

Ring des Nibelungen, Der

(‘The Nibelung’s Ring’).

Bühnenfestpiel (‘stage festival play’) for three days and a preliminary evening by Richard Wagner (see [Wagner family, \(1\)](#)) to his own libretto; Bayreuth, Festspielhaus, first performance as a cycle: *Das Rheingold*, 13 August 1876; *Die Walküre*, 14 August 1876; *Siegfried*, 16 August 1876; *Götterdämmerung*, 17 August 1876.

Contrary to Wagner’s claim that he turned away from historical subjects on discovering the potentialities of myth for his future music dramas, myth and history were interwoven in the *Ring* from the beginning. Not only was he working on his historical drama *Friedrich I*, begun in 1846, as late as 1848–9, but he was also making speculative connections between the stories of the Hohenstaufen emperor and the Nibelung hoard. Those supposed connections were formulated in the essay *Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage*. And although it was previously supposed that *Die Wibelungen* preceded the initial prose résumé and libretto for what became the *Ring*, it is now considered more likely that it succeeded them, probably about mid-February 1849 (see Deathridge, Geck and Voss 1986).

The chief sources Wagner drew on for the *Ring* are as follows: the Poetic (or Elder) Edda, the *Völsunga Saga* and the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson (all three of which were compiled in Iceland, probably in the first half of the 13th century); *Das Nibelungenlied*, an epic poem written in Middle High German c1200; and *Thidreks Saga af Bern*, a prose narrative written c1260–70 in Old Norse. Wagner also read copiously around the subject (see Magee 1990) and was indebted to the work of such scholars as Karl Lachmann, Franz Joseph Mone, Ludwig Ettmüller and the Grimm brothers.

Greek drama was also a major influence, not least in its use of mythology, its life-affirming idealism and the religious aura surrounding its performance. The *Oresteia* suggested not only the structure of a trilogy (*Das Rheingold* was merely a ‘preliminary evening’), but also the confrontations of pairs of characters, the possibility of linking successive episodes with the themes of guilt and a curse, and perhaps even the leitmotif principle (in Aeschylus’s use of recurrent imagery). There are also important parallels between the *Ring* and the *Prometheus* trilogy, especially as reconstructed by its German translator, Johann Gustav Droysen.

Wagner outlined a prose résumé for his drama, dated 4 October 1848, which in his collected writings he called *Der Nibelungen-Mythus: als Entwurf zu einem Drama* (the original manuscript is headed *Der Nibelungensage (Mythus)*). In this résumé the drama centres on Siegfried’s death, and, at the conclusion, Brünnhilde purges the guilt of the gods by an act of self-immolation, allowing them to reign in glory instead of perishing. The story at this stage largely follows the order familiar from the finished work, but in autumn 1848 Wagner next compiled a libretto for *Siegfrieds Tod* (originally spelt *Siegfried’s Tod*). This created so much back-narration of earlier events, however, that he subsequently, in 1851, wrote *Der junge Siegfried* (originally *Jung-Siegfried*), and finally *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold* (1851–2). Returning to revise *Der junge Siegfried* and *Siegfrieds Tod* in the light of the whole cycle, Wagner replaced Siegfried as the central figure by Wotan, and altered the ending so that the gods and Valhalla are all destroyed by fire. *Der junge Siegfried* and *Siegfrieds Tod* were eventually renamed *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Thus the librettos of the constituent

parts of the *Ring* cycle were written in reverse order, though the original conception was in the 'correct' order, as was the composition of the music.

The principals in the first three cycles given at Bayreuth in August 1876 included: Franz Betz (Wotan/Wanderer), Amalie Materna (Brünnhilde), Georg Unger (Siegfried), Albert Niemann (Siegmund), Josephine Schefsky (Sieglinde), Karl Hill (Alberich), Friederike Sadler-Grün (Fricka) and Luise Jaide (Erda). The conductor was Hans Richter. The tetralogy was not heard again at Bayreuth until 1896, when it was conducted by Richter, Felix Mottl and Siegfried Wagner. Complete cycles were given in Munich in 1878, Vienna in 1879 and Hamburg in 1880. Following the success of his production in Leipzig in 1878, Angelo Neumann took it on a Europe-wide tour with his travelling theatre, beginning in 1882. The first complete cycle in Britain was given at Her Majesty's, London, in 1882, in German, with Anton Seidl conducting, Emil Scaria as Wotan/Wanderer and Albert Niemann as Siegmund. Not until 1908 was it given in London in English, in uncut performances under the baton of Hans Richter. The first complete cycle in the USA was given at the Metropolitan in 1889, with Lilli Lehmann as Brünnhilde; the conductor was Seidl.

Notable Wotan/Wanderers have included Van Rooy, Schorr, Bockelmann, Hotter, Adam, McIntyre, Bailey and Morris. Brünnhilde has been sung by Lilli Lehmann, Nordica, Turner, Austral, Leider, Lubin, Flagstad, Varnay, Nilsson, Hunter and Gwyneth Jones. Interpreters of Siegfried have included Jean de Reszke, Melchior, Max Lorenz, Windgassen, Jess Thomas, Suthaus, Alberto Remedios, René Kollo, Jung and Jerusalem. Siegmund has been sung by Niemann, Svanholm, Vinay, James King, Windgassen, Vickers, Alberto Remedios, Peter Hofmann and Jerusalem. Sieglinde has been sung by Lilli Lehmann, Nordica, Ternina, Jeritza, Lotte Lehmann, Flagstad, Varnay, Rysanek, Crespín and Norman. Notable conductors of the *Ring* have included Richter, Mottl, Seidl, Mahler, Nikisch, Bodanzky, Coates, Walter, Beecham, Furtwängler, Solti, Karajan, Goodall, Böhm, Boulez, Colin Davis, Barenboim, Haitink and Levine.

Interpretations of the *Ring*, both literary and dramaturgical, have ranged from those that explore the work's social and political context to those that focus on its imagery and mythological content, denying any political ramifications. Shaw's classic interpretation of the *Ring* (1898) as a socialist allegory has been hugely influential, as has Donington's radically different analysis of the work in terms of Jungian psychology (1963). Taking their cue perhaps from Shaw, a series of radical stagings in the 1970s and 80s attempted to demythologize the work, emphasizing the corruption and debased moral values by which the gods, and in particular Wotan, are tainted. Recent productions have also dwelt on feminist and ecological aspects of the *Ring*.

See also [Götterdämmerung](#); [Rheingold, das](#); [Siegfried](#); and [Walküre, die](#).

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