

Götterdämmerung

(‘Twilight of the Gods’).

Third day of [der Ring des nibelungen](#) in a prologue and three acts by Richard Wagner (*see Wagner family, (1)*) to his own libretto; Bayreuth, Festspielhaus, 17 August 1876.

Siegfried	tenor
Gunther	bass-baritone
Alberich	bass-baritone
Hagen	bass
Brünnhilde	soprano
Gutrune	soprano
Waltraute	mezzo-soprano
First Norn	contralto
Second Norn	mezzo-soprano
Third Norn	soprano
Rhinemaidens	
Woglinde	soprano
Wellgunde	soprano
Flosshilde	mezzo-soprano
Vassals, women	

The first draft of *Siegfrieds Tod* (originally spelt *Siegfried's Tod* and later renamed *Götterdämmerung*) is dated (at the end) 20 October 1848. This draft begins in the hall of the Gibichungs, but having been persuaded that too much background knowledge to the story was presupposed, Wagner added a prologue some time before 12 November. He undertook the versification of *Siegfrieds Tod* between 12 and 28 November, but then put it aside, perhaps unsure how to reconcile the diverging strands of the drama: divine myth and heroic tragedy. In the summer of 1850 he made some preliminary musical sketches for the prologue and began a composition draft, which was discontinued after the opening of the leavetaking scene for Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Having then added a preliminary drama, *Der junge Siegfried* (1851), and *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold* (1851–2), Wagner found it necessary to subject *Siegfrieds Tod* to revision: Siegfried had already been replaced as the central figure of the cycle by Wotan; the ending was altered so that the gods and Valhalla are all destroyed by fire; the Norns' scene was completely rewritten; a confrontation between Brünnhilde and the rest of the Valkyries was compressed into the dialogue for Brünnhilde and Waltraute (Act 1 scene iii); and several passages of narrative now rendered superfluous by *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold* were removed. The first complete draft of *Götterdämmerung* was begun on 2 October 1869 and finished on 10 April 1872. The second complete draft (short score) was made, as with *Siegfried*, in parallel, between 11 January 1870 and 22 July 1872. The full score was finished in Wahnfried on 21 November 1874.

Prologue *The Valkyrie rock (as at the end of 'Siegfried')* The prologue opens with the two chords heard at the awakening of Brünnhilde (*Siegfried*, Act 3), but now in the darker,

mellower tonality of E \flat minor. The Three Norns, daughters of Erda, are weaving the rope of destiny. The First Norn tells how, long ago, Wotan came to drink at the Well of Wisdom, sacrificing an eye as forfeit. He had cut a spear from the trunk of the tree, which had later withered and died. The Second Norn tells how a brave hero broke Wotan's spear in battle; the god then sent heroes from Valhalla to chop down the World Ash. The Third Norn describes how the chopped logs of the World Ash have been piled round Valhalla; one day they will be ignited and the entire hall will be engulfed in flames. Gods and heroes are awaiting that day. As each Norn in turn passes on both rope and narration, the wind and brass intone the theme of the Annunciation of Death (*Walküre*, Act 2 scene iv). The First Norn sees fire burning round the Valkyrie rock and is told that it is Loge fulfilling Wotan's command. A vision of Alberich and the stolen Rhinegold causes the Norns anxiety. To a baleful statement of the Curse motif on the bass trumpet, followed by that of the Twilight of the Gods, the rope breaks.

The Norns descend into the earth and an orchestral interlude evokes sunrise. A pair of themes,

Ex.1



[ex.1](#) (a sturdier form of Siegfried's horn call) and [ex.2](#) (a new theme associated with Brünnhilde), are worked into a climax as the lovers come out of the cave to which they retired at the end of *Siegfried*. Brünnhilde sends Siegfried off on deeds of glory ('Zu neuen Thaten'), urging him to remember their love. A rapturous duet

Ex.2



follows, constructed from [ex.1](#) and [ex.2](#) and other themes associated with the pair and their love and heroism. The vocal lines continue the new style evolved in Act 3 of *Siegfried*, richly ornamented with figurations and melismas. Siegfried gives Brünnhilde the ring as a token of his faithfulness; in exchange, she offers him her horse, Grane.

Another orchestral interlude (colourfully scored, with the glockenspiel and triangle adding to the gaiety) depicts Siegfried's Rhine Journey. It begins with a variant of [ex.1](#) and the hero's progress is suggested by the appearance of the Fire motif and those of the Rhine and Rhinemaidens. In its latter stages, the dark-hued diminished triad of the Ring motif initiates a change of mood (and tonality).

Act 1.i-ii *The hall of the Gibichungs* The action proper begins as Gunther, the chief of the Gibichungs, asks his half-brother Hagen whether his reputation is high: 'Nun hör', Hagen'.

Ex.3



The accompanying motif, that of Hagen ([ex.3](#)), is a stunted form of the heroic octave leap of Siegfried's Forging Song (*Siegfried*, Act 1). Hagen replies that it would be higher if Gunther were to find a wife and Guttrune, his sister, a husband. The galloping Valkyrie motif and that of the fire god Loge are heard as Hagen tells them about Brünnhilde lying on a rock encircled by fire. He suggests that Siegfried would win the bride for Gunther if Guttrune had won him first. Hagen reminds them of a potion they have that would make Siegfried forget any other women.

Siegfried's horn is now heard and Hagen calls down to him (scene ii): his 'Heil! Siegfried', with ominous irony, picks out the notes of the Curse motif, sounded simultaneously on a trio of trombones. Such references have become increasingly oblique in the latter part of the *Ring*: a few bars later, the Curse motif sounds again as Siegfried asks whether Hagen knows him – a reminder of what it is that linked their ancestors. Hagen has to tell Siegfried the purpose of the Tarnhelm he is carrying. Gutrune appears, to a tender new motif ([ex.4](#)



). She offers Siegfried the drugged potion and he, in a gesture pregnant with irony, drinks to the memory of Brünnhilde and their love. An extended trill symbolically shifts the tonality from the A^b of Siegfried's memory to the G of Gutrune's presence. Siegfried is immediately drawn to Gutrune and loses no time in offering himself as her husband. He then offers to win Gunther a wife and as he is told about Brünnhilde high on a rock surrounded by fire, it is clear that he has only the faintest recollection of her. (Trills and tremolando strings evoke both the fire and the haziness of his memory.)

Siegfried proposes to use the Tarnhelm to disguise himself as Gunther in order to bring back Brünnhilde. The idea of swearing blood brotherhood brings forth the motifs of the Curse, the Sword (in a fast, energetic variant) and, less expectedly, that of Wotan's Spear: the symbol of the original contracts that have brought such trouble and strife. Siegfried and Gunther swear their oath: 'Blühenden Lebens labendes Blut', with its duetting in 3rds and 6ths, the first of several reactionary structures in the work. Motivic reference slows down here but does not disappear: the menacing presence of Hagen in the background accounts for both the Ring and Curse motifs and for the effective juxtaposition of falling perfect and diminished 5ths (the former associated with heroism, the latter with evil) at 'blüh' im Trank unser Blut!' Siegfried sets off up the river again, followed by Gunther. The dour Hagen sits guarding the palace, contemplating the satisfactory progress of his scheme to win power: 'Hier sitz' ich zur Wacht'. The falling diminished 5th is now irrevocably associated with him, and the falling semitone, which can be traced back ultimately to Alberich's cries of woe in *Das Rheingold*, here attains its most anguished harmonization.

An orchestral interlude meditating on salient themes effects a transition from Hagen sitting malevolently on watch outside the palace to Brünnhilde sitting in innocent contemplation of Siegfried's ring outside the cave. The introduction of Brünnhilde's [ex.2](#), with lighter scoring, dispels some of the oppressive atmosphere, but there remain enough pungent harmonies to suggest that trouble lies ahead.

1.iii *The Valkyrie rock* There is thunder and lightning and Brünnhilde sees her sister Waltraute approach on a winged horse (much use of the galloping Valkyrie motif). In her delight, Brünnhilde fails to notice Waltraute's agitation: has Wotan perhaps forgiven her? Waltraute explains that she has broken Wotan's command in coming, but sadly he is no longer to be feared. She then narrates ('Seit er von dir geschieden'), to a wealth of motivic reference, how Wotan, as the Wanderer, returned to Valhalla with his spear shattered, how he ordered the heroes to pile up logs from the World Ash Tree, how the gods sit there in fear and dread, and how Wotan longs for the ring to be given back to the Rhinemaidens; it is to persuade Brünnhilde to do this that Waltraute has come. Although stunned by this narration ([ex.5](#) with its anguished leaps is eloquent), Brünnhilde refuses to throw away Siegfried's pledge. The final brief exchange between Brünnhilde and Waltraute is enacted to one of the

numerous little congeries of allusive motifs which distinguish the score of *Götterdämmerung* (in the earlier parts of the *Ring*, motivic references are generally more sparing and explicit).

Waltraute departs in a thundercloud which passes to reveal a calm evening sky. But the peace is illusory. The flames leap up again round the rock and Brünnhilde hears Siegfried's horn. She rushes excitedly to the edge of the cliff and is horrified to find a stranger: Siegfried disguised by the Tarnhelm as Gunther. Her rapturous welcome is abruptly terminated with a discord, remembered from Hagen's Watch, but also identifiable as the 'Tristan chord' at correct pitch. The significance of the interpolation of that pivotal chord from Wagner's intervening opera at Brünnhilde's cry 'Verrath!' – the point at which the hero's love (under the influence of a magic potion, be it noted) is perceived to be false – need hardly be laboured. No less notable is the fact that the 'Tristan chord' turns out to be the G[#] minor of the Tarnhelm motif with the addition of an intensifying diminished 7th (the F). But most extraordinary of all is the fact that the 'Tristan chord' and Tarnhelm motif – both at their original pitch – effect a return to B minor, the key in which the act will end, as it began: a remarkable example of the interaction of local tonal reference with large-scale structural planning. The disguised Siegfried claims Brünnhilde as wife, violently snatches the ring from her finger and forces her into the cave for the night. He places his sword symbolically between them.

Act 2 *On the shore in front of the Gibichung hall* Hagen, sitting outside the palace in a half-sleep, is visited by his father, Alberich: 'Schläfst du, Hagen, mein Sohn?'. The syncopations of Hagen's Watch reappear here, but in B^b, the key of the Nibelungs. Hagen is urged to acquire the ring, and intends to do so, but will swear faithfulness only to himself. Dawn breaks in a loosely canonic passage scored for eight horns (scene ii) and Siegfried returns, now in his own form once more. Gunther is following with Brünnhilde, he says, and he tells Hagen and Guttrune how he braved the fire and overpowered Brünnhilde. He secretly changed places with Gunther and, using the Tarnhelm's magic, returned in an instant.

Hagen summons his vassals (scene iii) with blasts on his horn; his cries of 'Hoiho!' make frequent use of the ubiquitous falling semitone. The vassals rush in from all directions and are intemperately amused when they find out that Hagen has summoned them not for battle but for celebration. Their chorus in C major, with augmented-triad colouring influenced by Hagen – 'Gross Glück und Heil' – is another example of stylistic regression in *Götterdämmerung*, exciting as it can be in the theatre.

Clashing their weapons together, the vassals hail Gunther and his bride (scene iv), 'Heil dir, Gunther!', the switch to B^b possibly in recollection of a more celebrated Bridal March in the same key. To a melancholy reminiscence of the galloping Valkyrie motif, Brünnhilde is led forward, her eyes cast down. Guttrune's motif ([ex.4](#)) is prominent as she comes out of the hall with Siegfried. The sound of Siegfried's name provokes a violent reaction from Brünnhilde, her mute amazement forcefully depicted in the sustained diminished 7th chord that stops the music in its tracks. It starts up again with the anguished contortions of [ex.4](#) and, less predictably, the Destiny motif from the Annunciation of Death in *Die Walküre*. Has Siegfried forgotten his bride, Brünnhilde asks? She sees the ring on his finger and asks how he got it, as it was seized from her by Gunther. Siegfried states simply that he won it by slaying a dragon. Raging against the gods for allowing Siegfried to betray her, Brünnhilde borrows a broad phrase from the Valhalla motif, in the original key of D^b. Siegfried tells how he won Brünnhilde for Gunther and claims that his sword lay between them during the night.

Brünnhilde asserts that Nothung hung on the wall as its master wooed her. Siegfried, pressed by Gunther and the onlookers to declare his innocence, swears on the point of Hagen's spear that he has kept faith with his 'blood-brother': 'Helle Wehr, heilige Waffe!'. His innocently ringing perfect 5ths (both rising and falling) are tellingly offset by Hagen's diminished 5th sounded in the bass. The enraged Brünnhilde swears on the same spear-point that Siegfried has perjured himself. Siegfried calls everyone to the wedding-feast and leads Gutrune into the palace.

Brünnhilde, left alone with Gunther and Hagen, laments Siegfried's treachery (scene v). At first she scorns Hagen's offer to avenge her; the hero would soon make him quake, she says. But then she confides that Siegfried's back would be vulnerable; she gave him no protection there as he would never turn it on an enemy. Gunther bemoans his own disgrace, but initially reacts with horror to Hagen's proposal to strike Siegfried dead (the minatory falling semitones



on trombones are combined with the tortured [ex.5](#) on bassoons and double basses). He is persuaded by the promise of obtaining the ring and it is decided to tell Gutrune that Siegfried was killed by a boar while out hunting. The trio of the conspirators is a stylistic regression that runs contrary to Wagner's *Oper und Drama* principles (the libretto for *Götterdämmerung* in fact preceded the theoretical essays), though there is some attempt to integrate the passage by means of motivic reminiscence: the new oath of vengeance principally recalls the oaths sworn on Hagen's spear earlier in the act. Siegfried and Gutrune reappear from the palace and a wedding procession forms. The celebratory C major is chillingly darkened in the final bars by the intervention of the falling semitone on trombones in combination with [ex.5](#) a tritone away from the main key.

Act 3.i-ii *Wild woodland and rocky valley by the bank of the Rhine* Siegfried's horn call is heard first in the orchestra and then in the distance, supposedly sounded by Siegfried out hunting. It is answered by the horn call of the Gibichungs (an inverted form). The ominous falling semitone and tritone from the end of the previous act are heard, but then the lyrical music of the Rhinemaidens supervenes. They are playing in the river, singing of the lost gold. Siegfried, having lost his way, stumbles on them and they playfully ask him for the ring on his finger; he refuses. Then he relents, but when they tell him of the dangers the curse-laden ring brings he says he will not succumb to threats. The Rhinemaidens abandon the 'fool', leaving Siegfried to meditate on the oddity of women's behaviour.

Hagen's voice and falling semitone are heard, and Siegfried calls the hunting party over (scene ii). He tells them that the only game he has seen was three wild water-birds, who told him he would be murdered that day. Siegfried drinks jovially from a horn, but Gunther can see only Siegfried's blood in his. Siegfried is asked to tell the story of his life, and he begins with his upbringing by the ill-tempered Mime (to the ostinato of the Nibelungs' motif): 'Mime hiess ein mürrischer Zwerg'. The dwarf taught him smithing, but it was his own skills that enabled him to forge Nothung, with which he killed the dragon Fafner (the Sword and Dragon motifs are heard). As yet Siegfried has no trouble in recalling the past. Swirling augmented harmonies conjure the enchantment of the world he is describing. He tells how the taste of the dragon's blood enabled him to understand the song of the woodbird, and the Forest Murmurs are recalled. The bird had warned him of Mime's treachery and he had despatched the scheming dwarf.

Hagen hands him a drugged drink which he says will help him to remember what happened next. The music, recalling the trills of the potion he was given in Act 1, tell us that memories have indeed been stimulated: where the trills previously led to the theme of Gutrune, now they soar into a theme remembered from the prologue duet, closely followed by the Brünnhilde motif, [ex.2](#). To the appropriate motifs, and in an increasingly ecstatic state as he relives the traumatic but forgotten experience, Siegfried relates how he was led to a high rock surrounded by fire; there he found the sleeping Brünnhilde, whom he awoke with a kiss. The expected C major resolution is thwarted by Gunther's tritonal expression of dismay. Two ravens fly overhead and, as Siegfried looks up, Hagen plunges his spear in his back. Brass instruments thunder out the Curse motif and Hagen's falling semitone; one of Siegfried's heroic motifs is hurled out by the entire orchestra, but it reaches its climax on a discord and finally collapses on to the repeated-note, tattoo figure that is to become the basis of the Funeral March. The themes and radiant C major tonality of Brünnhilde's awakening (*Siegfried*, Act 3) are recalled, and Siegfried dies with Brünnhilde's name on his lips.

Siegfried's Funeral March represents a motivic pageant of his life and ancestry, as his body is carried off by vassals in a solemn procession. Themes associated with the Volsungs and their love are followed by a grand statement of the Sword motif in its original C major (on a trumpet), and by the motifs of Siegfried and his heroism, ending with a triumphant transformation, in E \flat , of [ex.1](#).

3.iii *The hall of the Gibichungs* Gutrune comes out of her room into the hall. She thinks she hears Siegfried's horn, but he has not returned. She has seen Brünnhilde walking towards the Rhine, and is anxious. Hagen is heard approaching ('Hoiho!', on falling semitones over [ex.5](#)) and Siegfried's corpse is brought in. She accuses Gunther of murdering him, but he blames Hagen, who claims – to the music of the oath-swearing – to have killed him for committing perjury; Hagen steps forward to seize the ring and when Gunther stands in his way, he is murdered by Hagen. Hagen tries again to take the ring, but as he approaches Siegfried, the dead man's hand rises into the air, to the horror of all. The Sword motif, in its other primary key of D major, makes a quietly noble intervention, but gives way to the motif of the Twilight of the Gods.

Brünnhilde enters with calm dignity and tells how Siegfried swore her an eternal oath. Gutrune curses Hagen and prostrates herself over Gunther's body, where she remains, motionless, until the end. Brünnhilde orders logs to be gathered to make a funeral pyre worthy of the hero ('Starke Scheite'). Loge's motif blazes in eager anticipation. She sings of her betrayal by this noblest, most faithful of men. Addressing Wotan in Valhalla, she says that Siegfried's death has atoned for his guilt and has brought her enlightenment through sorrow. This quietly reflective passage is rounded off by a statement, no longer threatening, of the Curse motif and a sublime resolution in D \flat , the ultimate goal of the cycle ('Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott!'). She takes Siegfried's ring, promising that it will be returned to the Rhinemaidens, whose carefree music is now heard. She hurls a blazing torch on to the pile of logs, which immediately ignites. Greeting her horse Grane (to recollections of the galloping Valkyrie motif), she mounts it and rides into the flames. The exultant theme sung by Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* on hearing of her future son's destiny ('O hehrstes Wunder') returns now to crown

the peroration: Wagner referred to this motif as ‘the glorification of Brünnhilde’ ([ex.6](#))

Ex.6



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The whole building seems to catch fire and the men and women press to the front of the stage in terror. Suddenly the fire dies down and the Rhine bursts its banks, flooding the entire space. On the appearance of the Rhinemaidens, Hagen leaps into the water in pursuit of the ring. To the sound of the Curse motif, they drag him down into the depths and hold up the ring in triumph. The water-level falls again and from the ruins of the palace, which has collapsed, the men and women watch a burst of firelight as it rises into the sky. Eventually it illuminates the hall of Valhalla, where gods and heroes are seen assembled. The Valhalla motif is naturally prominent here, and those of the Rhinemaidens and the Glorification of Brünnhilde are symbolically intertwined. To the sound of the motifs of the Twilight of the Gods and, finally, the Glorification of Brünnhilde in a radiant D^b major, Valhalla is engulfed in flames: the long-awaited end of the gods has come to pass.

The final opera of the *Ring*, a long evening's performance in its own right, provides an appropriately weighty conclusion to the epic cycle. 26 years elapsed from the time Wagner made his first prose draft for the work (then called *Siegfrieds Tod*) to the completion of the full score, with inevitable consequences in terms of stylistic unity. Retrogressive elements of grand opera exist side by side with motivic integration representative of Wagner's most mature style. And yet, the stylistic integrity of *Götterdämmerung* is scarcely compromised, so skilfully are the disparate elements welded together and so intense the dramaturgical conviction. The resources and stamina demanded by the work (from both singers and orchestra), combined with its sheer length and theatrical potency, make it one of the most daunting yet rewarding undertakings in the operatic repertory.

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