

## Introduction to *The Valkyrie*

We are about to play and sing for you the first act of *The Valkyrie*, one act out of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. The *Ring* is a 15-hour epic that is regarded by many as one of the greatest multimedia creations in history. This one act is reasonably self-contained and, if your diary excludes travelling to Bayreuth this July to experience the whole thing, this will be a good sample.

The first opera of the *Ring* is *The Rhinegold*, a 2.5 hour prelude that introduces us to the realms of the Gods (Valhalla) and to the Underworld (Nibelheim). Then the action switches to the world of man for *The Valkyrie*, telling of the conception of the hero Siegfried, whose deeds are recounted in the third opera, which bears his name. Last comes *Götterdämmerung*, the *Twilight of the Gods*. Well, that would be an impossible act to follow.

Wagner wrote his own libretti, and these have been judged an important contribution to German poetry — by no lesser authority than Wagner himself! The story is huge and about as believable as most opera. Who would believe that you could have a global hit with an epic series about a race of tiny people with a magic gold ring that gives power over the whole world?

I shan't tell you much of the story or the philosophy, because you'll have surtitles, and our maestro Steven has written some truly wonderful programme notes. So I'll say instead a little about the writing, and then set the scene.

The first act of *Valkyrie* requires a symphony orchestra, but only three singers. We are fortunate to have three outstanding operatic soloists: Leah Thomas is the soprano, Andrew Brunsdon the tenor and Shane Lawrence the bass. But if you're expecting some trios and duets (of the sort you'd hear in *Così fan tutti* or *Lakme*), you'll be disappointed.

So, why no duets and trios — at least in this act? We know a lot about the composer's intentions because Wagner wrote at length about his theory for merging the arts of music, poetry and drama into the enormous operas for which he is famous. So, there are no trios and duos because their equivalents don't occur spontaneously in speech: we don't usually talk in unison. For the same reason [*sing recit*] *there are no recitatives, because people don't talk like that.*


Instead, there *are* musical conversations, extended exchanges between the voices, but there is no vocal harmony or counterpoint in this whole act. (In later acts, the vocal harmony comes when people are laughing together, or in war cries.)


Further, the musical phrases that the soloists sing rarely form 'songs' with a clear rhythm and tunes repeated in chorus and verse. They do sing notes – lots and lots of notes. Nevertheless, the musical phrases that Wagner gives his singers aim to approximate the rhythm and the contour of speech – [*sing*] *the rhythm and the contour of speech.*

Another Wagner innovation: the singing is simultaneous with but *quite different from* the orchestral accompaniment. The orchestra does 'accompany' in this more general sense, but most of the time, the orchestra does what it does in movies: the music is there to set the scene – but more importantly *to manipulate your emotions*. This last point is worth stressing: a horror movie is much less scary without the creepy harpsichord and the bass clarinet; and how could the young couple fall in love without the oboe solo over the soft strings? Wagner doesn't write to make you think, he writes to make you feel.

Wagner contributed important developments to music, especially in reducing the importance of keys and simple chords. He rapidly moves among remote key signatures, his harmonies are 'stretched' and the chords go well beyond simple major and minor, he particularly likes augmented fifths [*augmented fifths*], and notes suspended over an unrelated chord.

As well as playing mood music, the orchestra, or subsets of us, also get to play the *Leitmotifs*: these are little phrases of a dozen or so notes that are associated with different characters, different objects, or even different emotional situations. For example, the god Wotan is not present in this act, but his motif is.

When you hear  , it is intended to suggest the character whom, in a complete Ring, you would already have met in *The Rhinegold*.

The sword motif,  , plays a key role in this act. It says *Hey, I'm here, I'm the sword your father left for you, buried to the hilt in this tree. Pull me out of the tree and become ... Pull me out of the tree and become ... somebody who has a sword.*

Steven's programme notes tell you a lot about the themes and philosophy of the Ring Cycle, the grand cycle of operas about the strength and limitations of love and power, the interactions between Valhalla, the Underworld, and the Earth between them.

But the Ring is also about the conflict between various races of people. Which brings us to the Wagner problem. Wagner was a racist, especially an anti-Semite. And, at a personal level, an ungrateful bastard, betraying his colleagues and benefactors. So Wagner wasn't much of a man, but he was a great composer. Well, we're here for the music.

And what great music it is. Let me set the scene we're about to play into being.

It was a dark and stormy night. The violins and violas are shivering in the darkness [*brr tremolo*] while the cellos and basses are running through the forest. The orchestral writing is so good that, after 60 bars, [*act*], after 60 bars running with the cellos, we are all out of breath.

The cellos are joined on stage by Siegmund, who is being pursued: we hear the hunting horns in the distance (*dada, dada, dada, dada\**). The running theme continues and the horns fall further away (*dada, dada, dada, dada\**).

Happily, *there's a light ... over at the Sieglinde place ...* oops, wrong opera.

Siegmund enters and falls asleep. Sieglinde enters and they introduce themselves. [*Mi chiamo Mimi ...* oops, wrong opera again.] Back to the house in the forest, and here's the dramatic obstacle: Sieglinde is unhappily married and husband is due home soon.

Siegmund and Sieglinde develop a familiar story: "*I really can't stay*" "*But Siegmund it's cold outside*" – oops, sorry, wrong composer again. Anyhow, Siegmund stays.

Actually, Siegmund calls himself Sorrow and explains why. His father was called Wolfe (an obviously heroic name connoting many virtues. According to some prosaic musicologists, however, it's because he wore a wolf skin.)

Siegfried confesses to being a multiple murderer. But don't worry [*spoiler alert*], we know he'll get away with it! Partly because he was rescuing a reluctant bride, and partly because ... because he's a tenor. Yes, here we go again, the guys who can hit the high Cs can get away with murder – and then get the soprano in the end. Yes, the tenor ends up with the soprano even if she and he are ... but I don't want to give away the story.

Instead, let your imagination take you back to the wind and the rain in the forest. It's cold [*brr*] and you're running with the cellos [*act*]. You see the light in the distance. The wild, epic story is about to begin – as soon as we've tuned up.

*Joe Wolfe, April 2017.*

\* Continuity spoiler: This tune cannot be played one handed on a hunting horn.

+ See? I almost fell of my horse.