



***The Rhinegold* Wagner**

The Rhinegold is the start of a huge cycle of operas, written by Richard Wagner, called the *Ring of the Nibelung*. Most people just call it *The Ring*. The Ring is a ring of power, and the person who wears it can become Lord of the World. However the Ring is dangerous: it was forged in treachery and its first owner put a terrible curse on it. Anybody who wears it will find it betrays and destroys them. Of course this doesn't stop people wanting the Ring, and Wagner's enormous cycle (it takes over 15 hours to perform) is all about the attempt to make the Ring safe. To get the Ring into the hands of a hero, who will return it to its home in the River Rhine. The story, as you will have guessed, is very like Tolkien's epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, which is not surprising as both Tolkien and Wagner got the idea for their stories from the same source – the Northern myths. The stories Vikings told round their firesides, hundreds of years ago.

To understand *The Ring* it's a good idea to get our head round the strange Northern world of the Vikings.

The Viking Universe

They thought that the universe was made up of nine different worlds – though *The Ring* fortunately only uses three. Asgard, the home of the gods, Midgard the home of men and Niflheim the home to the dwarfs. These worlds are supported by a mighty Ash Tree, Yggdrasil. This tree is so huge that its branches support the sky while its trunk runs through the centre of the worlds, just as the trunk of a real tree might run through the middle of some primitive Northern hut.

The Ash Tree is home to a variety of creatures, to a goat (who the gods milk) to deer, who devour its branches, and to an eagle that sits at the top. At the root of the tree lies the serpent Nidhogg who continually gnaws its roots. He is at war with the eagle and a squirrel continually runs up and down the tree carrying insults from one to the other. In between live a variety of beings, gods, men, giants, monsters and elves all sorted out into their different worlds.

Gods, Men, Dwarves and Giants

Near the centre of the tree lies the world of men, Midgard, middle earth: it is ringed round with mountains and, at the outer edge, live the frost giants. We call them giants but actually demons or trolls would be just as accurate. They are a brutal, stupid race, and hate the gods for being beautiful and wise.

Below Midgard, living out of the light, are the dwarfs. They are a self-centred lot, greedy and malicious, but they are excellent craftsmen and all the gods' most beautiful and magical possessions are made by them.

The gods live above Midgard and visit men by riding over Bifrost Bridge - the rainbow. The gods are not at all like God. They were created after the giants and dwarves, and they don't quite know what's going on in the world or what the future holds in store. Many of the Viking stories are about the gods trying to get information from giants and dwarves. As most giants and dwarves hate them, they have to resort to trickery to get anywhere. Other races also live in the three realms but, as Wagner ignores them, so will we; he does however add a race, the Rhinemaidens, who swim in from German fairy stories. They are water sprites and extremely beautiful.

The important thing to remember with all these creatures is that they have fixed characters. Wagner often sees things from their point of view, but he never alters them. Rhinemaidens tease people, giants are brutal, dwarves are malicious, and the gods are beautiful and dangerous.

Wotan

There is only one character who is unpredictable, and that is the hero of the cycle, Wotan.

Wotan (or Odin in Viking stories) is the chief of the gods. He has many names, All Father (of course) and the God of Justice – but he was also called the Hooded One, Father of the Slain, God of the Hanged, the Shape Changer, the Deceiver. These are sinister names which tell us what a disturbing god he was; the god of war, of magic, wisdom and deceit. Wotan spends most of his time in the stories trying to find out about the end of the world. One wonders why he bothers. It's going to be grim – everything decent and good will be destroyed and men and the gods will go down fighting, side by side.

Wagner's Wotan

Wagner's Wotan is very like the original Viking god, with one immense difference. He is deeply interested in Law. Like the Norse god he wields a mighty spear, but *his* spear is inscribed with runes, with contracts, and in Wagner's story it is by law that Wotan rules the world. This has major repercussions in the first story in the cycle, *The Rhinegold*.

The Bottom of the Rhine

Rhinegold starts at the bottom of the River Rhine. Three **Rhinemaidens** are messing around in the water, watched furtively by the Nibelung dwarf, **Alberich**. The Rhinemaidens tease him and he's just about to lose his temper when the sun shines through the water and catches a lump of metal which suddenly gleams gold.

The Rhinemaidens swoop round in the golden water and call to Alberich to dance with them. They tell him the glittering metal is the Rhinegold and that they are its guardians. The dwarf is deeply unimpressed, "What's the point of a lump of gold?" he asks, "all it does is light up your games."

One of the girls swims closer and tells him that the Rhinegold is actually extremely powerful: if it were taken from the Rhine it could be formed into a Ring, the owner of which would rule the world. The others scold her for talking too much, but she laughs at them. "There's no need to worry," she says, "it can only be taken by somebody who is prepared to renounce Love, I can't see this lecherous little dwarf doing that..."

Nobody notices Alberich edging nearer the gold, he reaches out and, uttering a terrible curse on love, he tears the gold from the rock. The water goes dark and amidst the confusion and cries, we hear him laughing as he slips off with his prize down a crack in the river bed.

Stolen Goods

This incident sets the whole opera going, and its worth remembering that it is a crime. Alberich spends the next 15 hours stamping around, yelling and justifying himself, but it doesn't alter the fact that he *steals* the Rhinegold. Wagner uses that verb over and over again. To make matters worse, Alberich compounds his crime by cursing love. That curse, working its way through his life, will wither everything in its path.

A Mountain Top

From the bottom of the Rhine the opera swiftly ascends to a mountaintop. There **Wotan** lies half asleep, dreaming of the fortress he has ordered from the giants, **Fasolt** and **Fafner**. He is woken by his wife, **Fricka**. The newly built fortress stands gleaming on a distant hillside, and the giants are about to arrive to collect their pay. Fricka is furious; she has only just realised that the price Wotan offered the giants was **Freia** - the goddess of Love. (For a moment Wotan appears to have acted like Alberich, he too has sacrificed Love for something he wants more. We discover later that, unlike Alberich, Wotan will come to bitterly repent his bargain.)

Enter the Giants

Freia herself runs on, crying for help, but Wotan hardly notices her. He is looking round anxiously for the fire god, **Loge**. Loge is a tricky god, admired by Wotan for his cleverness, but hated by the others for his mischief making. Wotan tells Fricka that he only agreed to the giants' request because Loge whispered to him that he'd find something the giants would like better. Fricka is not impressed and points out that though Loge is not here, the Giants *are* - and indeed they stomp in to a thundering tune at this moment.

We soon realise that it is the younger Giant, Fasolt, who wants the goddess. He is outraged when Wotan tries to laugh him out of his wages and reminds the god that their bargain holds good because it was written on his spear. Wotan's power over the giants is a result of the laws and contracts inscribed on his spear, break those and there will be war.

War is already in the air as **Donner** (the thunder god) and **Froh** (Freia's brother) rush in to defend her. The Giants raise their clubs, Donner swings his hammer and everything is about to get out of hand, when Wotan steps forward, stretches out his spear, and cries "Force will not serve!" And at this point Loge makes his long delayed entrance.

A Magic Ring

On he strolls, detached and infuriating; he congratulates the Giants on the new fortress, tells Wotan he's got a splendid new home - and takes for ever to tell them where he's been. "I've tried to find something the Giants would like better," he says, "but frankly what *is* better than beauty and love?" And then, slowly, he comes up with the answer. He's been right round the world to see if anyone would give up love and, though most people laughed at him, he heard of one person who *had*. The Rhinemaidens told him of Alberich the dwarf. Alberich has stolen their Rhinegold, made a Ring, and is planning to take over the world. The Rhinemaidens, he adds, would like Wotan to get the gold back.

But Wotan is not interested in the Rhinemaidens, instead he quizzes Loge on the power of the Ring. All the characters on stage (except significantly Freia, Love herself) cluster round the fire god as he describes the Ring, and everybody begins to desire it. Fafner comes to a decision, he turns to Wotan and says that he and his brother will give up Freia for the Ring and, in spite of Wotan's expostulations, ("I

haven't got the Ring!") the two monsters exit, prudently taking Freia as a hostage.

Magic Apples

As Freia leaves a mist hovers over the gods and they feel cold and weak. Only Loge realises what has happened; Freia tends the golden apples of youth, it is from these the gods get their youth and immortality, and without them they will wither and die. It was probably *this* that Fafner had in mind when he demanded Freia in the first place. Wotan is appalled and immediately makes up his mind; he will descend to Niebelheim, Alberich's kingdom, and, as he euphemistically puts it, *win* him the gold.

Niebelheim

And to Niebelheim we go, the air is filled with the sound of the Nibelung anvils (made by banging 14 railway sleepers at the side of the stage) and the cries of Alberich and his brother **Mime**, quarrelling. Mime, following Alberich's instructions, has made him a magic helmet, the Tarnhelm. He's been trying to keep it for himself but, unfortunately, he doesn't know how it works. Alberich puts it on, says some magic words, and immediately disappears. He beats Mime up (very easy to do when you're invisible) and tells him that now he will be able to terrorise him and the Nibelungs better than ever. He leaves as Loge and Wotan sidle in – and find Mime whimpering in the dust.

"Hey Mime, cheerful dwarf!" cries Loge, "What's the matter with you?" And Mime tells them that Alberich, with the help of the Ring, is the slave master of the Nibelungs. The battered dwarf sings wistfully of the time when the Nibelungs used their anvils to make magical toys; now they must sweat, mining gold for Alberich.

Shape Changing

At this point Alberich himself swaggers in and the gods edge, cautiously, and politely, into conversation. Alberich is deeply suspicious, but he is lured into revealing his plans for enslaving the whole world. Monstrously he suggests that as *he* has had to renounce love, he will have the whole world do the same. Loge idly wonders about his security, how can he ensure the Ring is not stolen? "Easily!" says Alberich shows them his magic Tarnhelm. With this, he says, he can change his shape – and Loge instantly demands a demonstration.

Shape changing is one of the most common bits of magic in the Northern myths, any reasonably competent dwarf or giant can do it and the foolish Alberich falls neatly into the trap. He changes himself into a dragon and, encouraged by Wotan's admiration, is lured into showing off and changing into something small. He becomes a toad, is pounced on by Wotan, tied up and dragged to the top of the mountain.

The Ransom

Back home Wotan demands a ransom, all Alberich's gold. Alberich is furious, but he calls down to the Nibelungs to bring it up. Loge demands the Tarnhelm and Alberich hands that over (comforting himself with the thought that he can still forge another one) and then Wotan makes his final demand, the Ring on his finger.

Alberich is horrified, "My life but not the Ring!" he cries, but Wotan rounds on him, It is not *his* ring, he reminds him, did the Rhinemaidens give it to him? Alberich does not answer the charge (he can't) but he cries out that he has suffered for the Ring (he is loveless), and he certainly didn't do that for Wotan. What is Wotan going to do with the Ring? Enslave the world?

The Curse

Wotan tears the Ring from his finger and puts it on his own. Loge, a silent observer,

unbinds the dwarf, who pronounces a solemn curse on the Ring. Everybody will desire it, nobody will receive joy from it and it will betray all who own it until it returns to his own hand. He leaves as the other gods, and the giants, appear.

Hiding Freia

Fasolt is distressed to see that the gods have been successful and only agrees to release Freia if they can completely hide her behind Alberich's gold. Loge stacks the gold round her but Fasolt, prowling round the heap, sees a gleam from her eye. The Tarnhelm has already been added to the pile and it seems there is no gold left until Fafner notices the Ring on Wotan's finger. "That will cover the chink!" he says. Wotan angrily refuses and it seems that Freia will be hauled off once again, when **Erda**, the earth goddess, makes her mysterious appearance.

A Prophecy

To slow impressive music Erda warns Wotan to give up the Ring and tells him that an evil day is dawning for the gods. Wotan is overcome with dread (and possibly guilt) he cannot make her say more, but he yields up the Ring.

Murder

The giants release Freia and begin to split up their ransom. Loge whispers to Fasolt not to worry about the gold "All you need is the Ring!" he says. A piece of advice that instantly provokes a quarrel. To the gods' horror Fafner clubs Fasolt to death, takes the Ring and begins methodically to pack up the gold.

Valhalla

Donner clears the air, literally, by swinging his hammer round to dispel the mist and Wotan looks broodingly on his hard won fortress. He rouses himself, names it **Valhalla** and calls the gods to follow him to their new home. Loge does not join them, he knows the castle has been paid for with stolen gold and he feels ashamed. The sound of the Rhinemaidens, bewailing their gold, comes up from the Rhine. Loge looks down and makes a bitter joke, "Stop wailing," he says, "You'll never see your gold again, let the gods' golden splendour shine on you instead!"

The gods laugh as they go over the Rainbow Bridge to their new home.

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