

SIEGFRIED 101

Peter Dundas

The illustrations in this presentation were painted by the distinguished English book illustrator Arthur Rackham (1867-1939) used in a two volume set on Wagner's Ring, published by William Heinemann, London in 1911

The video clips have been selected from two exceptional performances available on DVD

- 1. A live performance at the MET, conducted by James Levine in 1990 and directed by Otto Schenk.**
- 2. Filmed in the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth in June 1992, conducted by Daniel Barenboim and directed by Harry Kupfer, just prior to the summer season with the same cast.**

Cast details are in your handouts

SIEGFRIED

In 1882, the first staging of Wagner's RING took place at His Majesty's Theatre London, sung in German. It was reviewed in "The Era" weekly theatrical journal on May 13, 1882 and I quote from the section on Siegfried, performed on May 8.

"In reality the only incidents are the mending of the sword, the fight with the dragon, and the love scene with Brünnhilde. All the rest is mere "padding" so far as the spectator is concerned, and this is the fatal weak point of Wagner's 'new system', that the most trifling incidents have the same importance given to them as the leading events. If one of the characters comes upon the stage to ask a simple question it is sure to lead to twenty minutes of recitative, accompanied by an avalanche of orchestral passages (leitmotifs). In this process all real interest is completely crushed out.

Take the cream of this gigantic work, for example, and compress it into a four-act opera, and it would be a masterpiece, but the dead weight of the eternal recitative wearies the listener until sympathy is lost for the fine passages when they occur. As for all the business with the dragon, it is childish nonsense, fit only for a nursery tale, and to present it seriously upon the stage, and call it "grand opera," is an outrage"

"Wagner's system" of leitmotifs used in a new way of writing 'opera' called 'music drama' was described in his long thesis entitled "Opera and Drama", First Edition published in December 1851. The critic in "The Era" did not like this 'new-fangled' music-drama approach to opera, even though he praised Wagner's use of the orchestra.

“In one respect Wagner has made a true artistic advance in these works. He has given an importance to the orchestra it never had before. Merely to listen to the orchestra alone, in its varied changes, its novel effects, its wonderful colouring, has a charm for the musical student that causes him to forget much of the crudeness he sees upon the stage

The orchestra in Wagner’s treatment is sometimes almost magical in its beauty and unexpected combination of sound. When Wagner gets hold of a subject in his libretto that suggests beauty of treatment in the orchestra his genius shines forth resplendently. Then all harshness vanishes, and all that far-fetched and pedantic, harsh and forbidden, is softened down into the most exquisite blending of instrumental sound imaginable.”

It is true that over the years Siegfried has become the least liked of the four RING operas, especially to English speaking audiences. Wagner, himself, was aware of this.

Not long after Lohengrin was performed for the first time in Melbourne Australia on August 18, 1877, a local resident Emil Sander wrote to Wagner to inform him of this noteworthy event - a fact recorded by Cosima in her diary.

The entry for October 21, 1877 reads: “He receives a letter from a theatre director in Melbourne, according to which Lohengrin last month made its ceremonious entry there, too.”

The following day, Wagner replied to Sander as follows:

**“Most honored sir,
Your news has pleased me very much and I cannot refrain
from thanking you for it.**

**May you see to it that my works are performed in ‘English’;
only then can they be understood intimately by an English-
speaking public. We are hoping that this will happen in
London.**

**Your very much obliged
Richard Wagner**

Bayreuth 22 October 1877”

Of course, the use of ‘surtitles’ in opera houses and ‘subtitles’ on DVDs has improved matters, but there is still a need for some comments and explanation of what and why things happen in Siegfried. In a letter to King Ludwig on February 24, 1869, Wagner writes **“Siegfried is divine. It is my greatest work!”** However, it is doubtful that he ever saw a performance which came up to his ideal.

So where are we at the beginning of Siegfried? Let’s go back to Die Walkure for a moment. At the end of Act 2 in Die Walkure, Hunding finds Siegmund and Sieglinde in the forest. Hunding attempts to kill Siegmund but Brünnhilde, defying Wotan, protects Siegmund. Suddenly Wotan appears and shatters Siegmund’s sword allowing Hunding to kill him.

Sieglinde drops unconscious, but Brünnhilde snatches her up to her horse and escapes with her. Wotan then avenges Siegmund by killing Hunding and announces his intention of punishing Brünnhilde for her disobedience.

In Act 3 of Die Walkure Brünnhilde, fleeing with Sieglinde to the summit of a rocky mountain, finds that her sister Valkyries won't help her. Sieglinde says that she needs no protection and would rather die, since her husband Siegmund has been killed. But when she learns, from Brünnhilde, that she is carrying Siegmund's child, her attitude changes; she begs the Valkyrie to save her, so she can give birth to his child.

A heavy storm heralds the approach of Wotan, and swiftly Brünnhilde tells her to go eastward into the forest, where the dragon Fafner lays guarding Alberich's Ring and where Wotan will not follow her. Taking out the fragments of Siegmund's sword she gives them to Sieglinde, telling her to keep them for her son and to name him Siegfried.

In Act 1 of Siegfried, it is about 17 years later. The curtain rises on a rocky cave in the forest. Mime, the Nibelung dwarf, brother of Alberich, last seen in Rheingold, is a blacksmith, trying unsuccessfully to hammer a sword. Young Siegfried bursts in, exuberantly leading a bear, and urging it to chase Mime around the cave.

Bill McGlaughlin, host of "Exploring Music" on WFMT explains this in his inimitable way.

Audio Clip

Act 1; Mime and the entrance of Siegfried – 3:23



It is soon obvious that Siegfried hates Mime. The dwarf whiningly reproaches him, telling how he took him in as a 'squalling brat' and reared him for many years, but has received no affection in return.

The first video clip is from a film produced in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in July 1992, just before the summer season began.



Siegfried is sung by the heldentenor Siegfried Jerusalem and Mime is sung by tenor Graham Clark.

The Bayreuth Festival Orchestra is conducted by Daniel Barenboim with stage direction by Harry Kupfer.

Video Clip 1 – Act 1 Dialog 92 – 7:45

So now we, and Siegfried, know much more! Siegfried has found out about his mother and the broken sword she left for him. He is now determined to have a new sword “Nothung” forged again from the fragments.



After Siegfried leaves the forest, with many thoughts spinning in his head, Mime sits down dejectedly, knowing that he himself is incapable of re-making the sword.

But he is not left alone for long, for Wotan, in the guise of a Wanderer, comes and sits on the hearth. The god proposes a contest, in which each of them shall answer correctly three questions asked by the other, staking his head upon it. Mime asks his three questions and Wotan answers them correctly.

It's then Wotan's turn.

Wotan asks: What is the race that Wotan deals harshly with, and yet holds most dear? Mime correctly answers that these are the Volsungs - the wild couple Siegmund and Sieglinde, and their son Siegfried.



Secondly, Wotan asks: with what sword must Siegfried kill the dragon Fafner? Mime gives the right answer: it is 'Nothung'.

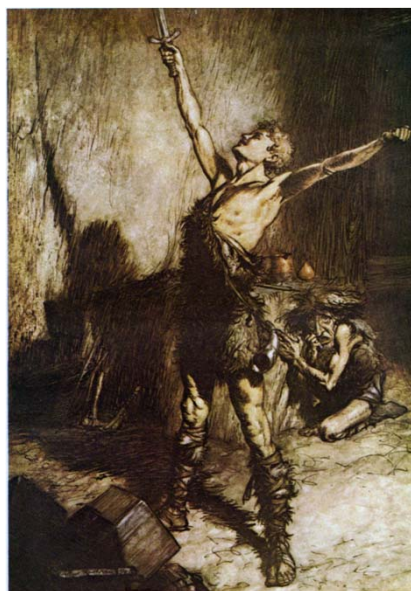
But to the third question: who shall forge the sword afresh? Mime gives no answer, knowing he cannot do it. Wotan tells him - **the only man who can restore the sword is he who has never known fear – and to him shall Mime's head be forfeit.** So saying, the Wanderer turns away, laughing, and disappears into the forest.

This whole scene with Wotan and Mime is a device used by Wagner to remind the audience about the major events in the previous two operas, like “previously, in Rheingold and Walkure”

Siegfried, returning, finds Mime cowering behind his anvil, terrified of the sunlight outside, which makes him think that Fafner has come to devour him. The young man asks why he is in this undignified posture. When Mime says he is afraid, Siegfried interestedly asks what that might be. He is none the wiser when Mime describes the symptoms of fear to him.

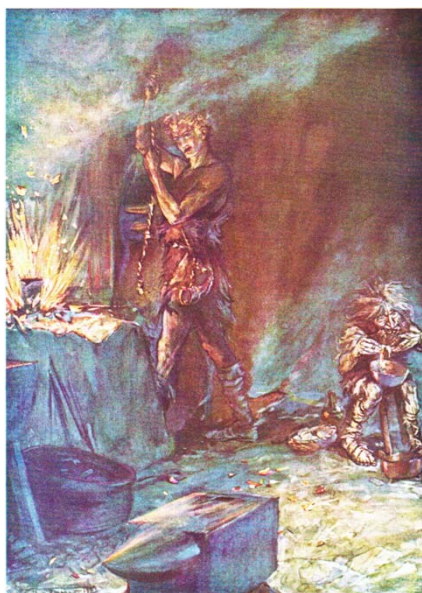
In that case, says Mime, he had better go to the cavern Neidhöhle, where Fafner the dragon lies hidden. 'Does the world lay that way?' asks Siegfried, and when Mime assures him that it does, he has only one thought - to take his sword and go out into the world with it.

Furious that Mime still has not yet mended it for him; he decides to do it himself.



The second Video Clip is, in my opinion, the best 'forging scene' on DVD. It is from a live 1990 MET performance, conducted by James Levine and staged by Otto Schenk, with Siegfried sung by Siegfried Jerusalem and Mime sung by Heinz Zednick, famous for his portrayal of Mime in the 1976 Chereau production at Bayreuth.

Video Clip 2 – Act 1 End 90
– 5:55



At the beginning of Act 2, Alberich is sitting outside Neidhöhle, the place where the dragon Fafner is protecting the Ring, the Tarnhelm (golden helmet) and the hoard of gold, which he had obtained from Wotan in "Rheingold".

Alberich is waiting for the moment when someone will kill the dragon, so that he can win the Ring.

The Wanderer approaches and Alberich recognizes his old enemy Wotan. Yet Wotan claims that he has no desires for the Ring anymore and he advises Alberich to look out for his own brother Mime instead.

The Wanderer says he will bring a hero, who will kill the dragon. The hero knows nothing of the Ring, but Mime does.

Wotan suggests that Alberich warn the dragon of the coming danger. Perhaps the dragon will give him the Ring in order to save its life. Wotan wakes Fafner and the two old enemies try to persuade him to give away the Ring. Fafner is indifferent, and sees the approaching hero as a meal, not a threat. Wotan leaves, confident that everything is going just right. Alberich hides in the woods to await Mime and Siegfried.

As the two enter, Mime tells Siegfried that this is the place where he is about to learn fear. Mime goes off to wait and Siegfried enjoys the quiet woods. He wonders about his origins again. He notices a forest bird singing and tries to communicate with it by playing a flute he makes from a reed. But he fails, and instead plays a tune on his horn.

This tune wakes up Fafner and Siegfried demands that he teach him fear. The dragon is surprised by the brashness of Siegfried. They engage in a battle and Siegfried kills the dragon.

It is unfortunate that there is no dragon on DVD which comes close to that seen at the Seattle Ring, similar to the painting by Arthur Rackham seen here.



When Fafner is dead, Siegfried pulls his sword from the dragon's heart. But the dragon's blood burns on his skin and as he tastes it, he suddenly understands the forest bird's songs. The bird tells him to get the Ring and the Tarnhelm in the dragon's lair. Alberich and Mime enter and fight over who is going to win the ring. They leave again as Siegfried comes out, carrying both ring and helmet.



Video Clip 3 – Act 2 Deceit 90 – 8:23

This is from the live MET performance in 1990 and shows how Siegfried, sung by Siegfried Jerusalem, learns from the Woodbird, sung by Dawn Upshaw, that he is now able to understand the thoughts of Mime, sung by Heinz Zednik.

I'm now going to change to the 1992 Bayreuth performance at this point and let you see how Harry Kupfer stages the ending of Act 2. Wagner's orchestration, which shows how the forest bird excites Siegfried about Brünnhilde and is prepared to show him the way to the flame-surrounded rock, is truly exceptional.

Siegfried Jerusalem sings Siegfried, Graham Clark is Mime, John Tomlinson is Der Wanderer and Hilde Leidland is the Forest Bird.

Video Clip 4 – Act 2 End 92 – 6:38

One of the oldest RING jokes is that “Wagner wrote the text backwards, and then set it to music forwards”.

History shows this to be true. Wagner completed the score of his Romantic Opera “Lohengrin” in Dresden, April 1848. He then began writing the text of a single epic he called “Siegfried’s Death”.

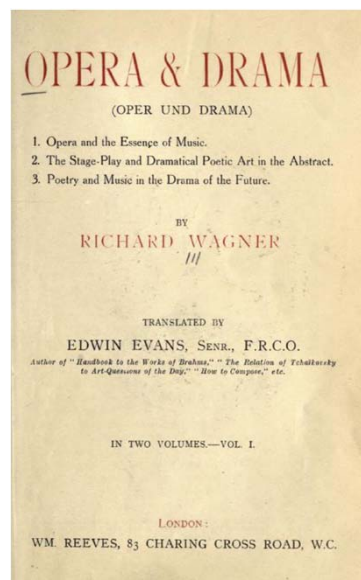
Caught up on the wrong side of an attempted revolution, Wagner narrowly missed arrest and imprisonment in May 1849. He fled, in exile, to Zurich and continued his work on “Siegfried’s Death”. It was soon apparent to him that it was ‘too overloaded with back-narration of earlier events’

In 1851 he completed a prelude opera called “Young Siegfried”.

Finding these two dramas still too overloaded with back-narration, he decided to precede them with yet another, “Die Walkure” completed in June 1852 and even another “Das Rheingold”, completed in November 1852.

Wagner then revised the four operas into “Der Ring des Nibelungen”. “Young Siegfried” became “Siegfried” and “Siegfried’s Death” became “Gotterdammerung”.

From October 1850 to January 1851, Wagner wrote a long essay in three parts, called "Opera and Drama", published in December 1851 by J J Weber in Zurich. This is where he laid out his thoughts on how opera, which he redefined as 'music drama', should be constructed, using many musical fragments or 'leitmotifs' played by the orchestra to identify characters, thoughts and events during an unendingly smooth flow of the drama.



90 leitmotifs have been identified in the Ring, first cataloged by Wagner's friend Hans von Wolzogen in 1858 and then by others including Roger Donington in 1963.

Wolzogen identifies 35 in Rheingold and additional 22, 20 and 13 in Walkure, Siegfried and Gotterdammerung, respectively.

Most of the orchestral fabric is made up of these Leitmotifs, to identify current or remembered characters and thoughts, with new ones introduced as new characters and situations are presented.

This enables Wagner to present a smoothly flowing narrative, augmented by a continuous orchestral 'tone poem' – his concept of 'Music Drama'

Donington has shown that all the motifs are related; they derive from a common ancestor d1, Nature, they group into families, and have brothers, cousins, parents, and partners.

Paul Heise, in his immense thesis available online at Wagnerheim.com has identified 140

Though the motifs are short and inter-related, Wagner keeps them as distinct from each other as possible

Wagner said that composers had exhausted all previous composition methods. The idea of the 'aria and recitative' basis, augmented skillfully by Mozart, to use ensembles and chorus, were not appropriate for epic drama, since these musical devices were constricted by meter and tone, resulting in an interruption of the dramatic flow.

He began composing the score of "Rheingold" in November 1853, following his new composition rules, following with "Die Walkure" in June 1854 and "Siegfried" in June 1856. He finished Act 2 of Siegfried in July 1857 and then stopped.

There is much written about why he stopped and the majority view is that he had not secured funding for any performance of the final Nibelung saga and he needed to write something shorter that would bring in much needed money.

So in August and September 1857, Wagner wrote the text of "Tristan und Isolde", A Lyric Drama in Three Acts. The musical composition was completed in August 1859. It is the most symphonic of all his operas and although he retained his use of 'leitmotifs', much of what he proposed in "Opera and Drama" was abandoned.

The magnificent Act 2 love duet in Tristan was the first of its kind since the Act 2 duet in Lohengrin, written eleven years earlier.

Wagner did not return to the musical composition of Act 3 of Siegfried until January 11, 1869, as recorded in Cosima's diary, a hiatus of nearly 12 years.

In a letter to King Ludwig on February 24, 1869, Wagner writes **"Siegfried is divine. It is my greatest work."** Then later in the letter, he says,

"If I wanted to tell you about Siegfried today, I should have to speak of a dark, sublime and awesome dread with which I enter the realm of my third act. We come here, like the Hellenes at the reeking crevice at Delphi, to the nub of the great world tragedy:

The world is on the brink of destruction; the god [Wotan] seeks to ensure that the world is reborn, for he himself is the world's will to become. Everything here is instinct, with sublime terror, and can be spoken of only in riddles".

On Friday March 12, 1869 Cosima Wagner writes in her diary **"Richard is going through what he composed in the morning and is not satisfied with it; he thinks he has gone too far in the proliferation of his motives. At tea he said that, "if he wanted to make things easy for himself, from the moment Wotan says, 'Seit mein Wunsch es will' (Since my 'will' desires it), he would introduce recitative, which would certainly create a great effect, but would also put an end to the work as art".**

Nobody has yet noticed how much art he has employed as a means to prevent the interruption of the flow of melody, while still achieving a romantic effect. – Music, he says, “transfigures everything, it never permits the hideousness of the bare word, however terrible the subject”.

In the final published score, it is interesting to see how Wagner succeeded in returning to the composition rules he set in “Opera and Drama” for Act 3, at least sufficiently to avoid a drastic style change from the previous two acts.

At the point where he felt some compositional difficulties in Act 3 Scene 1; where Wotan finally expresses his determination to renounce his willful pursuit of power, “Seit mein Wunsch es will”, passing on his heritage to Siegfried and Brunnhilde, and their redeeming love, Wagner introduces a magnificent heroic motif, called by Wolzogen “No 70 - World Heritage”, but is now usually called “Bequest”, which underscores Wotan’s great change of heart.



During Wotan's scene with Erda in *Siegfried* Act 1, Wotan finally expresses his determination, evolving since *Walküre* Act III, to renounce his willful pursuit of power and pass on his heritage to Siegfried and Brünnhilde and their redeeming love. The magnificent Bequest Motif underscores Wotan's great change of heart. ♪ The immediately obvious characteristic of this motif is its majestic ascending scale, which is the opposite of the willfully oppressive descent of the Spear Motif. ♪

This motif appears later in Siegfried and it is significant that it is the very last motif heard in the climatic closing of the opera.

But now we must return to the synopsis of Act 3 Scene 1.

The Wanderer enters and tries to arouse Erda, the Earth Mother. in the words of Deryck Cooke, she is the "primordial wise-woman," the eternal feminine. She is also the mother of Brünnhilde, fathered by Wotan!

She wakes up and Wotan demands that she tell him how to stop the events he has set in motion. Erda urges him to talk to Brünnhilde instead, but when she learns that Brünnhilde has been punished and is now sleeping, waiting for a man to wake her, she angrily refuses to help Wotan.

Wotan insists, but Erda tells him that he is not what he appears to be. He tells her that she is not what she appears to be either. Now her wisdom is not worth much anymore, as his plan is going to succeed. He will give up his power and bequeath it to Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Siegfried is to wake up Brünnhilde and they will redeem the gods. Erda requests that Wotan let her go back to sleep and he release her from his magic spell.

Video Clip 5 – Act 3 Erda 92 – 10:50

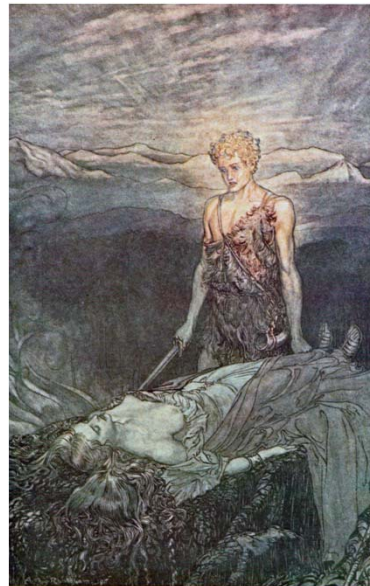
Wotan – John Tomlinson, Erda – Birgitta Svenden

Wotan sees Siegfried nearing. The forest bird disappears and Siegfried is left at the foot of the mountain. The Wanderer asks Siegfried where he is going. Siegfried tells him the story of Mime, Fafner, the bird's advice and how he is going to find Brünnhilde. As the Wanderer continues to ask questions, Siegfried gets fed up and insists that he let him pass. The Wanderer demands respect, but Siegfried refuses and threatens to move him by force.

The Wanderer takes his spear and reveals that this is the spear that once shattered Nothung. Siegfried thus learning that the Wanderer played a role in his father's death, splinters Wotan's spear, thus ending his powers. Siegfried continues towards the mountain and enters the magic fire that guards Brünnhilde.

Video Clip 6 – Act 3 Spear 92 – 10:05

Siegfried arrives on the mountaintop and finds Brünnhilde. First he thinks her to be a man, but when he removes her armor, he learns she is a woman. And for the first time he senses fear. He awakens Brünnhilde with a kiss and she greets the sun, the light, and the day. She learns it is Siegfried who has roused her, and tells him how she has loved him even before he was born. However, she cannot give herself up to him and she tries to persuade him that they must love each other from a distance.





She states that if they engage in human love, they will destroy each other's sense of being. Brunnhilde is afraid of the transformation from goddess to human woman.

Siegfried tells her of his undying love for her. Brunnhilde eventually warms up and declares her love for Siegfried. They fall into each other's arms in a loving embrace.

The clip starts at the point when Brunnhilde, sung by Hildegard Behrens, in the live MET performance, conducted by James Levine in 1990, sings "Ewig war ich, ewig bin ich" (I always was, I always am). This is the famous theme which Wagner used to begin his "Siegfried Idyll".

Cosima wrote in her diary for December 25, 1870, her 33rd birthday. "When I woke up I heard a sound, it grew even louder, I could no longer imagine myself in a dream, music was sounding, and what music! After it had died away, Richard came in to me with the five children and put into my hands the score of his "Symphonic Birthday Greeting". I was in tears, but so, too, was the whole household; Richard had set up his orchestra on the stairs and thus consecrated our Tribschen forever! "The Tribschen Idyll" – thus the work is called". The name was changed to "Siegfried Idyll" on its publication by 'Schott Music' in 1878.

This is the first time in the RING where Wagner allows two main characters to sing together in duet.

“Gotterdammerung”, the final opera in the RING includes two glorious symphonic orchestral interludes. It also has several ensembles and a large chorus, much in the style of “Tristan und Isolde” and “Meistersinger”.

I’ve chosen the 1990 live performance at the MET, with Hildegard Behrens and Siegfried Jerusalem, because it is one of my favorites and certainly the best available on DVD.

Video Clip 7 – Act 3 End 90 – 11:30

From 1958 to 1964 the Decca Record Company went to Vienna Austria to make the first complete studio recording of the RING. Georg Solti conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the very best soloists of the day were engaged.

After close to 50 years this is still, in my opinion, the closest to the perfection of Wagner’s ideal.

As an encore for this talk, please listen to the last three minutes of the opera – the concluding moments of the love duet, with Brünnhilde, sung by Birgit Nilsson, and Siegfried, sung by Wolfgang Windgassen.

