

# SIEGFRIED

## OPERA IN THREE ACTS

Part Three of

*Der Ring des Nibelungen*

Libretto by the composer

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A Study Guide prepared by Virginia Opera

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# **SIEGFRIED**

## **Premiere**

First performance on August 16, 1876 at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Germany.

## **Cast of Characters**

**Siegfried**, mortal grandson of Wotan

**Mime**, Siegfried's foster father

**Wotan**, King of the gods, disguised as **The Wanderer**

**Alberich**, Mime's brother

**Fafner**, a dragon

**Waldvogel**, a woodbird

**Erda**, goddess of the Earth

**Brünnhilde**, a Valkyrie

Tenor

Tenor

Bass Baritone

Baritone

Bass

Coloratura Soprano

Contralto

Soprano



**2023-2024 Season**

## Brief Summary

The opera begins in a forest, as **Mime** is forging a sword for his foster son, **Siegfried**.

Siegfried, driven by a desire to find his biological father, repairs his father's sword, Nothung. Mime wants Siegfried to use the sword to kill **Fafner**, the dragon who guards the all-powerful Ring of Nibelung. In order to convince Siegfried to do so, the Mime tells Siegfried that fear is an essential craft that he will learn about when fighting the dragon. Mime creates a poisoned drink to give Siegfried after he kills Fafner, as **The Wanderer**'s riddle has foretold that Siegfried will kill Mime.

**Alberich**, the one who forged the Ring, stays near Fafner's cave in hopes that he can regain the Ring and rule the world. Alberich warns the dragon that there is a plot to kill him. In exchange for the Ring, Alberich promises to prevent the fight. Fafner declines. As Siegfried travels to Fafner's cave, he hears the song of the **Waldvogel (woodbird)** and mimics this song on his horn. The song awakens Fafner and they fight – Siegfried fatally stabs Fafner. Fafner warns Siegfried that each owner of the Ring is condemned to death. Fafner's blood gives Siegfried the ability to understand the Waldvogel's song. He follows the song's directions and takes the Ring before leaving Fafner's cave. The woodbird warns Siegfried about Mime's plot to kill him. Siegfried kills Mime and, heeding the Waldvogel's instructions, seeks out a woman sleeping on a rock.

Siegfried meets The Wanderer in the forest in his search for **Brünnhilde**, the woman sleeping on a rock. The Wanderer questions Siegfried, but Siegfried mocks him. He breaks The Wanderer's staff and continues to search for Brünnhilde. Siegfried passes through the ring of fire surrounding Brünnhilde's rock due to his fearlessness. Siegfried experiences fear for the first time as he looks upon Brünnhilde's beauty. He kisses her and she wakes from her slumber. Siegfried convinces her to renounce her powers given to her from the world of the gods in order to live a mortal life with him.

## Detailed Synopsis

### ACT 1

#### Scene 1: Mime's cave.

**Mime** is forging a sword and plotting to obtain the Ring of Nibelung. He has raised his foster son, **Siegfried**, to kill **Fafner**, the dragon guarding the Ring. Mime has to fashion a sword for Siegfried as he has destroyed every sword that Mime has made. As Siegfried returns from wandering in the forest, he breaks the new sword that Mime has just made. Mime scolds Siegfried for being so unappreciative, especially since Mime has raised Siegfried since he was a baby. Siegfried demands to know his true parentage, as he knows that Mime is not his biological father. Mime reveals that he encountered Siegfried's mother, Sieglinde, when she was in labor. She died giving birth to Siegfried. To prove this, Mime shows Siegfried the remains of the sword Nothung, which Sieglinde gave to Mime upon her death. Siegfried demands that Mime reforge Nothung, but Mime says he is unable to do so. Siegfried exits, leaving Mime in despair.

#### Scene 2: Mime's cave.

**Wotan**, disguised as an old man, arrives at Mime's door. He introduces himself as **The Wanderer**. He wagers that if he can answer three of Mime's questions, that Mime will grant him hospitality. If he cannot answer all three questions, then Mime can have his head. Mime asks The Wanderer to name the races that live underground (Nibelungs), on the earth (the Giants) and in the skies (the Gods). Despite The Wanderer answering all three questions correctly, Mime refuses to grant him hospitality. The Wanderer then demands that Mime answer three of *his* questions; if Mime cannot answer all three, then he surrenders his own head. Mime agrees. The Wanderer asks Mime to name: the race that Wotan loves dearly yet are treated terribly (the Wälsungs – Siegfried's parents); the sword that can kill Fafner (Nothung); and the person who can repair Nothung. Mime is unable to answer the last question. The Wanderer tells Mime that only he who does not know fear can repair Nothung and that person will be the one to take Mime's head.

#### Scene 3: Mime's cave.

Siegfried returns and expresses his annoyance at Mime's lack of progress on Nothung. Mime realizes that Siegfried is the one who does not know fear. If he does not find a way to instill fear in Siegfried, then he will kill Mime, as The Wanderer foretold. Mime convinces Siegfried that he needs to learn fear and that he can teach him by taking him to Fafner. Because Mime was unable to repair Nothung, Siegfried decides to do so himself. While Siegfried is working on Nothung, Mime concocts a poisoned draught to give to Siegfried after he kills Fafner. Siegfried finishes repairing Nothung and exits.

### ACT 2

#### Scene 1: Deep in the forest.

The Wanderer appears at the entrance of Fafner's cave, crossing paths with **Alberich**. Alberich brags that he will rule the world once he is able to regain ownership of the Ring. The Wanderer tells Alberich that he only plans to observe, not to interfere. He offers to awaken Fafner so that

Alberich can strike a bargain with him. When the dragon wakes, Alberich warns him that someone is coming to kill him. In exchange for the ring, Alberich promises to prevent the fight from happening. Fafner does not take the threat seriously and declines Alberich's offer. The Wanderer tells Alberich that fate cannot be changed. He exits and Alberich withdraws to his lair near Fafner's cave.

### **Scene 2: Fafner's cave.**

Siegfried and Mime arrive at Fafner's cave. Mime tells Siegfried that the dragon will teach him fear and exits. Siegfried hears the **Waldvogel (woodbird)** singing as he is waiting for Fafner to appear. Siegfried tries to play the woodbird's tune on his pipe, but he is unsuccessful. When he plays it on his horn, the tune awakens the dragon. Siegfried and Fafner fight; Siegfried stabs him in the heart with Nothung. In his final moments, Fafner warns Siegfried that every owner of the Ring is doomed to die. When Siegfried withdraws Nothung from Fafner's body, the dragon's magic blood burns his hands. When he puts his finger in his mouth to soothe the sensation, he is suddenly granted the ability to understand the woodbird's song. Heeding the woodbird's instructions, he takes the Ring and the magic helmet, Tarnhelm, from Fafner's cave.

### **Scene 3: Outside of Fafner's cave.**

Alberich and Mime are fighting over the treasure from Fafner's cave. As Siegfried approaches, Alberich hides. Siegfried examines the Ring but does not comprehend its power or value. He tells Mime that the dragon did not teach him fear. Mime congratulates Siegfried for slaying the dragon and offers him the poisoned draught as a reward. The woodbird warns Siegfried about Mime's plot to kill him. Siegfried stabs and kills Mime. Alberich laughs at Mime's death. The Waldvogel now sings about a beautiful woman named Brünnhilde who is sleeping on a rock surrounded by a ring of fire. Siegfried thinks that he may be able to learn about fear from this woman and follows the Waldvogel to the rock.

## **ACT 3**

### **Scene 1: Foot of Brünnhilde's rock.**

On a mountain pass, The Wanderer summons Erda to ask about the gods' fate. She avoids his questions and he accepts that the end of the gods' reign is coming. He rests his hope in Siegfried and Brünnhilde due to Siegfried's ability to remain uncorrupted by the Ring's power. Erda is dismissed and returns to the earth.

### **Scene 2: Foot of Brünnhilde's rock.**

Siegfried arrives at the mountaintop where Brünnhilde sleeps. He crosses paths with The Wanderer, but does not recognize him as his grandfather. He avoids The Wanderer's questions, mocks him, and breaks his spear with Nothung. The Wanderer gathers the pieces of his spear and vanishes. Siegfried continues on the path to Brünnhilde's rock.

### **Scene 3: Brünnhilde's rock.**

Due to his fearlessness, Siegfried is able to pass through the ring of fire surrounding Brünnhilde's rock. At first he thinks the sleeping armored figure is a man. Upon removing the armor, he finds

a beautiful woman underneath. Struck with the feeling of love for the first time, Siegfried now experiences fear. He kisses Brünnhilde, waking her from her slumber. Brünnhilde hails the Sun, overjoyed that Siegfried has awoken her. Though she tries to resist Siegfried's declarations of love, she eventually gives in. She renounces her magical powers and immortality to live out a mortal life with Siegfried. The opera ends with the two praising love.

## About the composer

Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813 to a theatrical family. He grew up wanting to be a poet and playwright but at the age of fifteen he decided to become a composer after discovering the music of Ludwig van Beethoven. Although he had almost three years of formal training in harmony, he never mastered an instrument and taught himself music largely through studying scores. As a student at Leipzig University he drank, dueled, and gambled. All of his life he shamelessly borrowed money he could not, or had no intention of, paying back. In his early twenties, Wagner conducted in several small German theaters and began to compose operas. In 1833 he took a position as chorus master at Würzburg where he became familiar with a great deal of the standard repertoire. There, he wrote his first opera, *Die Feen (The Fairies)*, a German fairy-tale opera typical of the period. It was only performed posthumously, in 1888.

In 1839 he and his wife, Minna, moved to Paris. During the two years they lived in Paris, Wagner was unable to get an opera performed and was reduced to doing musical odd jobs such as copying, in order to survive. In 1842 he returned to Germany for the premiere of his opera, *Rienzi*. The work was a success and he was engaged as conductor of the Dresden Opera. There he spent six years, gaining fame as an opera conductor and composer. After the 1848 revolutions, Wagner had to flee to Switzerland for a combination of reasons, mainly his participation in protests and because he had accumulated large debts in Dresden. He hoped that a new society produced by revolution would cause his debts to be erased and would be more supportive of artistic activity. For several years he did not compose but instead theorized about the future of opera in various essays. His essays appeared in a volume published in 1851 called *Opera and Drama*. He also worked on the libretto to the four operas comprising *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. *Siegfried* is the third of these four operas.

In *Opera and Drama*, which was revised in 1868, Wagner's colossal ego comes through. His own works were clearly indebted to several musical sources such as the German operas of Weber, Marschner, and others, to the French grand operas of Meyerbeer and Auber, and to Italian bel canto opera, particularly Bellini's *Norma*, which Wagner had conducted and adored. Yet Wagner liked to construct musical smoke screens to make it appear that he was totally original, indebted to no one. Just as he never paid his monetary debts, so he never acknowledged musical ones – quite the opposite, for he spilled much ink denigrating both French and Italian opera as “tinsel opera,” where the audience went to be seen, seek romantic assignations, play chess, gamble, eat and drink, and listen to star singers perform dazzling circus feats of virtuosity, rather than pay attention to the drama. He criticized the opera of his own time as debased, superficial entertainment that catered to a degenerate society that was in need of redemption (the theme of many of his operas). He believed that drama had reached its zenith in ancient Greece and had been deteriorating for 2,000 years, partly because the dogmas of the Church conflicted with art. He felt that currently (after 1848) art could ennoble those who aspired to high ideals; and he was the one to lead the way, to redeem society, as it were. There is a much darker side to this, in fact: not only did Wagner denigrate French and Italian opera, he felt peoples of Latin and Semitic heritage were racially inferior to Germans. His autobiography, *Mein Leben (My Life)*



later became the prototype for Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) and Wagner's music became inextricably linked with the Nazis to the point that his music is unofficially banned in Israel even today.

Wagner certainly knew the power that music and art in general held in mid-nineteenth century Europe, especially with the void left because of the decline of organized religion after the French Revolution. Music itself became a kind of religion or a source of spirituality and opera in particular was a source of escape. Wagner sought to use a renewed public interest in opera to gain prestige. One can clearly see this by looking at how Wagner planned his own opera house – the *Festspielhaus* – the theater he had built in Bayreuth, Germany (pronounced bye-royt). First, he chose the isolated small town of Bayreuth for this theater. Audiences would not be surrounded by the confusion of a big city such as Munich or Berlin, but would come specifically to Bayreuth only to hear Wagner's stage works. The *Festspielhaus* featured festival seasons that were devoted entirely to the works of Wagner, with one exception, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. This still holds true today. Bayreuth was kept dark, an innovation at the time, for the auditoriums of opera houses had always been as brightly lit as possible, so that the audience could see everyone's fine clothing and jewelry and could socialize as much as possible. Wagner, however, wanted all attention focused on his message on stage, so he reduced distractions. He also buried the orchestra underneath the stage, so that one cannot see the tops of the bassoons or the harps, or even the conductor beating time. Thus, the sound of the orchestra seems to emanate from a deep, mysterious source. Of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner stated that "If it well performed, it should drive the listener insane." The *Ring* cycle is heard over a period of four nights and in experiencing it, one has devoted the better part of a week to Wagner's music.

After 1851 Wagner considered that he no longer wrote operas, the name affixed to Italian and French entertainments; he instead called his works "music dramas" because his works treated music and literature equally. In the *Ring*, he chose Germanic mythology as the subject, not only because of his beliefs in Aryan supremacy, but because he believed this mythology could redeem. The musical texture was continuous in the orchestra constructed of musical themes called "leitmotifs" (leading motives), which Wagner called "melodic moments of feeling." These could represent a thing, a person, or an idea, and were transformed musically to portray dramatic and psychological needs. The vocal part, in theory, was to be as far away from Italian singing style as possible; rather than a continuous vocal line, it was to be intermittent and declamatory. Thus, the whole idea of arias with pauses for applause was eliminated – the orchestral music kept flowing, taking the listener deeper and deeper into Wagner's world. In order to heighten the musical and dramatic unity and thus the power of this music dramas, Wagner stated that all the elements of the work – text, music, costumes, sets, lighting, stage directions – should be guided by one hand, his own. This fusion of the arts – which in fact German composers such as E.T.A. Hoffman and Carl Maria von Weber had been writing about for decades – Wagner called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total or collected work of art.

Wagner interrupted composition on *The Ring* cycle to compose two operas: *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859) known for the "love-deaths" of the hero and heroine, and *Die Meistersinger* (*The*

*Master-singers*), his only “comedy”. After Wagner finished *Tristan* his career began to decline. His revised version of *Tannhäuser* was a failure at the Paris Opéra (making him detest Paris even more than previously). *Tristan* was abandoned by the Vienna Opera as unperformable and he his creditors continued to seek repayment.

In 1864 King Ludwig of Bavaria saved Wagner’s fledgling career. Ludwig put the entire resources of the Munich Opera at Wagner’s disposal. At this time Wagner fell in love with Cosima Liszt von Bülow, the daughter of Franz Liszt and married to a close friend of Wagner’s, the conductor Hans von Bülow. While still married to von Bülow, Cosima gave birth to two children by Wagner. After Wagner’s first wife died, he and Cosima were soon married.

Undoubtedly the high point of Wagner’s life was the opening of the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth. There in August of 1876, the first complete *Ring* cycle was given. Wagner composed his final work, *Parsifal*, between 1877 and 1882. The following year Wagner died in Venice.

## Historical Background

In 1845 Richard Wagner decided to write an opera based on material medieval German epic poems and Nordic legends that shared common themes and characters. He initially planned an opera called *Siegfried's Death*, which decades later became *Götterdämmerung*, the final opera in the *Ring* cycle. As he prepared the libretto he found that more and more situations in the story needed explaining and eventually wrote four operas that comprised one master work – the *Ring* cycle. In addition to *Götterdämmerung* these operas include: *Young Siegfried* (now *Siegfried*, the third opera in the cycle), *Sigmund und Sieglinde* (now *Die Walküre*, the second opera in the cycle), and *Das Rheingold* (the first opera in the cycle). The cycle is primarily about the power of love and people's willingness to give up love for worldly reasons. The ring refers to a ring that the gnome, Alberich, made out of gold from the Rhine river. When Wotan, the king of the gods stole the ring to pay for his castle, Valhalla, Alberich put a curse on the ring – all who own the ring are cursed to die. Throughout the course of these four operas, the curse is fulfilled.

Wagner wrote the libretto for *Siegfried* between 1851-1852. It was not until 1856 that Wagner began to write the music for *Siegfried* and he completed the first two acts in 1857. Wagner left *Siegfried* incomplete while he wrote two other operas outside of the *Ring* cycle: *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*. In 1869, he resumed composing the music for *Siegfried* and finished writing the opera in 1871. He held off on premiering *Siegfried* so that it would premiere during the inaugural *Ring* cycle at the Festspielhaus in August 1876. Wagner wanted to connect Siegfried's character with the history of the gods in order to elevate this music drama to what musicologist Richard Taruskin calls a "cosmogony," or an origin story that describes the fate of the world. For Wagner, writing such an opera would allow him to rebuild society in the fashion he described in *Music and Drama*.

The *Ring* cycle is ultimately a drama about ethics and the meaningless nature of worldly possessions. In other words, love – not money – is everything. Fear is the beginning of death, and humanity's struggle for power is rooted in fear. The only solution to this predicament is fearless love. But Wotan's misdeeds can only be made right by the self-sacrificial heroism of some mere mortal – Siegfried himself. Therefore man had to be created by the gods so that Siegfried might right the wrong and supplant the gods as ruler of the world. The creation of man was an act of willful self-destruction by the gods, as Wotan acknowledges in the final act of *Siegfried*.

It is therefore no coincidence that *Siegfried* showcases the human experience with the use of several different emotions. Wagner uses comedy in the first and final acts. Mime's joy at solving The Wanderer's riddle in act one nearly teeters into self-sabotage. In the final act, there is a comic moment when Siegfried realizes that Brünnhilde is not a man. In this opera, too, Wagner showcases the beauty of love. Though appearing at the end of the opera, Brünnhilde and Siegfried's love duet was the first bit of music that Wagner composed for this opera. This final moment sets the stage for the last opera in the cycle, *Götterdämmerung*, in which Siegfried and Brünnhilde's love ultimately redeems humankind.

## Points of musical interest

Wagner's operas interweave leitmotifs (leading motives) that each represent a particular character, event, thing, or emotion. Wagner's prologues typically introduce the leitmotifs in their original form. As the opera develops, so do the leitmotifs to reflect the development of characters and their emotions. Below are two leitmotifs: one for the Nibelungs and one for Siegfried's horn call.

Act 1, scene 1, leitmotif for the Nibelungs (both Alberich and Mime are Nibelungs):



Ex. 1

The dotted rhythm in the Nibelung leitmotif represented the toiling of the Nibelungs as they forged the gold that Alberich stole to create the all-powerful Ring.

Act 2, scene 2, leitmotif for Siegfried's horn call



Ex. 2

This leitmotif represents a call to battle, as this is the horn call that wakes Fafner, the dragon.

## Discussion questions

1. Music from the Romantic period (ca. 1830-1900) is typically characterized as having the following characteristics: long, flowery phrases; experimentation with harmony and texture; emotionally expressive melodies; and large orchestras. Idealistically, music from the Romantic period typically had a moral value and expressed nationalism. Which aspects of the Romantic idiom are expressed in *Siegfried*? In which ways does *Siegfried* differ from the Romantic idiom?
2. Wagner wrote his vocal lines to be declamatory – he wanted them to sound closer to speech than the long, florid vocal lines of his French and Italian contemporaries. This aspect of Wagner’s composing exemplifies realism, another creative tool of the Romantic period. Wagner and other artists wanted to portray real life in their artistic works. Do you think that *Siegfried* is a good portrayal of realism? Explain your answer.
3. Wagner participated in the 1848 revolutions in Germany. The politics surrounding these protests, in part, influenced him to write the *Ring* cycle. Germany was not one unified country at the time – it was made up of 39 states that comprised the German Confederation. The revolutionaries wanted to unite the states under one German nationalism and rebuild a new society based on democratic values. How does *Siegfried* represent this battle between overlords and revolutionaries? Which roles do characters such as Siegfried and Wotan (The Wanderer) play?
4. Given Wagner’s anti-Semitic political views, there are many who believe that Wagner’s music should not be performed. Do you think Wagner’s operas should still be performed despite his views? What precautions should arts institutions take if/when producing these works? What conversations should take place?