

The Rhinegold

“Das Rheingold”

Music drama with a Prologue and four scenes

Music composed by Richard Wagner

Drama written by Richard Wagner

Premiere: Hoftheater in Munich, 1869

The Rhinegold is the first music drama, or Prelude for the cycle, The Ring of the Nibelung , “Der Ring des Nibelungen.”

**Adapted from the
*Opera Journeys Lecture Series***

**by
Burton D. Fisher**

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Principal Characters in The Rhinegold

In the ancient Norse and Teutonic myths and legends, the world consisted of three realms: the underworld, inhabited by the Nibelung smiths; the earth's surface, inhabited by Giants and mortals; and the skies and heights, inhabited by the Gods.

Gods:

Wotan, ruler of the Gods	Bass-baritone
Fricka, wife of Wotan, and Goddess of marriage	Mezzo-soprano
Loge, demi-God of fire	Tenor
Freia, Goddess of eternal youth, Sister of Fricka	Soprano
Donner, God of thunder, wind, lightning, brother of Fricka	Baritone
Froh, God of fields and rain, brother of Fricka	Tenor
Erda, Goddess of wisdom	Contralto

Nibelung Dwarfs:

Alberich, a smith	Baritone
Mime, brother of Alberich, a smith	Tenor

Giants:

Fasolt, brother of Fafner	Bass
Fafner, brother of Fasolt	Bass

Rhinemaidens:

Woglinde	Soprano
Wellgunde	Mezzo-soprano
Flosshilde	Mezzo-soprano

Story Synopsis and Overview

The *Ring* cycle begins with *The Rhinegold*, designated a Prologue by Wagner: musical imagery portrays the world's creation; the cycle ends with the world's destruction. At the beginning there is a primordial wasteland in which there is water, and surging arpeggios convey its flow and unceasing rise. Wagner was said to have remarked to Franz Liszt that his opening for *Rhinegold* was like "the beginning of the world."

Water is a primal element from which, science claims, all life evolved. Instinctive early man was in harmony with nature; uncorrupted, unthinking, unaware, and wedded in a lost innocence and union with his natural world. But civilization progressed and evolved, and nature's creatures of instinct who were previously unencumbered by thought, broke their bonds and rose to consciousness; Prometheus daringly stole fire for mankind, and Adam ate the apple that brought knowledge. In his new state of consciousness, man became liberated and separated from nature, and proceeded to embark on humanity's eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil.

Wagner's *Ring* is populated by three human forces: Gods, Giants, and Dwarfs, all rivals locked in eternal combat in their pursuit of wealth and power; in their quest, they become corrupt, immoral, and degenerate.

These forces are metaphorically classes in 19th century industrialized Europe.

First, there is a race of Giants, symbolically the bourgeoisie, who are indolent, stupid, and aspire only to live in the protection and safety of their wealth.

Second, there are the Dwarfs, and in particular, the evil Alberich, who represents the incarnation of all forces of materialism. He possesses misdirected intelligence, and is evil and cunning, consumed only with the acquisition of wealth, power, and world domination.

Third, there are the Gods, headed by their supreme ruler, Wotan. He represents the incarnation of corrupt political power, and is supposedly modeled on the King of Saxony, Frederick Augustus I.

The Gods are lofty spirits who attempt to wield their power to maintain order and benefit the world;

to “bind the elements by wise laws and devote themselves to the careful nurture of the human race.” They are ordained to rescue the world from the threatening evils of the Giants and the Dwarfs, but in the process, they themselves become morally flawed, unethical, and unscrupulous, achieving their goals not by reconciliation and persuasion, but by using force, cunning, and deceit. The Gods strive for an exalted world order that is intended to invoke moral consciousness, but they elevate self-interest above conscience and become absorbed in the evil against which they fight; ultimately they become as despicably evil, villainous, and immoral as their enemies.

Scene 1: The Rhinemaidens, guardians of the Gold, praise the new-born world with innocence and sweetness: “wonder,” “wander,” “water.”

The unsavory Alberich appears, the driving force in the *Ring*: he is the Nibelung Dwarf in the title, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Alberich is ugly, awkward, and deformed, but behind his physical exterior he has human desires, and the Rhinemaidens cause sensations of love to rise within him. The maidens taunt and tempt him, and he pursues them with lust, but after they mock him with heartless contempt, their rejection of him transforms his desires into frustration, bitterness, and anger.

Alberich becomes distracted by the uncanny radiance of glowing Gold, and the Rhinemaidens tell him that a man who steals their Gold and fashions a Ring from it can achieve mastery of the world. Suddenly, the spurned Alberich’s bitterness transforms into hope: if he cannot master the inner world of his yearnings and desires, with Gold and power he can master the external world; a wealth that can satisfy his desires by buying love from any mortal woman.

With indiscretion, the Rhinemaidens inform Alberich how to steal their Gold, coaxing him that if he renounces love, he can learn the secret that will enable him to fashion an all-powerful Ring from the Gold; with the Ring, he can achieve mastery over the world. Alberich, propelled by greed and power, accepts his destiny. In a terrifying moment, consciously and deliberately, he renounces love, and then steals the Gold; for Alberich, the Gold will

become the ultimate resource he will use for evil purposes.

Wagner poured all the evils of capitalism into the creation of Alberich: the treasure he stole will become a means toward “measureless power”; the domination of society. Unable to find love, he deliberately rejected love altogether, and he will strive toward becoming a lawless totalitarian power, a destructive pursuit that will avenge his frustrations. With his new wealth, Alberich will vie for world power against Wotan and the Gods.

Scene 2: The God-head, Wotan, and his wife, Fricka, Goddess of wedlock, await their entry into their new impregnable fortress, Valhalla, built for them by the Giants, Fafner and Fasolt.

Wotan’s Spear is the symbol of his moral power; on its shaft are engraved the Laws of human conduct. He acquired his wisdom by drinking from the Well of Wisdom, his self-emancipation from nature, and his first step in the acquisition of consciousness. Immediately, he “sinned” by committing a willful and violent act against nature; he split a branch of the World Ash-Tree and engraved his Spear-shaft with Treaties and Laws; thereafter, the Well dwindled and the despoiled and impoverished Ash-Tree died. Wagner commented on Wotan’s “sin” against nature and his rise to consciousness: “But error is the father of knowledge, and the history of the beginning of knowledge on error is the history of the human race, from the myths of earlier times down to the present day.” Nevertheless, Wotan ruled society with his Law-laden Spear that provided him “divine infallibility”; his conscious Will to control, sustain, rule, and even exploit the world.

In payment to the Giants for building Valhalla, Wotan promised Freia, the Goddess of eternal youth, a promise he disingenuously hoped he would not be called upon to honor. Wotan regards the Giants with contempt, coarse creatures of low intelligence, physically repulsive, but good laborers. When the Giants demand their fee, he is loathe to surrender Freia, for her golden apples provide the Gods with eternal youth.

Fricka, like Wotan, is a moral paradox, not free of ordinary human weaknesses, yet her God-role

represents moral conscience. She reproaches Wotan for the levity with which he offered Freia to the Giants, as well as building the fortress to ensure his mastery of the world. However, Fricka indeed urged him to build Valhalla for purely selfish reasons, hoping that the new fortress would bind her errant husband more closely to home.

Loge, the crafty God of fire, makes his long-anticipated arrival after having promised Wotan that then the time arose, he would contrive an alternative payment to the Giants.

Like all gods in mythology, Loge is ambivalent. As the fire God he is the patron of smiths, and the servant of man needing the benefits of fire. But in Norse mythology, Loge grew progressively evil, becoming a mischief-maker, an arch-trickster, and “The first father of falsehood.” He was the son of Giants, and therefore a half-God or demi-God, who refers to himself in relation to the Gods, as “half as glorious as you glorious ones!”, preferring to remain aloof from them, and an objective moral mirror of their consciences. Nevertheless, he despises the Gods, resents their superiority, satirizes them, relishes every opportunity to endanger them, exploits their needs and goals, manipulates them, and longs for their destruction.

Loge remains detached from the struggle between Gods, Giants, and Dwarfs, and seemingly has no ambition for power. Certainly, he has no respect for the Gods’ solemn contracts, and is cynical when he addresses ethical issues. But symbolically, Loge represents pure intelligence, an attribute that enables him to see things clearly: therefore, of all the Gods, Wotan seems to be his only friend, and most in need of his artfulness. Loge appears in human form in *Rhinegold*; afterwards, he appears only as the elemental force of fire.

Loge arrives as the Gods’ messenger of news. He relates that Alberich stole the Gold from the Rhinemaidens, that he has forged the Ring, and that he has enslaved the Nibelungs. His awesome story about the Ring’s power tempts both the Gods and the Giants, but in particular, it arouses their fear that Alberich will turn that power against them. Loge suggests Alberich’s Hoard as an alternative payment

to the Giants; immediately, the Giants succumb to the lure and accept. As ransom, the Giants take Freia away, and as she disappears, the Gods suddenly find their youth and strength fading; they no longer have Freia's youth-preserving Apples. It only remains for Wotan, with the cunning help of Loge, to agree to steal the treasure from Alberich, pay the Giants, and rescue Freia.

Paradoxically, Fricka gladly and willingly approves of the forthcoming theft, inspired by a promise of golden trinkets for female adornment from the treasures of the Nibelungs. Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim to steal the Gold from Alberich.

Scene 3: In Nibelheim, Alberich has enslaved the Nibelung Dwarfs, and has forced his brother, Mime, to craft a Tarnhelm that will enable him to metamorphose into any shape, or become invisible. With wealth, might, and magical powers, Alberich is determined to dominate the world. But the magically endowed Tarnhelm becomes Alberich's undoing when Wotan and Loge coax him into making himself invisible, and capture him after he transforms himself into a toad. The victors, Wotan and Loge, ascend from Nibelheim with their victim, Alberich.

Scene 4: The defeated Alberich is forced to summon his Nibelung Dwarfs to surrender the Gold to the Gods. Wotan forcibly wrests the Ring from Alberich, but before departing, Alberich invokes a Curse of death upon anyone who shall possess the Ring, and envy to those who do not: it is a Curse that will haunt all future possessors of the Ring throughout the drama. Nevertheless, Wotan has become guilty of theft and deceit: he has stolen from a thief, but that does not condone his act of thievery.

The wise earth Goddess, Erda, appears, the prophetess whose wisdom provides her with foresight of the beginnings and ends of all things. She persuades Wotan to return the Ring, but also implies in riddles that the Gods will fall.

The two Giants, Fafner and Fasolt, quarrel over the Hoard, and immediately, Alberich's curse on the Ring is fulfilled: Fafner slays his brother and leaves with the Hoard, planning to disappear to a cave where

he will protect the Hoard by transforming himself with the magic of the Tarnhelm into a Dragon.

The Gods enter their new fortress of Valhalla but Loge remains remote from them while he predicts their doom; in the Rhine below, the Rhinemaidens lament the loss of their Gold.

Wotan relishes his momentary glory but is fearful about the turn of events that threatens the power of the Gods and the world. He realizes that he must find a way to wrest the Gold from Fafner and return it to its primal innocence in the waters of the Rhine, thus cleansing the Ring of Alberich's curse. However, he cannot violate his Spear's Laws and act against Fafner using force, yet he must prevent Alberich from seizing the Ring, Tarnhelm, and Gold from Fafner.

Wotan contrives the idea of creating a hero, independent of his Will, who could overcome Fafner and rescue the treasure. His thoughts turn to a powerful Sword, a weapon possessing divine lineage and endowed with magical powers that will provide the needs for a future hero.

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

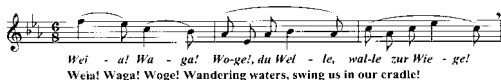
Scene 1: *The Rhinegold* unfolds with musical images of the primordial world at the beginning of creation. From water, the Rhine itself evolved, and its waters gain strength and motion, suggesting the movement of waves and flooding.

Nature: The Rhine



Scene 1: The misty lower depths of the Rhine are saturated with rock fissures and crags. Woglinde, a Rhinemaiden, greets the waters while swimming gracefully around a large rock whose peak is clearly visible in the upper waters.

Greeting the Waters



Wellgunde and Flosshilde respond merrily, but Flosshilde chides them for their carelessness in maintaining their vigil on the “sleeping Gold.”

While the Rhinemaidens delight in their innocent diversion, the hunchbacked Nibelung Dwarf, Alberich, emerges from a dark cavern and watches their frolicking with ever-increasing pleasure. He calls out to the maidens, telling them that he comes from Nibelheim, the darkest caverns of the earth, which he would gladly abandon if he could share their merriment and love. The Rhinemaidens recoil and elude him, reminding each other that their father warned them to beware of such ugly and repulsive creatures.

When Alberich pursues the Rhinemaidens lustily, they taunt and tease him, and when he tries to grasp them he slips awkwardly on the slimy crags, prompting the maiden’s laughter. Frustrated, he loses his temper and condemns them, concluding that love will always elude him. Nevertheless, he continues to pursue them with a sensual fury, and their defiance

and evasion compounds his avenging fury: he calls them “cold and bony fish” who should “take eels for their lovers.”

Flosshilde pretends to take pity on the Dwarf and disarms him with cajolery and deception, promising him that he will be more successful with her than with her sisters; with her, he will enjoy the passions of genuine love. She tells Alberich, “Oh, the sting of your glance and your stiff scrubby beard, I would like to feel it forever! And might the locks of your hair, so shaggy and wild, float around Flosshilde forever! And your toad’s shape and the croak of your voice! Oh, might I be dazzled and amazed to see and hear nothing else but these!”

Flosshilde heartlessly taunts the Dwarf by embracing him and then brusquely rejecting him, prompting her sisters to burst into raucous laughter. Alberich becomes totally discouraged and enraged and vows to seize at least one of them, but they elude him as he again slips awkwardly on the rocks. Derided and rejected, he indicates his fury by vengefully shaking his menacing fist at them.

Alberich’s attention is suddenly drawn to a dazzling glow that he perceives in the waters above; it is the sleeping Rhinegold awakening.

The sleeping Rhinegold



The Rhinemaiden’s swim around the Gold gracefully, praising its radiance with joy and rapture.

The Rhinegold



Alberich, struck with awe, inquires about the Gold’s significance. The maidens invite him to join them to praise its magnificence, but he rejects their childish games. However, they assure him that the Gold possesses limitless powers, and reveal that anyone who wins the Gold and fashions a Ring from it would become master of the world.

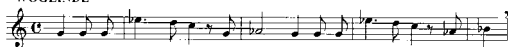
The Ring



Flosshilde admonishes her sisters, reminding them that their father warned them to guard the Gold carefully lest some robber seize it and use its powers for evil. But Wellgunde and Woglinde express their confidence that they have nothing to fear from this lascivious lusting imp who is visibly tormented and too preoccupied with his passion for love: he would certainly never renounce love to obtain the secret to mastering a Ring from the Gold. Woglinde announces, “He who forswears the power of love, he who forbears the delights of love, he alone can master the magic that makes a Ring from the Gold.”

The Renunciation of love

WOGLINDE



Nur wer der Min - ne Macht ver - sagt, nur wer der Lie - be Lust ver - jagt,
He who the power of love forswears, from all delights of love forbears,

Confidently, the Rhinemaidens assure themselves that no one in all creation would ever forswear the delights of love. Ironically, they invite Alberich to join them in their merriment, for the Gold’s radiance even seems to have improved the imp’s hideous form. Meanwhile, Alberich’s eyes remain fixed solidly on the Gold, his devious mind contemplating the wealth and power he could obtain if he knew the secret of fashioning the all-powerful Ring: “Through your magic, I could win the world’s wealth for my own? If love is to be denied me, my cunning shall win me the Gold’s delight? Keep mocking me! The Nibelung comes near your toy!”

With a demonic laugh, Alberich springs toward the summit of the rock and stretches out his hand towards the Gold. Solemnly and triumphantly, he renounces love: “My hand quenches your light. I wrest the Gold from the rock, and will fashion the Ring of revenge. Hear me flooded waters: henceforth love shall be accursed forever!”

The Rhinemaidens scatter before him in terror. Alberich seizes the Gold and plunges with it into the

depths of the Rhine, his sinister mocking laughter heard as he disappears from sight, deaf to the lamenting cries of the Rhinemaidens.

Scene II: On a mountain height

As day dawns, the waves of the Rhine gradually transform into clouds. A fine mist slowly disperses to reveal a bright, open space atop a mountain. Visible in the background is the majestic, newly built fortress of Valhalla; in the foreground Wotan and Fricka sleep on a flowery bank; between them and the fortress the broad Rhine flows.

Wotan dreams blissfully of the splendid fortress that has been built for the Gods; a majestic stronghold and testament to his power from where he will rule the world with might and eternal glory. He conceived the citadel in his dreams and called it into being through his Will.

Valhalla



Fricka does not share her husband's illusions about power, for what fills him with pride, overcomes her with fear and dread. She rouses Wotan from what she calls his "deceptive dream" and exhorts him to become realistic about the crisis she senses will soon overcome the Gods: the fortress has been completed but he has not fulfilled his promise to pay the Giants for building it. He callously and capriciously promised to pay the Giants with Freia, her sister and Goddess of youth, beauty, health, and charm, but failed to consult with her and the other Gods before making such a foolishly trade.

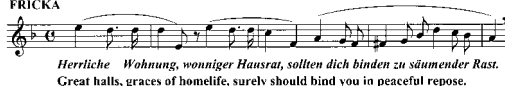
Fricka chides Wotan for his heartlessness in sacrificing a Goddess of love for "the garish toy of empire and power," trading love and woman's virtue to gratify his lust for power and dominion. But Wotan assures her that he never intended to relinquish Freia to the Giants.

Wotan's Laws, Treaties, and Compacts

Wotan assuages Fricka's fears, admonishing her that he has entrusted Loge, the cunning and unscrupulous God of fire, to fulfill his promise to solve the problem when the hour of reckoning should arise. He further reminds Fricka that she indeed favored the building of Valhalla, but her motivations were selfish; she believed that the new fortress would keep her errant and philandering husband at home.

Love's Enchantment

FRICKA



As they speak, Freia arrives, breathlessly and in fright and terror.

Freia

Conflicted and emotional, Freia calls on Wotan and Fricka to save her since she is defenseless against the Giants who pursue her for their promised payment. Wotan calms her, assuring her that Loge will soon arrive to resolve the problem. Fricka scornfully reproaches Wotan for his continued trust in that despicable trickster who has already caused the Gods such harm; nevertheless, Wotan remains self-assured, admitting that when wisdom fails, the intelligent Loge's artfulness and cunning succeed. Wotan affirms his faith in the wily rogue who initially advised him to pledge Freia to the Giants in payment for Valhalla, but who also assured him that he would find a way to annul the promise.

Freia calls desperately to her brothers, Donner and Froh, to come to her aid, convinced that Wotan has abandoned her. And Fricka compounds Freia's distress, telling her somberly that the Gods have

woven a net of treachery about her and have forsaken her.

Suddenly, the Giants arrive, Fasolt and Fafner, huge coarse and unkempt men who trod noisily while brandishing large clubs.

Giants



Fasolt is milder in nature than his brother, Fafner, and alternates between his anger at Wotan and the tenderness he feels toward Freia. Fafner is more uncouth and brutish, but his interest in Freia is only to use her as a hostage to secure payment, knowing full well that without Freia's youth-perpetuating Apples, the Gods will wither and die.

Fasolt respectfully and patiently explains that the Giants toiled endlessly, piled heavy stone upon heavy stone, and now that the resplendent fortress is completed, the Gods can pay them their wages. The Giants remind Wotan that he agreed that Freia was their payment, but Wotan contemptuously rejects their demand, denouncing it as ludicrous, and asking them to request another payment.

Fasolt remains momentarily dazed and speechless, but then inquires if the solemn Laws engraved on Wotan's Spear are nothing more than a mockery. Fafner, more realistic, turns to his brother and sneeringly points out the Gods' lack of scruples.

Fasolt solemnly warns Wotan of the consequences if he fails to honor their agreement, reminding the God that his power rests in his virtue in honoring his treaties, and if he renounces his promise, his wisdom shall be cursed and the peace between the Giants and the Gods will end. But Wotan waves Fasolt's admonition airily aside, telling him that the bargain was made in jest, and certainly that boors like the Giant are unable to appreciate the beautiful Goddess's charm and grace.

Angrily, Fasolt accuses Wotan of mocking them and repeats their agreement. They toiled hard to win a woman, and as he speaks of Freia's charm and grace his coarseness transforms into tenderness. But the

brutal Fafner interjects contemptuously and admonishes his brother to cease arguing with these arrogant and unscrupulous Gods: they will wrest Freia from them, and without her golden Apples they will age, weaken, and waste away.

Freia's Golden Apples



Wotan becomes fearful and anxious, and wonders why Loge has not arrived yet. Meanwhile, he asks the Giants to demand another wage, but Fasolt again refuses. As both Giants try to seize Freia, she cries for help and runs to her brothers, Donner and Froh. Froh throws a protecting arm around Freia, and Donner, the God of thunder, places himself before the Giants, brandishing his hammer and threatening them. Amidst Freia's wailing that she has been forsaken Wotan intervenes, stretches out his Spear between the disputants to avoid a conflict, and commands them to cease their quarreling: force will not serve them. He implores the Giants to trust him, assuring them that he is bound by his Law-laden Spear through which he rules the world; if he were to break a single Treaty, his power would be ended forever.

Wotan's Spear



Wotan turns away from the Giants in anger and disgust. As he looks anxiously toward the valley he sees a glimmer of flame and a nimble figure clad in fluttering garments who leaps from rock to rock as he nears them.

Loge: the crafty demi-God



Loge has finally arrived. He is cunning, artful, and full of malicious mischief: he is a different God from the others who lives in another element in which he is not subject to their limitations; he is a restless, elusive spirit who sweeps homeless through the world and wanders wherever his fancy leads him.

Loge caused Wotan to enter the potentially disastrous agreement with the Giants but promised that he would find a substitute payment for Freia. Wotan confronts Loge, and he glibly raises his hands in cynical protest, denying that he made any such promises to the Gods. Wotan reproves Loge's levity, roguishness, and shifty philosophy, cautioning him that he should beware not to deceive him, but the duplicitous Loge protests that all he had sworn was that he would ponder the problem and consider a solution.

The other Gods become revolted by Loge's heartless cynicism: Fricka angrily reproaches Wotan for placing faith in this treacherous knave; Froh tells him that he should be called "not Loge but Lüge" ("lies"); and Donner threateningly vows that he will put out his light.

Loge remains contemptuous, considering the Gods fools whose accusations are a subterfuge for their own gross errors.

Wotan steps between the feuding Gods to make peace, diplomatically admonishing them not to affront his friend Loge; after all, he assures them, the slower Loge is to give counsel the craftier he becomes.

In "Loge's Narration," he mockingly reminds the Gods that they are ungrateful, continuously failing to reward him for his great deeds and wonderful achievements. However, he has truly devoted his serious energy to resolving their problem, and has searched unceasingly through the world for a substitute ransom for Freia that might satisfy the Giants.

Loge relates the story about Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold. The sorrowful maidens of the Rhine told him how the Nibelung Dwarf, having sought their favors in vain, solemnly renounced love and then robbed them of the Gold. The Rhinemaidens implored Loge to advise Wotan of their loss, punish the thief, recover the Gold, and return it to the waters from

where it had been ravished. Complacently and ironically, Loge proudly attests to his integrity; he has kept his promise and related the Rhinemaiden's grief to the Gods.

But Wotan is more concerned with his own pressing needs than with the Rhinemaiden's Gold. However, Loge's revelation about the Gold provokes the Giants' fascination and thought: Fasolt expresses his displeasure at the Nibelung Dwarf who has always wronged them yet always evaded their grasp. Loge further explains that when the Gold slept in the waters of the Rhine it was merely a novelty that provided sport for the maidens of the deep, but when it was fashioned into a Ring it conferred measureless might on its possessor that could enable him to master the world. Fafner expresses his conviction that if the Dwarf possesses the power of the Gold he will be brewing mischief for all of them.

Fricka asks if the Gold provides adornment for women, and Loge, with his usual craftiness, explains that the woman who possesses the golden trinkets which the Nibelungs have made from the Gold could ensure her husband's faithfulness. Fricka turns enthusiastically to Wotan, cajoles him, and urges him to win the Gold, motivated by a possible solution to her marital problems.

Wotan asks Loge by what power the Ring is fashioned, and Loge explains that the magic force is learned by forswearing love; however, the Gold is now beyond their reach because Alberich fearlessly renounced love, won its magic spell, and has cast the Ring. Loge's revelation causes fear to overcome the Gods and they become struck with terror and horror: Donner predicts that they will all become enslaved by the Dwarf if the all-powerful Ring is not wrested from him; Wotan recognizes the importance of wresting the Ring from Alberich; and Froh expresses his confidence that the Gods can seize the Ring without any of them forswearing love.

Loge concurs with Froh: "By theft! What a thief stole, you steal from the thief. Could anything be simpler? But Alberich guards himself with cunning weapons; to return the lustrous Gold to the Rhinemaidens, you must be shrewd and wary in order to surpass his wiles." Wotan echoes Loge incredulously: "Return it to the Maidens?" Fricka

supports the Gods and renounces the ugly brood of Dwarfs who have lured many to their lair by their wiles.

Suddenly, all the Gods become silent as each of them, for reasons of his own, is ready and willing to become an accomplice in forcibly wresting the Gold and Ring from Alberich, but Wotan expresses his reservations, fearful of achieving their goals through wrongdoing.

The Giants intervene in the Gods' dilemma: Fafner announces that the Gold would serve the Giants better than Freia, but Fasolt is initially unwilling to yield to his brother's wishes, unable to surrender his dreams of possessing the gracious and beautiful Freia. Nevertheless, both Giants trudge before Wotan and announce their decision that they will relinquish their claim to Freia if they are paid with the Nibelung's Gold.

Wotan indignantly protests that they are mad, for how could he pay them with something that is not his own? And further, do they expect him to conquer Alberich, seize the Gold, and then casually deliver the treasure to the Giants? Wotan despairs, realizing that satisfying the Giants by conquering the Nibelung represents a distasteful solution to his dilemma, but he has become trapped by his own carelessness and duplicity. In truth, he had never intended to surrender Freia and trusted Loge's craftiness to find him a way out of his promise. His lofty purpose had been to build Valhalla to maintain order in the world and bend both the Giants and Nibelungs to his Will. But now Alberich threatens the Gods, and he fears that he will use the Ring to master the world. Wotan reasons that to overcome Alberich the Gods are justified in using force and deceit: he must fight fire with fire and evil with evil; a sacrifice of conscience that he must make for the greater good of the world.

Suddenly, the Giants bring Wotan's dilemma into immediacy. Fasolt brutally draws Freia to his side and orders her to remain with them until the ransom of Alberich's Gold is paid; Freia will be their hostage until nightfall, and if the Hoard is not tendered to them, the Gods will forfeit her forever. Freia is thrown across their shoulder and screams in vain for help as she is dragged away.

As Freia disappears, a pale mist gradually becomes more dense. The Gods suddenly transform and begin to look old and pale, seemingly sick, wrinkled and withered. Froh's boldness and courage deserts him; Donner's arms become feeble and he is unable to hold his great hammer; and Fricka has now grown old and gray.

Cynically and unsparingly, Loge observes them and describes the terrifying reality that has overcome the Gods: without Freia's golden Apples, the Gods' youth and strength have faded, the tree branches droop and decaying fruit falls to the ground. Loge himself suffers not their misery because he is at best only a half-God who needs not their delicate fruit; Loge gloats at the impending doom of the race he considers the scorn of all the world.

Fricka reproaches Wotan as the cause of the Gods' horrible predicament, shame and disgrace. As Fricka rouses Wotan to act, he suddenly becomes overcome with resolve. He raises his Spear and announces his decision: Freia must be ransomed, and he bids Loge join him to assault Nibelheim and seize the Gold. Cynically, Loge cruelly taunts Wotan, reminding him that his lofty purpose is specifically to rescue the Gold and return it to the Rhinemaidens, but Wotan contradicts him furiously, explaining that it is Freia's ransom, not the return of the Gold that is his prime concern. Loge pursues his sarcasm, suggesting that they descend to Nibelheim through the Rhine, but Wotan refuses, preferring to avoid meeting the Rhinemaidens.

As a sulphurous vapor rises, Wotan and Loge disappear into a fissure en route to Nibelheim.

Scene 3:

The thunderous, frenzied, rhythmic sounds of hammering on anvils portrays the enslaved Nibelung Dwarfs forging Gold for Alberich.

Hammering of the Nibelungs



incantation, and immediately the shrieking Dwarfs , together with Mime, scatter and flee from him in terror.

Alberich halts suspiciously before the two strangers and brandishes the Ring threateningly at the strangers, admonishing them to tremble in terror before the great lord of the Ring.

Servitude



Warily and distrustfully, Alberich scans the intruders and inquires the reason for their presence in Nibelheim. Wotan replies that they have heard about his great achievements and power and have come to witness them. Alberich explodes in anger when Loge sarcastically suggests that he should treat his guests with more courtesy. Loge introduces himself and reminds Alberich of their earlier friendship; after all, Loge is the fire-God who has brought light and comforting warmth to the Dwarf's sunless cave, and brought fire for his forges. Alberich refuses to be duped by cajolery, noting that the duplicitous Loge was once his friend but now consorts with the "light-elves" who dwell above. (*Lichtalben*, the Gods; Alberich himself a *Schwarzalb*, a black-elf.) But Alberich no longer fears Loge because his power rests in his Hoard; what they see is trivial, for day by day his Hoard grows and increases his glory.

Wotan inquires what value his wealth possesses in Nibelheim where the treasure can buy him nothing. Alberich boasts that his treasure provides the power to bend the whole world to his will; he will transform the Gods into his vassals, and those who dwell on the earth above and live, laugh and love, he will wrench of their happiness. He himself has forsworn love, and at his bidding all humanity shall forswear love because they will hunger for his Gold. Those Gods residing in majestic Valhalla dwelling in bliss and despising the black-elves below, let them beware, for their power will crumble before the might of the Nibelung's Hoard, and all women who once despised the Dwarf will yearn to sate his lust.

The Hoard



Alberich has revealed his inner soul: he is the incarnation of envy, hatred, and evil will, a powerful force that Gods and men will have to reckon with. As he laughs contemptuously, Wotan becomes outraged, but Loge intervenes to restrain him, advising him to control his anger. Loge placates Alberich with his usual smooth assurance, complimenting his wonderful work and craft that provides him with limitless power that forces all to kneel before him. With deferential care, Loge hints that he should be cautious lest his envious Nibelungs revolt and destroy him.

Loge suggests that while the Ring remains in Alberich's possession the Nibelungs kneel before him in fear, but he would be vanquished if a thief stole the Ring from him while he slept. Loge has cunningly appealed to Alberich's vanity, and the evil Dwarf falls into his trap. Alberich replies arrogantly that he has cleverly foreseen danger by protecting himself with the magic Tarnhelm, a magic helmet which can change his shape or make him invisible at will; he is now carefree and secure because if he so desires he can be everywhere yet no one can see him.

With pretended awe, Loge compliments Alberich and tells him that his Tarnhelm must indeed be the greatest marvel on earth. If Alberich speaks the truth eternal might is indeed his. Loge again coaxes Alberich's egotism by goading him to demonstrate his ingenious wonder. The vain Dwarf becomes willing and eager to prove his wizardry, and asks Loge what shape he would like him to assume. Loge makes no choice, casually telling him that the deed confirms the word. Alberich obliges, places the Tarnhelm on his head and murmurs a spell: "Dragon dread, turn thee and wind thee." Instantly, Alberich disappears and in his stead, a huge serpent writhes on the ground, stretching its gaping jaws towards Wotan and Loge.

The Serpent



Loge pretends to be paralyzed with terror and pleads for mercy; Wotan breaks into hearty laughter and ironically compliments the Dwarf for his wondrous magic. The serpent vanishes and Alberich reappears in his own form and eagerly seeks their praise for his spectacular feat. Loge assures him that he has proven himself and they can no longer be skeptics about his magic powers. Loge again feigns admiration and invites Alberich to accomplish a correspondingly smaller transformation, advising the Dwarf that in a smaller size he could more easily escape danger.

In his vanity Alberich accommodates Loge and asks him how small he wants him to become? Loge replies that he should become small enough to creep into a toad's crevice. Alberich, reveling in the simplicity of the request, murmurs his spell once again, and in his place a toad appears. At a quick word from Loge, Wotan stamps his foot on the toad, and Loge takes it by the head and seizes the Tarnhelm. Instantly, Alberich becomes visible, transformed back to his own shape and form.

Alberich curses Wotan while struggling helplessly under his foot. Loge binds him with a rope, and he is dragged to the shaft from which the Gods had entered Nibelheim and the three of them disappear.

Scene 4: The mountain heights

Wotan and Loge ascend from Nibelheim dragging their bound victim, who furiously belittles himself for his foolishness and blind trust, and admits that he has learned his lesson and will be wiser and less disingenuous in the future. Loge goads him sarcastically, gleefully dancing about the captive Dwarf and provoking Alberich to curse and vow revenge against this rogue and robber. Alberich demands his freedom which Loge promises after he surrenders all the Nibelheim treasure.

Alberich, in an aside, comforts himself by reasoning that if he can save the Ring he can re-create the Hoard. He announces that he will summon the

Gold for them if they will untie his hand. As Loge frees his right hand, the Dwarf places the Ring to his lips and murmurs a secret command. Immediately, Nibelungs emerge from the clefts and begin to pile-up the Hoard. Alberich, ashamed and disgraced by his bondage, hides his face as he imperiously orders the his enslaved Nibelungs to be quick with their work and not look upon him. He again kisses his Ring, holds it out commandingly, and the terrorized Nibelungs flee back into the clefts.

The treasure assembled, Alberich demands his release and asks for the Tarnhelm, but Loge advises him that it must remain. Alberich curses him, but consoles himself with the knowledge that he can again force Mime to make another Tarnhelm.

Wotan demands Alberich's Ring. Alberich cries out in desperation, offering his life but not the Ring. Wotan becomes insistent and asks Alberich how he came to possess the Ring, and where he found the Gold to fashion the Ring, all the while knowing the truth about his theft. Alberich suddenly has a revelation and realizes the Gods' intents. He weighs the moral scales between himself and the Gods and realizes that they share a common purpose, concluding that that the Gods themselves would have stolen the Gold from the Rhine had they known how to forge the Ring from it.

On the scale of morality Wotan and Alberich are in perfect balance. Nevertheless, it is too late now for Wotan to back down for he is irrevocably committed to his course of wrong-doing and is caught in a net of his own weaving in which he is yet unable to foresee the horrifying consequences of his actions. Wotan ruthlessly flings himself on the Dwarf and tears the Ring from his finger. The God, like Alberich, has become possessed with the power inherent in the Ring. He places the Ring on his finger, contemplates it, and revels that it now belongs to him; its spell makes him the incontestable lord of the world.

Alberich, with a horrible shriek, laments his ruin. Contemptuously, Wotan gives Loge permission to release the impotent Dwarf, and Loge dutifully unties his bonds and tells him he is free to leave. Alberich raises himself from the ground and with a wild laugh greets his freedom with a horrifying Curse on the Ring.

Curse on the Ring:



Wie durch Fluch er mir ge-riet, verflucht sei die-ser Ring!
As by curse it came to me, accursed now be this Ring!

Alberich has invoked harm, injury, misfortune, anxiety, and death to all who shall possess the Ring: no one on earth shall have joy from the Ring's radiance; each possessor of the Ring shall become consumed with torment; and those who do not possess it shall be destroyed by envy. No one shall ever reap gain from the Ring, and murder and death shall follow it wherever it goes. The Ring's lord shall be the Ring's slave until it once more is returned to the Nibelung, its rightful owner:

"So, stirred by the direst need, the Nibelung blesses his Ring: and now it is yours. Look to it well, but you can never flee my curse!"

Annihilation



With a demoniacal laugh Alberich disappears into the clefts. Cynically, Loge asks Wotan if he heard the Dwarf's fond farewell? But Wotan disregards Alberich's curse, for now he has become blind and consumed with self-satisfaction as he contemplates the Ring on his finger.

The Giants return with Freia, and are joined by Fricka, Froh and Donner. Fricka rushes to Wotan and anxiously asks him for news of his mission into Nibelheim. Wotan points to the Hoard and assures her that by force and guile the Gods were victorious and secured Freia's ransom. Froh breathes sighs of ecstatic relief at Freia's return, their redeeming perpetual youth. Suddenly, the Gods recover their youthful freshness.

Wotan offers the Giants the Nibelung Hoard as payment for Freia's freedom. Fasolt becomes reluctant and saddened at the thought of relinquishing Freia, but if he must lose her he wants the treasure heaped so high that it will hide her from his sight. The two

Giants thrust their staves in the ground on either side of Freia so as to measure her height and breadth. Wotan, sick with a sense of shame and degradation bids them proceed quickly. Assisted by Loge and Froh, the Giants heap up the treasure between the two staves, while Fafner, in his frenzied greed, searches for crevices and presses the pile more tightly.

Wotan turns away in profound disgust, commenting that he feels disgraced; Fricka adds to his torment by reproaching him for his ambitious folly. As Fafner cries out for more Gold, Donner circles about him furiously, threatening the greedy Giant with his hammer. Loge assures the Giants that they have the entire Hoard but Fafner peers more closely at the dense pile and catches a glimpse of Freia's golden hair, immediately demanding the Tarnhelm be thrown in to hide the opening. Wotan, ever more weary and disgusted, orders Loge to add it to the pile.

Fasolt, still grieving over the loss of Freia, peers more closely at the heap and laments that there still exists a gap through which he can see Freia's shining eyes. Loge protests that it cannot be filled because the Hoard is quite exhausted, but Fafner points to the Ring on Wotan's finger and demands that it be used to plug the crevice. Loge assures Fafner that Wotan intends to return the Ring to the Rhinemaidens from whom the Gold was ravished, however Wotan swears adamantly that he will not yield the Ring to anyone, although Loge protests that he has reneged on his original promise to return it to the Rhinemaidens. Nevertheless, Wotan defends his decision by claiming that promises to Loge do not bind him: Wotan claims the Ring as his own, and then turns to Fafner and urges him to make a substitute request.

Fasolt angrily pulls Freia out from behind the pile, accuses the Gods of reneging on their promise and proclaims that they have forfeited Freia forever. Fasolt begins to leave, but Fafner holds him back. Fricka, Donner, and Froh appeal to Wotan to relent in his decision but he has become intransigent and too overcome by possessing the Ring's powers. He again proclaims that he will not yield the Ring and turns away from them all in blind, furious anger, remaining impervious both to the Giants who threaten to take away Freia again, and to the pleas of the other Gods.

The crisis can only be resolved by the intervention of a world force greater even than the God-head himself. Darkness suddenly descends and a bluish light appears from a rocky cleft: it is Erda, the Goddess of earth and wisdom who becomes visible as she rises from below the ground to half her height; she is the mother of the Norns who weave the threads of the world's destiny. Erda cautions Wotan: *Weiche, Wotan! Weiche!*, "Yield it, Wotan! Yield it!"

Erda, Goddess of wisdom



The Gods stand in awe and become speechless. Erda stretches out her hand commandingly to Wotan and bids him relinquish the Ring to evade the Curse that lies on it. Erda, the woman who possesses all the world's wisdom, confounds Wotan by prophesying the downfall of the Gods. "All that exists must come to an end. A day of gloom dawns for the Gods: again I charge you to give up the Ring!"

Twilight of the Gods



Wotan responds thoughtfully to Erda's grave and mysterious words and demands to know more about her enigmatic pronouncement. As he moves desperately toward her the bluish light fades and she slowly disappears, uttering a final message to the tortured God: "I have warned you; you have learned enough; brood now with care and with fear." Wotan turns to anxiety and fear as he broods thoughtfully and profoundly on Erda's last words.

He decides to heed her advice and rouses himself as if a bold resolution has overcome him: he turns resolutely to the Giants while brandishing his Spear and hurls the Ring upon the Hoard. Freia, now rescued, runs to the Gods who shower her with caresses.

Donner crashes the hammer down on the rock and a blinding flash of lightning bursts from the clouds, followed by a violent thunderclap. In the gleaming sunlight a great rainbow appears, extending as a bridge for the Gods to enter Valhalla.

Rainbow Bridge



The Gods gaze admiringly at the awesome sight of their new fortress which Wotan envisions as mighty walls that will shelter him from his troubled thoughts.

All proceed toward the rainbow bridge except Loge, who cynically comments that the Gods are hastening toward their doom; he is ashamed of them and no longer wants to share their activities, preferring to remain behind and transform himself once more into a wayward flickering fire.

From the depths of the valley below, the haunting voices of the Rhinemaidens are heard sadly calling for the return of their Gold, their poignant laments disturbing Wotan as he is about to set foot on the bridge. He turns around, asks whose plaint he hears, and Loge tells him that it is the children of the Rhine lamenting over the stolen Gold, and Wotan curses them for annoying him in his moment of glory. Loge calls down into the waters and ironically delivers the message, telling them that it is not Wotan's Will to recover their Gold, but rather, they should share in this moment of the Gods' glory. As Wotan laughs at Loge's humor and begins to pass over the bridge, the Rhinemaidens break into a more poignant lament, condemning those on earth as false and contemptible.

The Gods cross the rainbow bridge and enter their new fortress, seemingly confident that their power will remain secure. Loge observes them nonchalantly; he, like Erda, foresees their doom, but more importantly, despises them and resolves to build his own empire on the ruins of their power.

With no thought of the inevitable consequences of their greed and failure of conscience, the Gods gloriously enter Valhalla.

But Wotan's thoughts are preoccupied with a Sword which he snatched up from the remains of the treasure.

Sword

Freia has been rescued, but the all-powerful Ring, Hoard, and Tarnhelm are in Fafner's possession; the future of the Gods remains in jeopardy.

