

## ***Das Rheingold - Synopsis***

(English title: *The Rhinegold*)

An Opera by Richard Wagner

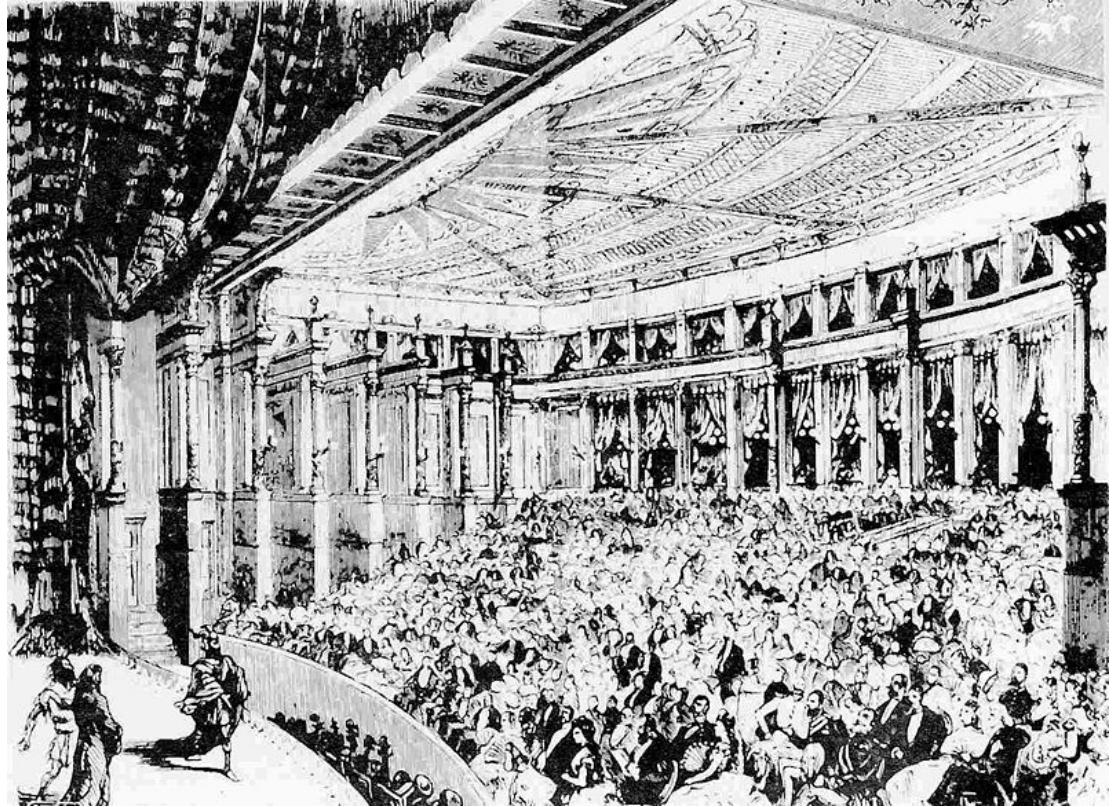
Prologue in four scenes to the trilogy of music-dramas. "The Ring of the Nibelung," by Richard Wagner. "Das Rheingold" was produced, Munich, September 22, 1869. "The Ring of the Nibelung" was given complete for the first time in the Wagner Theatre, Bayreuth, in August, 1876. In the first American performance of "Das Rheingold," Metropolitan Opera House, New York, January 4, 1889, Fischer was Wotan, Alvary Loge, Moran-Oldern Fricka, and Kati Bettaque Freia.

### **CHARACTERS**

WOTAN, a God ..... Baritone-Bass  
DONNER, a God ..... Baritone-Bass  
FROH, a God ..... Tenor  
LOGE, a God ..... Tenor  
FASOLT, a Giant..... Baritone-Bass  
FAFNER, a Giant..... Bass  
ALBERICH, a Nibelung ..... Baritone-Bass  
MIME, a Nibelung ..... Tenor  
FRICKA, a Goddess..... Soprano  
FREIA, a Goddess..... Soprano  
ERDA , a Goddess..... Mezzo-Soprano  
WOGLINDE, a Rhine Daughter..... Soprano  
WELLGUNDE, a Rhine Daughter..... Soprano  
FLOSSHILDE, a Rhine Daughter..... Mezzo-Soprano

**Time:** Legendary.

**Place:** The bed of the Rhine; a mountainous district near The Rhine; the subterranean caverns of Nibelheim.



The first performance of Wagner's opera, *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold) in Bayreuth, 1876.

In "The Rhinegold" we meet with supernatural beings of German mythology -- the Rhinedaughters Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde, whose duty it is to guard the precious Rhinegold; Wotan, the chief of the gods; his spouse Fricka; Loge, the God of Fire (the diplomat of Walhalla); Freia, the Goddess of Youth and Beauty; her brothers Donner and Froh; Erda, the all-wise woman; the giants Fafner and Fasolt; Alberich and Mime of the race of Nibelungs, cunning, treacherous gnomes who dwell in the bowels of the earth.

The first scene of "Rhinegold" is laid in the Rhine, at the bottom of the river, where the Rhinedaughters guard the Rhinegold.

The work opens with a wonderfully descriptive Prelude, which depicts with marvelous art (marvelous because so simple) the transition from the quietude of the water-depths to the wavy life of Rhinedaughters. The double basses intone E flat. Only this note is heard during four bars. Then contra bassoons add a B flat. The chord, thus formed, sounds until the 136th bar. With the sixteenth bar there flows over this seemingly immovable triad, as the current of a river flows over its immovable bed, the **Motive of the Rhine**.



A horn intones this motive. Then one horn after another takes it up until its wave-like tones are heard on the eight horns. On the flowing accompaniment of the 'cellos the motive is carried to the wood-wind. It rises higher and higher, the other strings successively joining in the

accompaniment, which now flows on in gentle undulations until the motive is heard on the high notes of the wood-wind, while the violins have joined in the accompaniment. When the theme thus seems to have stirred the waters from their depth to their surface the curtain rises.

The scene shows the bed and flowing waters of the Rhine, the light of day reaching the depths only as a greenish twilight. The current flows on over rugged rocks and through dark chasms.

Woglinde is circling gracefully around the central ridge of rock. To an accompaniment as wavy as the waters through which she swims, she sings:

*Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle,  
Walle zur Wiege! Wagala weia!  
Wallala, Wieala weia!*

They are sung to the **Motive of the Rhinedaughters**.

[Music excerpt]

In wavy sport the Rhinedaughters dart from cliff to cliff. Meanwhile Alberich has clambered from the depths up to one of the cliffs, and watches, while standing in its shadow, the gambols of the Rhinedaughters. As he speaks to them there is a momentary harshness in the music, whose flowing rhythm is broken. In futile endeavours to clamber up to them, he inveighs against the "slippery slime" – which causes him to lose his foothold.

Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde in turn gambol almost within his reach, only to dart away again. He curses his own weakness in the **Motive of the Nibelungs' Servitude**.

[Music excerpt]

Swimming high above him the Rhinedaughters incite him with gleeful cries to chase them. Alberich tries to ascend, but always slips and falls down. Then his gaze is attracted and held by a glow which suddenly pervades the waves above him and increases until from the highest point of the central cliff a bright, a golden ray shoots through the water. Amid the shimmering accompaniment of the violins is heard on the horn the **Rhinegold Motive**.

[Music excerpt]

With shouts of triumph the Rhinedaughters swim around the rock. Their cry "Rhinegold," is a characteristic motive. The **Rhinedaughters' Shout of Triumph** and the accompaniment to it are as follows:



As the river glitters with golden light the Rhinegold Motive rings out brilliantly on the trumpet. The Nibelung is fascinated by the sheen. The Rhinedaughter gossip with one another, and Alberich thus learns that the light is that of the Rhinegold, and that whoever shall shape a ring from this gold will become invested with great power. We hear **The Ring Motive**.



Flosshilde bids her sisters cease their prattle, lest some sinister foe should overhear them. Wellgunde and Woglinde ridicule their sister's anxiety, saying that no one would care to filch the gold, because it would give power only to him who abjures or renounces love. At this point is heard the darkly prophetic **Motive of the Renunciation of Love**.



Alberich reflects on the words of the Rhinedaughters. The Ring Motive occurs both in voice and orchestra in mysterious pianissimo (like an echo of Alberich's sinister thoughts), and is followed by the Motive of Renunciation. Then is heard the sharp, decisive rhythm of the Nibelung Motive. Alberich fiercely springs over to the central rock. The Rhinedaughters scream and dart away in different directions. Alberich has reached the summit of the highest cliff.

"Hark, ye floods! Love I renounce forever!" he cries, and amid the crash of the Rhinegold Motive he seizes the gold and disappears in the depths. With screams of terror the Rhinedaughters dive after the robber through the darkened water, guided by Alberich's shrill, mocking laugh.

There is a transformation. Waters and rocks sink. As they disappear, the billowy accompaniment sinks lower and lower in the orchestra. Above it rises once more the Motive of Renunciation. The Ring Motive is heard, and then, as the waves change into nebulous clouds, the billowy accompaniment rises pianissimo until, with a repetition of the Ring Motive, the action passes to the second scene. One crime has already been committed -- the theft of the Rhinegold by Alberich. How that crime and the ring which he shapes from the gold inspire other crimes is told in the course of the following scenes of "Rhinegold." Hence the significance of the Ring Motive as a connecting link between the first and second scenes.

**Scene II.** Dawn illumines a castle with glittering turrets on a rocky height at the back. Through a deep valley between this and the foreground flows the Rhine.

The **Walhalla Motive** now heard is a motive of superb beauty. It greets us again and again in "Rhinegold" and frequently in the later music-dramas of the cycle. Walhalla is the abode of gods and heroes. Its motive is divinely, heroically beautiful. Though essentially broad and stately, it often assumes a tender mood, like the chivalric gentleness which every hero feels toward woman. Thus it is here. In crescendo and decrescendo it rises and falls, as rises and falls with each breath the bosom of the beautiful Fricka, who slumbers at Wotan's side.



As Fricka awakens, her eyes fall on the castle. In her surprise she calls to her spouse. Wotan dreams on, the Ring Motive, and later the Walhalla Motive, being heard in the orchestra, for with the ring Wotan is planning to compensate the giants for building Walhalla, instead of rewarding them by presenting Freia to them as he has promised. As he opens his eyes and sees the castle you hear the Spear Motive, which is a characteristic variation of the Motive of

Compact. For Wotan should enforce, if needful, the compacts of the gods with his spear.

Wotan sings of the glory of Walhalla. Fricka reminds him of his compact with the giants to deliver over to them for their work in building Walhalla, Freia, the Goddess of Youth and Beauty. This introduces on the 'cellos and double basses the **Motive of Compact**, a theme expressive of the binding force of law and the with the inherent dignity and power of the sense of justice.



In a domestic spat between Wotan and Fricka, Wotan charges that she was as anxious as he to have Walhalla built. Fricka answers that she desired to have it erected in order to persuade him to lead a more domestic life. At Fricka's words

*"Halls, bright and gleaming,"*

the Fricka Motive is heard, a caressing motive of much grace and beauty.



It is also prominent in Wotan's reply immediately following. Wotan tells Fricka that he never intended to really give up Freia to the giants. Chromatics, like little tongues of flame, appear in the accompaniment. They are suggestive of the Loge Motive, for with the aid of Loge the God of Fire, Wotan hopes to trick the giants and save Freia.

"Then save her at once!" calls Fricka, as Freia enters in hasty flight. The **Motive of Flight** is as follows:



The following is the **Freia Motive**:



With Freia's exclamations that the giants are pursuing her, the first suggestion of the Giant Motive appears and as these "great, hulking fellows" enter, the heavy, clumsy **Giant Motive** is heard in its entirety:



For the giants, Fasolt, and Fafner, have come to demand that Wotan deliver up to them Freia, according to his promise when they agreed to build Walhalla for him. In the ensuing scene, in which Wotan parleys with the Giants, the Giant Motive, the Walhalla Motive, the Motive of the Compact, and the first bar of the Freia Motive figure until Fasolt's threatening words,

*"Peace wane when you break your compact,"*

when there is heard a version of the Motive of Compact characteristic enough to be distinguished as the **Motive of Compact with the Giants**:



The Walhalla, Giant, and Freia motives again are heard until Fafner speaks of the golden apples which grow in Freia's garden. These golden apples are the fruit of which the gods partake in order to enjoy eternal youth. The Motive of Eternal Youth, which now appears, is one of the loveliest in the cycle. It seems as though age could not wither it, nor custom stale its infinite variety. Its first bar is reminiscent of the Ring Motive, for there is subtle relationship between the golden Apples of Freia and the Rhinegold. Here is the **Motive of Eternal Youth**:



It is finely combined with the Giant Motive at Fafner's words:

*"Let her forthwith be torn from the mall."*

Froh and Donner, Freia's brothers, enter hastily to save their sister. Froh clasps her in his arms, while Donner confronts the giants, the Motive of Eternal Youth rings out triumphantly on the horns and wood-wind. But Freia's hope is short-lived. For though Wotan desires to keep Freia in Walhalla, he dare not offend the giants. At this critical moment, however, he sees his cunning adviser, Loge, approaching. These are Loge's characteristics motives:



Wotan upbraids Loge for not having discovered something which the giants would be willing to accept as a substitute for Freia. Loge says he has traveled the world over without finding aught that would compensate man for the renunciation of a lovely woman. This leads to Loge's narrative of his wanderings. With great cunning he tells Wotan of the theft of the Rhinegold and of the wondrous worth of a ring shaped from the gold. Thus he incites the listening giants to ask for it as a compensation for giving up Freia. Hence Wagner, as Loge begins his narrative, has blended, with a marvelous sense of musical beauty and dramatic fitness, two phrases: the Freia Motive and the accompaniment to the Rhinedaughters' Shout of Triumph in the first scene. This music continues until Loge says that he discovered but one person (Alberich) who was willing to renounce love. Then the Rhinegold Motive is sounded tristly in a minor key and immediately afterward is heard the Motive of Renunciation.

Loge next tells how Alberich stole the gold. He has already excited the curiosity of the giants, and when Fafner asks him what power Alberich will gain through the possession of the gold, he dwells upon the magical attributes of the ring shaped from Rhinegold.

Loge's diplomacy is beginning to bear results. Fafner tells Fasolt that he deems the possession of the gold more important than Freia. Notice here how the Freia motive, so prominent when the giants insisted on her as their compensation, is relegated to the bass and how the Rhinegold Motive breaks in upon the Motive of Eternal Youth, as Fafner and Fasolt again advance toward Wotan, and bid him wrest the gold from Alberich and give it to them as ransom for Freia. Wotan refuses, for he himself now lusts for the ring made of Rhinegold. The giants having proclaimed that they will give Wotan until evening to determine upon his course, seize Freia and drag her away. Pallor now settles upon the faces of the gods; they seem to have grown older. They are affected by the absence of Freia, the Goddess of Youth, whose motives are but palely reflected by the orchestra. At last Wotan proclaims that he will go with Loge to Nibelung and wrest the entire treasure of Rhinegold from Alberich as ransom for Freia.

Loge disappears down a crevice in the side of the rock. From it a sulphurous vapour at once issues. When Wotan has followed Loge into the cleft the vapour fills the stage and conceals the remaining characters. The vapours thicken to a black cloud, continually rising upward until rocky chasms are seen. These have an upward motion, so that the stage appears to be sinking deeper and deeper. With a *molto vivace* the orchestra dashes into the Motive of flight. From various distant points ruddy gleams of light illumine the chasms, and when the Flight Motive has died away, only the increasing clangour of the smithies is heard from all directions. This is the typical **Nibelung Motive**, characteristic of Alberich's Nibelung toiling at the anvil for him. Gradually the sounds grow fainter.



Then as the Ring Motive resounds like a shout of malicious triumph (expressive of Alberich's

malignant joy at his possession of power), there is seen a subterranean cavern, apparently of illimitable depth, from which narrow shafts lead in all direction.

**Scene III.** Alberich enters from a side cleft dragging after him the shrieking Mime. The latter lets fall a helmet which Alberich at once seizes. It is the Tarnhelmet, made of Rhinegold, the wearing of which enables the wearer to become invisible or assume any shape. As Alberich closely examines the helmet the **Motive of the Tarnhelmet** is heard.



It is mysterious, uncanny. To test its power Alberich puts it on and changes into a column of vapour. He asks Mime if he is visible, and when Mime answers in the negative Alberich cries out shrilly. "Then feel me instead," at the same time making poor Mime writhe under the blows of a visible scourge. Alberich then departs -- still in the form of a vaporous column -- to announce to the Nibelungs that they are henceforth his slavish subjects. Mime cowers down with fear and pain.

Wotan and Loge enter from one of the upper shafts. Mime tells them how Alberich has become all-powerful through the ring and the Tarnhelmet made of the Rhinegold. Then Alberich, who has taken off the Tarnhelmet and hung it from his girdle, is seen in the distance, driving a crowd of Nibelungs before him from the caves below. They are laden with gold and silver, which he forces them to pile up in one place and so form a hoard. He suddenly perceives Wotan and Loge. After abusing Mime for permitting strangers to enter Nibelheim, he commands the Nibelungs to descend again into the cavern in search of new treasure for him. They hesitate. You hear the Ring Motive. Alberich draws the ring from his finger, stretches it threateningly toward the Nibelungs, and commands them to obey their master.

They disperse in headlong flight, with Mime, into the cavernous recesses. Alberich looks with mistrust upon Wotan and Loge. Wotan tells him they have heard report of his wealth and power and have come to ascertain if it is true. The Nibelung points to the hoard. He boasts that the whole world will come under his sway (Ring Motive), that the gods who now laugh and love in the enjoyment of youth and beauty will become subject to him (Freia Motive); for he has abjured love (Motive of Renunciation). Hence, even the gods in Walhalla shall dread him (Walhalla Motive) and he bids them beware of the time when the night-begotten host of the Nibelungs shall rise from Nibelheim into the realm of daylight. (Rhinegold Motive followed by Walhalla Motive, for it is through the power gained by the Rhinegold that Alberich hopes to possess himself of Walhalla.) Loge cunningly flatters Alberich, and when the latter tells him of the Tarnhelmet, feigns disbelief of Alberich's statements. Alberich, to prove their truth, puts on the helmet and transforms himself into a huge serpent. The Serpent Motive expresses the windings and writhings of the monster. The serpent vanishes and Alberich reappears. When Loge doubts if Alberich can transform himself into something very small, the Nibelung changes into a toad. Now is Loge's chance. He calls Wotan to set his foot on the toad. As Wotan does so, Loge puts his hand to its head and seizes the Tarnhelmet. Alberich is seen writhing under Wotan's foot. Loge binds Alberich; both seize him, drag him to the shaft from which they descended and disappear ascending.

The scene changes in the reverse direction to that in which it changed when Wotan and Loge were descending to Nibelheim. The orchestra accompanies the change of scene. The Ring Motive dies away from crashing fortissimo to piano, to be succeeded by the dark Motive of Renunciation. Then is heard the clangour of the Nibelung smithies. The Giant, Walhalla, Loge, and Servitude Motives follow the last with crushing force as Wotan and Loge emerge

from the cleft, dragging the pinioned Alberich with them. His lease of power was brief. He is again in a condition of servitude.

**Scene IV.** A pale mist still veils the prospect as at the end of the second scene. Loge and Wotan place Alberich on the ground and Loge dances around the pinioned Nibelung, mockingly snapping his fingers at the prisoner. Wotan joins Loge in his mockery of Alberich. The Nibelung asks what he must give for his freedom. "Your hoard and your glittering gold," is Wotan's answer. Alberich assents to the ransom and Loge frees the gnome's right hand. Alberich raises the ring to his lips and murmurs a secret behest. The Nibelungs emerge from the cleft and heap up the hoard. Then, as Alberich stretches out the ring toward them, they rush in terror toward the cleft, into which they disappear. Alberich now asks for his freedom, but Loge throws the Tarnhelmet on to the heap. Wotan demands that Alberich also give up the ring. At these words dismay and terror are depicted on the Nibelung's face. He had hoped to save the ring, but in vain. Wotan tears it from the gnome's finger. Then Alberich, impelled by hate and rage, curses the ring. The **Motive of the Curse**:



To it should be added the syncopated measures expressive of the ever-threatening and ever-active **Nibelung's Hate**:



Amid heavy thuds of the Motive of Servitude Alberich vanishes in the cleft.

The mist begins to rise. It grows lighter. The Giant Motive and the Motive of Eternal Youth are heard, for the giants are approaching with Freia. Donner, Froh, and Fricka hasten to greet Wotan. Fasolt and Fafner enter with Freia. It has grown clear except that the mist still hides the distant castle. Freia's presence seems to have restored youth to the gods. Fasolt asks for the ransom for Freia. Wotan points to the hoard. With staves the giants measure off a space of the height and width of Freia. That space must be filled out with treasure.

Loge and Froh pile up the hoard, but the giants are not satisfied even when the Tarnhelmet has been added. They wish also the ring to fill out a crevice. Wotan turns in anger away from them. A bluish light glimmers in the rocky cleft to the right, and through it Erda rises. She warns Wotan against retaining possession of the ring. The Erda Motive bears a strong resemblance to the Rhine Motive.

The syncopated notes of the Nibelung's Malevolence, so threateningly indicative of the harm which Alberich is plotting, are also heard in Erda's warning.

Wotan, heeding her words, throws the ring upon the hoard. The giants release Freia, who rushes joyfully towards the gods. Here the Freia Motive combined with the Flight Motive, now no longer agitated but joyful, rings out gleefully. Soon, however, these motives are interrupted by the Giant and Nibelung motives, and later the Nibelung's Hate and Ring Motive. For Alberich's curse already is beginning its dread work. The giants dispute over the spoils, their dispute waxes to strife, and at last Fafner slays Fasolt and snatches the ring from the dying giant, while as the gods gaze horror-stricken upon the scene, the Curse Motive resounds with crushing force.

Loge congratulates Wotan on having given up the curse-laden ring. But even Fricka's caresses, as she asks Wotan to lead her into Walhalla, cannot divert the god's mind from dark

thoughts, and the Curse Motive accompanies his gloomy reflections -- for the ring has passed through his hands. It was he who wrested it from Alberich -- and its curse rests on all who have touched it.

Donner ascends to the top of a lofty rock. He gathers the mists around him until he is enveloped by a black cloud. He swings his hammer. There is a flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and lo! the cloud vanishes. A rainbow bridge spans the valley to Walhalla, which is illuminated by the setting sun.

Wotan eloquently greets Walhalla, and then, taking Fricka by the hand, leads the procession of the gods into the castle.

The music of this scene is of wondrous eloquence and beauty. Six harps are added to the ordinary orchestral instruments, and as the variegated bridge is seen their arpeggios shimmer like the colours of the rainbow around the broad, majestic **Rainbow Motive**:



Then the stately Walhalla Motive resounds as the gods gaze, lost in admiration, at the Walhalla. It gives way to the Ring Motive as Wotan speaks of the day's ills; and then as he is inspired by the idea of begetting a race of demigods to conquer the Nibelungs, there is heard for the first time the **Sword Motive**:



The cries of the Rhinedaughters greet Wotan. They beg him to restore the ring to them. But Wotan must remain deaf to their entreaties. He gave the ring, which he should have restored to the Rhinedaughters, to the giants, as ransom for Freia.

The Walhalla Motive swells to a majestic climax and the gods enter the castle. Amid shimmering arpeggios the Rainbow Motive resounds. The gods have attained the height of their glory -- but the Nibelung's curse is still potent, and it will bring woe upon all who have possessed or will possess the ring until it is restored to the Rhinedaughters. Fasolt was only the first victim of Alberich's curse.