again, the "water" music from the overture can clearly be heard in the orchestra.
- (06:00) Alberich enters. Ask your students to describe how the music changes at this moment. What new ideas does the music inspire?
- (06:16) At first, the Rhinemaidens are terrified of Alberich. Soon, however, their fear turns to laughter, then to teasing.
- (07:22) Trying to reach the Rhinemaidens, Alberich begins climbing up the river bank. How does the music reflect his clumsy, stumbling attempts to reach the Rhinemaidens?
- (07:28) Once again, have your students read the text out loud and draw their attention to the alliteration:
Garstig, glatter, glitschriger Glimmer! GAHR-stig, GLAHT-ter, GLITCH-rig-er GLIM-mer!
Loosely translated, this line means, "Oh, this slippery, slimy, nasty riverbank!" Does the poetry sound clumsy? Slippery? How else might your students describe it?

(Continued)

- (07:38) Alberich is less well equipped than the Rhinemaidens to move through the water, and soon the water fills his nose.
- Listen to how Wagner uses the orchestra to create the sound of Alberich's sneezing!
- (08:17) As you listen to an opera, it's important to remember that not everything that comes out a singer's mouth is sung. Just like actors, opera singers are often asked to laugh, scream, cry, or make other sounds that help push the drama forward. When the Rhinemaidens see how Alberich is struggling to reach them, they begin to laugh at him, and the singers who play the Rhinemaidens must literally laugh out loud.
- (09:28) This line is another great example of alliteration:
Pfui, du haariger, höckriger Geck! PFOO-ee, doo HAH-rig-er, HOOK-rig-er GEK!
Schwarzes, schwieliges Schwefelgezweg!
SHVAR-tzes, SHVEE-lig-es, SHVEH-fell-geh-tsverg!
- Loosely translated, the text means: "You're a hairy, horrible thing! So ugly, scruffy and sulfurous!" But even if you didn't understand the German words, the sound of the language and music can probably tell you a lot about what the Rhinemaidens are saying. Does this line sound kind, or does it sound cruel and hard-hearted?
- (09:47) The Rhinemaidens burst into laughter as Wagner's water music once again bubbles out of the orchestral texture. As this excerpt draws to a close, invite your students to reflect on the character of Alberich. What must he be feeling at this point? Do you think he is happy or sad? If your students were in his position, what would they do? And, if your students have already read the opera's synopsis, ask them: What does Alberich do next?

"NIBELHEIM HIER"

Hoping to steal Alberich's ring, Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim, the dwarves' underworld realm. When Wotan and Loge arrive, Alberich's brother, Mime, tells the gods about the terrifying events that have taken place ever since Alberich stole the Rhinemaidens' gold.

What to listen for:

- Four different leitmotifs, used by Wagner to signify "Nibelheim," "the ring," "the ring's power," and "hate"
- How Wagner varies the Nibelheim motif to match what is happening in the text

- (0:00) Unlike many composers, who traditionally divided operas into stand-alone segments, Wagner believed that operas should unfurl as an "endless melody." Yet he was also aware that an unceasing, several-hour stream of melodies could leave audiences overwhelmed and confused. Thus, he developed a clever trick for guiding audiences through his musical scores: the leitmotif, a short musical motif that signifies a character, place, object, or idea. Today, we regularly see a similar technique used in film music: Think of the grumbling theme in *Jaws* that signifies the presence of the shark; or the "Mordor" theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, which appears whenever characters talk about or see this terrifying realm.
- As this excerpt begins, listen to the repeating rhythm in the strings. This rhythm is the leitmotif that represents Nibelheim. Ask your students to clap along with the rhythm. Then ask them to imagine the kind of place this motif signifies. Is it a sunny, happy place? Or is it dark, fiery, and scary?
- (00:24) Wotan and Loge arrive in Nibelheim, and Loge thinks he sees something moving in the darkness. Soon, Mime emerges from the smoke and fires of the dwarves' mines.
- (02:02) A French horn begins playing the "Nibelheim" rhythm. The motif, which sounds like the hammering of anvils, appears just as Mime begins talking about the golden jewelry and toys that the Nibelungs forge for their wives and children.
- (02:29) Wagner doesn't just repeat leitmotifs: Across the course of the opera (or even within a single scene) he varies them to give the audience new information about the characters and situations that the leitmotifs represent. Mime explains that, under Alberich's tyranny, the Nibelungs must crawl through dark caves to find gold. The "Nibelheim" theme continues, but now it is in very low instruments, as though it is crawling through the depths of the earth.
- (02:42) The rumbling "Nibelheim" theme continues, and the shimmering strings above it perfectly illustrate the glowing "ore hidden in the rocks."

(Continued)

- (02:50) The music gets higher and faster, reflecting Mime's distress, exhaustion, and terror.
- (03:05) The entire orchestra plays the "Nibelheim" rhythm, then suddenly gets quiet.
- (03:20) Mime describes his fate, and the "Nibelheim" rhythm returns again, now played by only a few instruments. Why might Wagner have made the "Nibelheim" theme sound so lonely here?
- (04:04) As Mime describes the power of the ring, a short leitmotif representing "the ring" is played in the orchestra. Listen carefully and you will hear a melody consisting of four falling notes followed by three rising notes; Wagner will repeat this short melody over and over throughout the rest of this excerpt.
- (04:23) Mime explains that Alberich's power comes not from the helmet but from the Rhinegold ring, and Wagner introduces another leitmotif consisting of two chords that rock back and forth: this motif signifies "the gold's power."
- (05:04) Listen to the rumbling, repeating melody in the orchestra. This is a leitmotif that signifies "hate." Why might Wagner use it here?
- (05:11) Finally, Wagner combines the leitmotifs for "hate" (the deep rumblings in the orchestra) and "the ring" (the melody that descends then rises). Once again, invite your students to think about why Wagner would have chosen to mix these two themes here.

"WEICHE, WOTAN! WEICHE!"

Initially, Wotan planned to use the Rhinegold ring to pay the giants. Once he puts it on his finger, however, Wotan finds it strangely hard to part with the shining piece of gold. He happily gives the giants the gleaming piles of gold from Alberich's ransom and even throws Alberich's magical helmet into the mix, but when it comes to the ring Wotan simply refuses to give it away. The giants are furious. Suddenly Erda, the goddess of the earth, appears. She grimly warns Wotan that a day of reckoning is coming for the gods, and tells him that the ring will hasten their demise.

This excerpt has less action than the previous two (it consists mostly of Erda standing in the middle of the stage admonishing Wotan), but it is an excellent opportunity for your students to think more deeply about *Das Rheingold's* story and Wagner's compositional techniques.

What to listen for:

- Two new leitmotifs, which signify "Erda" and "Götterdämmerung" ("the twilight of the gods," pronounced "GO-ter-DAME-meh-roong")
- The relationship between these new leitmotifs and a theme that your students have already heard

- (00:00) We have already seen examples of leitmotifs signifying places (such as Nibelheim), objects (such as the ring), and ideas or emotions (such as hate). Now we have an excellent example of a leitmotif that signifies a person. Listen to the rising brass melody close to the beginning of this excerpt: it is the leitmotif for Erda, goddess of the earth.
- (00:24) Erda begins singing.
- (01:09) The Erda leitmotif is heard again as this goddess introduces herself. "I am the goddess who knows all things," she says. "All that is past, and all that will be."
Your students might notice that Erda's leitmotif sounds rather like the "water" music from *Das Rheingold's* overture. In fact, this similarity was an intentional compositional choice. For Wagner, the "water" music signified "genesis," the beginning of the earth, and Erda (the earth goddess) has existed since before the earth was created.
- (03:37) "A bleak day for the gods will soon arrive," Erda warns. In the background, the orchestra plays the leitmotif that signifies "Götterdämmerung," or "the twilight of the gods" (i.e., the day when the gods will be destroyed). This is an excellent example of how Wagner not only develops but interlinks his leitmotifs: If you play the "genesis" or "Erda" motifs backwards, this will be the result! Tell your students that the Götterdämmerung motif is the "inverse" or "reflection" of the genesis motif, and ask them why Wagner might have made this choice.
- (03:50) As Erda warns Wotan to give up the ring, the "ring" motif (that we heard in the Nibelheim scene) returns. In other words, Wagner doesn't just use his leitmotifs to illustrate individual scenes; rather, he uses them to link scenes in the opera that may be separated by several hours.
- (04:40) As Erda finishes her speech, we hear her somber motif again.
- (05:22) The gods are terrified by what Erda has said. As they reflect on what her words mean, Erda's theme appears one final time (in the clarinet) to bring the scene to a quiet, foreboding end.
- (04:07) The storm bursts around Gilda as she stumbles into the inn. Sparafucile grabs a knife, stabs her, and drags her body outside into the rain.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the *My Highs & Lows* reproducible handout found in the back of this guide.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *DAS RHEINGOLD*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE IN ATTENDING THE FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. They will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

The Student Critique activity incorporates a reproducible sheet. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. The activity directs attention to details of the production that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The activity sheet is called *My Highs & Lows*. It serves to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations, as well as to help them articulate their own opinions. It is designed to enrich the students' understanding of the art form as a whole. The ratings system encourages students to express their critique: use these ratings to spark discussions that require careful, critical thinking.

The *My Highs & Lows* handout can be found at the back of this guide.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently? The discussion offers an opportunity to apply the notes on students' My Highs & Lows sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Das Rheingold* experts.

Wagner believed that an opera performance was like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Each and every element of the opera—including music, poetry, acting, singing, stage sets, costumes, wigs, and makeup—was like a single puzzle piece, and it was the combination of these pieces that made the opera's plot comprehensible and compelling. Now that your students have seen *Das Rheingold*, ask them which of the elements in the above list helped them understand *Das Rheingold's* plot. The following questions may facilitate your discussion.

- What is the ring's power? Why does everyone want the ring?
- What did Alberich have to give up to wield the power of the ring? Do you think this power makes him happy?
- What is special about Alberich's helmet? How did Loge use this helmet to trick Alberich?
- What do the giants do when they get the ring?
- What is Erda's warning? Does Wotan listen to her?
- Why did Alberich curse the ring? Do you think the curse is real, or is he just trying to scare the gods?

Das Rheingold is the first episode in a much longer story. Invite your students to imagine—as a class, in smaller groups, or individually—that they have been hired to write the next episode in *The Ring*. What will happen? Students are free to create new characters, new locations, etc., but should be prepared to explain how these new elements relate to the characters and events in *Das Rheingold*.

Now ask your students to think of some other serialized stories they know. Novels, television, video games, and comic books all feature stories that are told one episode at a time. What do these storytelling media have in common? How are they different? If your students could choose any medium for their sequel to *Das Rheingold*, what would it be? Why?

Finally, remember that opera is a multimedia art form: Any and all aspects of the performance your students have just seen, including the act of seeing it live, are important factors contributing to the overall experience. Ask them for any final thoughts and impressions. What did they find most memorable?

FURTHER RESOURCES

IN PRINT

Berger, William. *Wagner Without Fear: Learning to Love—and Even Enjoy—Opera’s Most Demanding Genius*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. An excellent and accessible introduction to Wagner, William Berger’s book features a good overview of the composer’s life and insightful commentary on each of Wagner’s operas. It also includes thoughtful discussions of some of the thornier issues in Wagner’s biography (such as his notorious antisemitism), an annotated bibliography and discography, and a description of Berger’s own experience visiting the Bayreuth Festival.

Gaiman, Neil. *Norse Mythology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Novelist Neil Gaiman’s retelling of famous Norse myths is both humorous and approachable, and students will recognize many of *Das Rheingold’s* characters in these stories. For teachers who want a more scholarly introduction to Wagner’s source materials, see the Oxford World’s Classics editions of *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs* (translated with an introduction and notes by Cyril Edwards, 2010) and *The Prose Edda* (revised edition, translated with an introduction and notes by Carolyne Larrington, 2014).

Millington, Barry. *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, His Work and His World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

This extensive biography is especially notable for its 285 illustrations, which offer an excellent visual documentary of Wagner’s life and work.

Sadie, Stanley, ed. *Wagner and His Operas*. The New Grove Composers Series. London: Macmillan Reference, 2000.

This collection of short essays by many of the world’s leading Wagner scholars includes musical analyses, discussions of terms such as “leitmotif” and “Gesamtkunstwerk,” a description of the annual Bayreuth festival, and an introduction to some of the many singers who have performed Wagner’s operas over the years.

Wagner, Richard. *Das Rheingold*. Translation and commentary by Rudolph Sabor. London: Phaidon, 1997.

A facing-page translation of *Das Rheingold’s* entire text, this edition of Wagner’s libretto includes insightful commentary about the music and lyrics and indicates where different leitmotifs occur. This is an excellent resource for teachers who want to delve more deeply into Wagner’s poetry and music.

ONLINE

“The History of the Bayreuth Festival.” <https://www.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/the-festival/history/>

This article, from the Bayreuth Festival’s official website, offers an in-depth history of the festival and its famous opera house complete with historical illustrations and quotes from Wagner’s own writings.

McGrady, Patrick, dir. *Stephen Fry: Wagner & Me*. BBC Four, 2010.

Actor and opera enthusiast Stephen Fry provides a terrific introduction to Wagner’s life and work in this BBC documentary. Over the course of the film, Fry visits important landmarks from Wagner’s career and takes viewers on a behind-the-scenes tour of the Bayreuth Festival Theater. He also discusses how Wagner’s music has been appropriated by nationalist movements in the twentieth century (most famously in Nazi Germany) and offers a passionate appeal for why opera lovers shouldn’t let this distasteful history prevent them from enjoying Wagner’s work. Available on DVD, and streaming from amazon.com.

Southbank Centre What’s On. “An Animated Guide to the Ring.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykQ7jc09OAK>

This six-minute introduction to *The Ring*, produced for London’s Southbank Centre concert hall, presents Wagner’s epic opera in an entertaining and easily digestible animated morsel.

“The Story of the Ring: Opera Synopses,” from GP at the *Met: Wagner’s Ring Cycle*. PBS Great Performances, September 4, 2012.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/gp-at-the-met-wagner-e2-80-99s-ring-cycle-the-story-of-the-ring-opera-synopses/1377/>

If your students want to know what happens in *The Ring* after *Das Rheingold* ends, this website provides good synopses for all four of Wagner’s operas.

act/scene

Acts and scenes are ways of categorizing sections of operas. An act is a large-scale division of an opera, and each opera will typically include from two to five acts. Acts can be subdivided into scenes, which are often differentiated by a change in setting or characters.

adagio

Literally “at ease,” adagio is a tempo marking that indicates a slow speed. An adagio tempo marking indicates that the performer should play in a slow and leisurely style.

allegro

Italian for “cheerful” or “joyful,” Allegro is the most common tempo marking in Western music, indicating a moderately fast to quick speed.

aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, da capo arias, became common by the eighteenth century and feature the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

articulation

The smoothness or hardness with which a note is begun and ended. Articulation is a way of indicating the degree to which each note connects to the next, and can be seen while watching the bow of a stringed instrument player. A note can be attacked sharply and made short, or it can flow smoothly into the next note.

baritone

Literally “deep sounding,” a baritone is what a typical male voice sounds like—the term refers to a male singer with a low but not extremely low vocal range. A baritone will sing notes that are higher than those sung by a bass and lower than those sung by a tenor. Uncommon until the nineteenth century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who often reserved the voice type for villains.

baroque

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1600 to 1750. The beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. The Baroque period saw the rise of modern tonality, an expansion of performing forces, and increased ornamentation. The term “baroque” means bizarre or exaggerated, and was used by critics in the Eighteenth century critics who preferred a simpler and less-ornamented style.

bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for bass voice, using musical repetition and low register for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for bass voice, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

bel canto

Referring to the Italian vocal style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on lyrical embellishment directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on a weighty, dramatic style. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti.

cadenza

An ornamented musical elaboration played in a free style by a soloist to display his or her virtuosity. Cadenzas are typically improvised—that is, created by a performer on the spot—though they can also be written out in advance. They most frequently occur near the end of a piece, at a point of harmonic tension when the piece is about to conclude.

chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral or commentary on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

Classical

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1750 to 1830, bordered by the earlier Baroque period and the later Romantic period. Contrasting with the ornamentation common to the preceding Baroque period, Classical music is characterized by simple and elegant melodies, regular harmonic accompaniment, and contrasts between melodic themes. The composers most closely associated with the Classical period include Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

coloratura

A rapid and elaborate ornamentation by a solo singer, particularly common in operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Requiring vocal agility and a wide and high range, coloratura showcases the virtuosity of a singer by featuring repeating melodic figures, rapid scales, trills, and other embellishments.

conductor

The person who directs the orchestra, setting the tempo, giving interpretive directions to the musicians, and generally holding all the musical elements of a performance together. In orchestra performance, the conductor typically stands on a podium in front of the players and uses a baton to communicate the meter and tempo, and his or her non-baton hand to indicate dynamics, phrasing, and articulation to the musicians. The gestures of a conductor can be likened to a non-verbal language that the musicians understand.

contralto

A deep female voice, with a vocal range that extends lower than that of a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos are known for having a very wide range and for the power and depth of sound with which they can sing. As is the case for roles for basses, many of the earliest roles in opera for contraltos are comic roles, though nineteenth-century composers also wrote dramatic roles for female singers with a lower range.

crescendo

A gradual raising of volume in music achieved by increasing the dynamic level. When music crescendos, the performers begin at a softer dynamic level and become incrementally louder. One of the most famous types of crescendos in opera, the Rossini crescendo, includes an increase in volume together with repeating melodic and rhythmic phrases, higher instrumental registers, and the gradual addition of instruments in order to create a particularly dramatic effect.

diminuendo

A gradual lowering of volume in music achieved by decreasing the dynamic level. During a diminuendo, the performers begin at a louder dynamic level and become incrementally softer.

dynamics

A musical trait pertaining to loudness and softness. During the eighteenth century, composers began indicating their desired intensity of volume in music by writing words such as piano (soft) and forte (loud) into the musical score. Dynamics encompass a spectrum from pianissimo (very soft) to piano (soft) to mezzo piano (moderately soft), all the way up to fortissimo (very loud). Music can shift to another dynamic level either suddenly or gradually, through a crescendo or diminuendo.

ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

finale

The last portion of an act, a finale consists of several musical sections that accompany an escalating dramatic tension. Finales frequently consist of multiple ensembles with different numbers of characters. When it occurs at the end of an early act in the opera, a finale may create a messy situation—and the resolution of this situation will only happen in subsequent acts. One type of finale common in comic operas, a chain finale, features characters entering or exiting from the stage to create unexpected combinations of characters, in turn increasing the opera's dramatic tension.

forte

Meaning "loud" or "strong" in Italian, forte is a dynamic level in music that indicates a loud volume. Adding the suffix "-issimo" to a word serves as an intensifier—since forte means "loud," fortissimo means "very loud."

harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony began to become insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

intermission

A break between acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain will fall (that is, close) on stage, and the lights in the auditorium, called the house lights, will become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later, or be set in a different location. Usually lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

legato

A type of articulation in which a melody is played with smooth connection between the notes. A legato passage does not include any pauses between notes or any accents at the beginnings of notes, as the notes blend into one another without a break. In contrast, a passage that is played staccato features notes played in a separated manner.

Leitmotif

From the German for “leading motive,” a leitmotif is a recurring musical idea, or motive, that represents a particular person, object, idea, emotion, or place. This musical idea is usually a few seconds in length and can occur in the music’s melody, harmony, rhythm, or a combination of the three. Leitmotifs are most closely associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, where they are used repeatedly throughout the opera to provide unity; they also less frequently appear in operas of other composers, including Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss.

libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

maestro

A title of respect used to address a conductor. The term is often applied to conductors with several decades of experience. However, performers often use this honorific when addressing the conductor.

melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

mezzo-soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles as older women, including nurses, confidantes, or maids.

opera buffa

A term applied to Italian comic operas from the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. The plot of an opera buffa often features scenes and characters from everyday life and addresses a light or sentimental subject, concluding with a happy ending.

opera seria

An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Italian opera employing a noble and serious style. The plot of an opera seria often upholds morality by presenting conflicting emotions such as love versus duty, or by modeling enlightened rulers.

operetta

Featuring spoken dialogue, songs, and dances, an operetta is a short theatrical piece. Shorter in duration than operas, operettas typically feature a light subject matter, incorporate melodies composed in a popular style, and feature spoken dialogue. Most popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the genre is the precursor of the American musical.

ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make a melody more expressive or ornate. Ornamentation can be either indicated through symbols written into the music or improvised by the performer.

overture

An instrumental piece that occurs before the first act as an introduction to an opera. After the conductor enters the orchestra pit and takes a bow, the music for the overture begins. Most overtures are a few minutes in duration, and set the mood for the opera—even featuring musical themes that will occur later in the opera.

piano

Abbreviated *p* in a musical score, piano indicates a soft dynamic level. Musicians may achieve a piano sound by using less bow, less air, or less force. In opera, soft music will often correspond with emotions of sadness or moments in the plot when a character is reflecting on a course of action or emotional state. Pianissimo is “very soft,” and can be so quiet that an audience may need to listen carefully in order to discern its melody and harmony.

pitch

The quality of a musical sound corresponding to its perceived highness or lowness. Scientifically, pitch can be measured as the number of vibrations (or repetitions) of a sound wave per second, which is called its frequency. A sound with a low frequency, like a bass drum, will sound low and have a low pitch, while a sound with a high frequency, like a siren, will sound high.

prima donna

Meaning “first lady” in Italian, the prima donna is the leading female role in an opera. The term may apply to the role or to the singer herself, who usually sings in the soprano register and is the star of the show. Since the nineteenth century, the term has also been applied to a singer of any gender with a self-centered and demanding personality.

recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied either by keyboard or by the whole orchestra.

rhythm

Rhythm refers to the way music unfolds over time; it is a series of durations in a range from long to short. Along with pitch, it is a basic and indispensable parameter of music. Rhythm is perceived in relation to an underlying beat and within the context of a meter. Western musical notation indicates to the performer the exact duration of each note or rest.

Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1830 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by composers, romanticism reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. Music from the Romantic period often explores music’s redemptive power, focusing on the sublimity of nature, love, and the mysterious. Composers began to experiment with shortening and lengthening the standard forms and durations of musical works, and also added more expressive harmonies to convey the originality of their musical vision.

score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Singspiel

Literally “sung play,” a Singspiel is an opera with spoken dialogue. Singspiels are typically in German and are from the Classical or early Romantic eras. The plot of a Singspiel is usually comic in nature, and its music may include songs, choruses, and instrumental numbers that are separated by spoken dialogue.

solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

soprano

The highest singing range for the female voice. Roles composed for soprano singers are typically among the leading roles in the opera and require soprano singers to show off their virtuosic flexibility and range.

tempo

Literally “time” in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—such as *allegro*, *adagio*, *vivace*, *moderato*, *grave*, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer’s desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, *vivace* indicates not only a brisk speed but also a lively spirit. Additional tempo markings may indicate when a composer asks for a section of music to be sped up (such as “*accelerando*”) or slowed down (such as “*rallentando*”).

tenor

The highest natural male vocal range. By the nineteenth century, the tenor had become the most common vocal range for male leading roles in operas. Tenor roles often feature high-pitched notes for male voice in order to showcase the singer’s range and power. A related voice type is the countertenor, with a range above that of a tenor and similar to that of a contralto.

theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

timbre

Pronounced TAM-bruh, a French word that means “sound color.” It refers to the complex combination of characteristics that give each instrument or voice its unique sound. Just as we can recognize each other by the differences in our speaking voices, operatic singing voices are distinguishable by their unique timbres. Listeners can also identify orchestral instruments by their timbre without being able to see them. The creative combination of different instrumental timbres is one of the artistic aspects of orchestration.

trill

A rapid alternation between two pitches that are adjacent to one another. Trills are a type of ornamentation, serving to embellish the melodic line, and appear regularly within *coloratura* passages. Trills also may appear near the end of a piece in order to prolong the musical tension before the music concludes.

verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Its characters are driven by passion to defy reason, morality, and the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers of verismo opera developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the *bel canto* style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

March 6, 2019

Conducted by Philippe Jordan

Reviewed by _____

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Tomasz Konieczny as Alberich	*****	
Greer Grimsley as Wotan	*****	
Norbert Ernst as Loge	*****	
Jamie Barton as Fricka	*****	
Wendy Bryn Harmer as Freia	*****	
Günther Groissböck as Fasolt	*****	
Dmitry Belosselskiy as Fafner	*****	
Gerhard Siegel as Mime	*****	
Karen Cargill as Erda	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
The Rhinemaidens splash in the river			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Alberich steals the gold			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Wotan argues with Fricka			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The giants arrive			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim			
My opinion of this scene	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Alberich abuses the Nibelungs			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Wotan and Loge meet Mime			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Alberich changes shape			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Wotan pays the giants			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Erda warns Wotan			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The gods walk to Valhalla			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5