

By Richard Freed © 2009

Richard Freed, now in his eighteenth season as program annotator for the Flint Symphony Orchestra, is a former music critic for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review*. His credentials include service as assistant to the director of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, executive director of the Music Critics Association, record critic for *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Post*, and program annotator for the St. Louis Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Houston Symphony, National Symphony (Washington, D.C.) and Philadelphia Orchestras. He has received two ASCAP-Deems Taylor Awards for his concert and record annotations, and a Grammy Award for the latter. In 2003, the President of Finland awarded him the medal of Knight First Class in the Order of the Lion of Finland.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born April 1, 1873, Semyonovo, Russia

Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California

Rachmaninoff was a respected composer before he reached age 20, with several works in various forms to his credit. Tchaikovsky, in fact, interrupted work on his own final symphony, the *Pathétique*, in May 1893 to attend the premiere of Rachmaninoff's opera *Aleko* in Moscow. But the premiere of the younger composer's First Symphony, given in St. Petersburg in March 1897, conducted by another precocious Russian composer, Alexander Glazunov, was such a dismal failure that Rachmaninoff went into a period of depression that interrupted his creative activity for nearly three years. Toward the end of 1899 he consulted a psychotherapist, Dr. Nikolai Dahl, who was to become godfather to the Second Concerto, and to whom the grateful composer dedicated this work.

Dr. Dahl's specialty was treating such disorders as Rachmaninoff's through auto-suggestion. As an accomplished amateur violinist and ardent chamber music player himself, he was especially solicitous toward his new patient, with whom he had *daily* sessions from January through April of 1900, more or less hypnotizing Rachmaninoff and repeating to him over and over, "You will begin to write your concerto. . . You will work with great facility. . . . Your concerto will be of excellent quality . . ." Before the year was out, Rachmaninoff actually performed the second and third movements of his C-minor Concerto in a Moscow concert conducted by his cousin and teacher Alexander Siloti, and on November 9, 1901, he and Siloti performed the work in full with the Moscow Philharmonic.

Even then, complete self-confidence was still elusive. Less than a week before the concerto's full premiere, Rachmaninoff was tormenting himself with doubts about the work. To Nikita Morozov, who had undertaken an analysis of the score, he wrote that in playing through the first movement

it only now becomes clear to me that the transition from the first theme to the second is not any good, that as it stands now the first theme is not the first theme but an introduction, and that no fool will believe when I begin to play the second theme that it is the beginning of the Concerto. I feel the whole first movement is spoilt, and from this minute on it is repulsive to me. I am simply in despair. And why did

you start with this analysis of yours five days before the performance?!!!

Despite those misgivings, the concerto was a huge success. Less than a year after the premiere Siloti played the solo part in St. Petersburg with Arthur Nikisch conducting, and they then took the work on a very successful European tour. In 1904 Rachmaninoff received the Glinka prize for the concerto, which by then had established itself with audiences everywhere. Like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff knew how to create a good tune, and two of the themes in this work, like so many of Tchaikovsky's, were adapted for popular songs in our country in the 1940s. The first-movement theme became *I Think of You*, and the big theme in the finale (not actually invented by Rachmaninoff, he said, but given to him by Morozov) was fitted out with the immortal verses of *Full Moon and Empty Arms*. Neither song's text, fortunately, is likely to intrude itself into the minds of today's listeners.

Between these outer movements, both filled to the brim with striking color and rhythmic effects as well as melodic abundance, is a slow movement that must be regarded as one of the most exalted products of Rachmaninoff's inspiration. The delicacy of the scoring, the tasteful balance of the various elements, and the unforced genuineness of the emotional content add up to expressiveness on the most intimate level, and perhaps a poetic one as well. Just as this exquisite *Adagio sostenuto* is no mere interlude, the dramatic outer movements, with their more urgently melodic substance, are no mere frame for it. The measure of Rachmaninoff's genius is in the even and sustained level of this remarkable work's appeal, from the first bar to the last, and from the composer's time to our own. ■

The Ring Without Words

RICHARD WAGNER

Born May 22, 1813, Leipzig

Died February 13, 1883, Venice

Arranged by Lorin Maazel (born 1930)

Wagner composed the text and music of the four music dramas that constitute *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Nibelung's Ring") between 1848 and 1874. *Das Rheingold* was given its premiere in Munich on September 22, 1869; *Die Walküre* was introduced there on June 26, 1870. Both *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* ("Twilight of the Gods") were first performed as parts of the integral four-part work in the opening season of Wagner's *Festspielhaus* at Bayreuth in the summer of 1876, on August 16 and 17, respectively. Lorin Maazel made this arrangement of music from *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the suggestion of the producers of his recordings for Telarc Records; the first performance was the one he recorded for that label, with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, in December 1987. Mr. Maazel has since performed this edition with several orchestras, and other conductors have taken it up.

It was Wagner himself who initiated the practice of presenting excerpts from his operas in orchestral concerts. Reversing the usual procedure, he composed and performed the Overture to *Die Meistersinger* before he wrote the music for the opera itself. The Paris version of *Tannhäuser* was introduced by the original Dresden version of the overture; the so-called Paris version of the combined "Overture and

Venusberg Music" was actually introduced in a concert in Vienna. In that same city, when the Opera backed out of its commitment to produce *Tristan und Isolde*, a musician Wagner admired—Johann Strauss, the Waltz King—gave the premiere of the concert piece known now as the "Prelude and Liebestod." In his later years Wagner delegated the preparation of concert pieces from *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal* to his young colleague Engelbert Humperdinck, whom we remember now as the composer of *Hänsel und Gretel*.

To be sure, orchestral material from other operas, both before Wagner's and since, has made its way into the concert repertoire, but none has so justified its place there as his has, by virtue of its symphonic character and its crucial importance in the staged dramas. Nearly 75 years ago the conductor Leopold Stokowski created and recorded, with the Philadelphia Orchestra, "symphonic syntheses" of Wagner operas which included a bit of connecting tissue as well as the standard concert excerpts, and occasionally involved singers as well as the orchestra.

About five years after Lorin Maazel recorded the arrangement Enrique Diemecke brings us in this evening's concert, the Dutch musician Henk de Vlieger created a similar "synthesis" of the four *Ring* dramas for the conductor Edo de Waart, using several of the familiar excerpts and providing his own continuing links. Mr. de Waart, who named his compatriot's version *The Ring: An Orchestral Adventure*, introduced it in February 1992 with the Netherlands Radio Orchestra.

Actually, it was RCA Victor's producer of Stokowski's Philadelphia recordings, Charles O'Connell, a legend in his own right, who coined the term "symphonic synthesis" for that conductor's arrangements of music from Wagner's operas (and from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* as well). In Lorin Maazel's case it was his own recording producers, at Telarc, who suggested that he arrange music from the *Ring*—enough of it to fill a compact disc—and Mr. Maazel devised his own title, which covers all the bases in its inspired simplicity: *The Ring Without Words*.

What Mr. Maazel has done in *The Ring Without Words* is rather different from what Stokowski, Henk de Vlieger, and Wagner himself (with or without Humperdinck's assistance) offered for the concert hall. The familiar concert staples from the four operas are represented here, but as part of a seamless ongoing narrative rather than separate pieces, and in this case all of the connecting tissue is Wagner's own, though in keeping with the symphonic context any and all vocal passages are reassigned to instruments. In introducing this arrangement, Mr. Maazel recalled his own experience in working at Bayreuth with the producer Wieland Wagner, the composer's grandson, who stressed the importance of the orchestra in these stage works: "the text behind the text, the universal subconscious that binds Wagner's personae one to the other and to the proto-ego of legend." In undertaking *The Ring Without Words*, Mr. Maazel set himself four elemental guidelines:

1. The synthesis must be free-flowing (no stops) and chronological, beginning with the first note of *Rheingold* and finishing with the last chord of *Götterdämmerung*.
2. The transitions must be harmonically and periodically justifiable, the pacing contrasts commensurate with the length of the work.
3. Most all of the music originally written for orchestra with-

out voice must be used, adding those sections with a vocal line essential to a synthesis and only where the line is either doubled by an orchestral instrument, "imaginable" or in the rare instance, when it can be reproduced by an instrument.

4. Every note must be Wagner's own.

"Though no conscious attempt was made to include all the *Ring*'s motifs," Mr. Maazel added, "most of them do surface in one form or another." By way of further guidance, the following synopsis of the action in the *Ring* may be helpful.

DAS RHEINGOLD

Das Rheingold, which Wagner designated a prologue to the remaining works in the *Ring* cycle, is conspicuously shorter than any of them, laid out as a single act with four scenes. The evocative Prelude introduces the three Rhinemaidens—Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde—in their watery home. The dwarf Alberich appears on the river bank, eager to join them in their sport; they taunt him flirtatiously until the sun comes out to reveal the Rhinegold amid the underwater rocks. The maidens sing of its mystic powers. Wellgunde reveals to Alberich that a ring made from this gold would make its owner master of all the world. She and her sisters are not too worried, since no one would be willing to make the renunciation of love that would be required in order to make such a ring. But Alberich is quite ready: he pronounces a curse upon love and makes off with the gold, leaving the Rhinemaidens weeping.

In Scene 2, dawn breaks over the Rhine Valley. Wotan (chief of the gods, known in Norse legends as Odin) and Fricka ("Mrs. Fricka Wotan," as Anna Russell liked to identify her) awaken on the bank. In the background the sun strikes Valhalla, the castle built for Wotan by the giants Fasolt and Fafner, who are to receive in payment Fricka's younger sister Freia, the goddess of youth. Wotan made that bargain without consulting his wife, who is horrified to learn of it now. I only wanted a castle, she tells Wotan, "so you'd have a nice home and quit chasing girls all over the world." His response is that it's his male prerogative to go adventuring—"but I have great respect for women (remember, I gave up an eye to get you for my wife) and I surely don't intend to give your sister to any giants." Wotan is counting on Loge, the god of fire and of deceit, to save the day, but Fasolt and Fafner are outraged when Wotan tells them they'd better forget about Freia and accept some other form of payment. They can't do that, says Fafner, because without Freia they would lose their eternal youth and die. Freia's two brothers—Donner, god of thunder, and Froh, god of the rainbow—step in to protect her. Then Loge arrives to point out to Wotan that there is no way out of the bargain he made with the two giants, unless he can manage to get the Rhinegold back from Alberich for the Rhinemaidens. Wotan likes the idea of being master of the world; Freia likes the idea of the gold's enabling her to hold on to her husband. When Donner adds that they must get the ring from Alberich in order to avoid becoming his slaves, Wotan decides to go after it and the giants agree to accept it in payment for building Valhalla, but they hold on to Freia as hostage while Wotan and Loge head for Alberich's lair, Nibelheim.

There, surrounded by Nibelungs enslaved by the power of the *Ring* and working at forges to increase Alberich's treasure, he makes his appearance in the company of Mime, whom he

has ordered to forge a cap of gold—the Tarnhelm—which will give the wearer the power of changing into any form he may wish, or of becoming invisible. Alberich puts the cap on his head, chooses the latter option, and gives Mime a drubbing. When he becomes visible again, he finds Loge and Wotan in his treasury, and orders the Nibelung slaves to leave. He tells his uninvited guests (who claim to have come simply out of curiosity) that with his magic powers he is determined to enslave the gods and force them to renounce love, as he has done. Alberich shows off the powers of the Tarnhelm by rendering himself invisible and then taking the form of a dragon, and then, at Loge's suggestion, a toad—whereupon Wotan traps him under his foot and Loge takes possession of the helmet. Wotan and Loge take Alberich (now in his own form) with them as they return to the surface world.

Back on their mountain top, Wotan and Loge demand the Rhinegold and all of Alberich's treasure as the dwarf's ransom. His slaves bring everything to him and he is forced to hand it all over to Wotan—with a curse, however, upon Wotan and anyone into whose hands the Ring may pass. Fasolt and Fafner return Freia in exchange for the gold. Loge maintains that the Ring must be returned to the Rhinemaidens, but Wotan is determined to keep it, until Erda, the earth-mother (and mother of the three Norns) appears and urges him to surrender it in order to avoid the consequences of Alberich's curse. Wotan finally tosses the Ring onto the treasure pile to buy Freia's freedom, and within minutes the Ring claims its first victim when the two giants fight over the division of the ransom and Fafner beats his brother to death. Fricka now declares it's time to take possession of Valhalla, since it is fully paid for. Donner clears away the mists surrounding the castle, and Froh directs his fellow gods to enter by way of a Rainbow Bridge. Wotan raises a sword left behind from the treasure taken by Fafner, and the lamentations of the Rhinemaidens below gradually die away under the procession of the gods over the Rainbow Bridge.

DIE WALKÜRE

Once Valhalla was built and occupied, Wotan and Erda became the parents of the Valkyries, nine Amazon-like warrior women who ride their horses through the air to bear the bodies of slain heroes to the castle, where they are restored to life to defend the place. Wotan was by no means finished with his interminable begetting at that point, but descended to Earth to father the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, in hopes that the lad will grow up to get rid of Fafner and restore the Ring to the Rhinemaidens to end the curse. The twins, however, are separated and have no knowledge of their background. Sieglinde is eventually abducted and married to Hunding, while Siegmund endures a life of wandering and hardship. In the first scene of *Die Walküre* he stumbles across Hunding's hut and asks for refuge from Sieglinde, who shows Siegmund the tree growing in the middle of the hut: in its trunk is the sword *Nothung*, which Wotan had embedded there to be withdrawn by a worthy hero. Siegmund confidently pulls it from the trunk and dashes out with Sieglinde, leaving Hunding more than a little irritated. Fricka, who among her other godly duties is guardian of marriage vows, insists to Wotan that he take Hunding's side when the inevitable duel takes place. Brünnhilde, Wotan's favorite among his Valkyrie daughters, pleads for Siegmund, but to no avail: when she comes to his aid in the fight, Wotan himself shatters the sword *Nothung* with his own spear, allowing Siegmund to be killed

by Hunding—whom the god then dispatches in a gesture of contempt. Before her father can deal with her, Brünnhilde gathers the fragments of *Nothung* and gives them to Sieglinde, who is soon to bear Siegmund's son.

Now the broken-hearted chief of the gods must punish his rebellious favorite daughter. In what is perhaps the earliest of all such myths, Wotan sings a sorrowful farewell to Brünnhilde, who has extracted one promise from him: rather than leave her to be claimed by just anyone, he surrounds her with a magic fire and causes her to sleep until she shall be awakened by—again—a worthy hero.

SIEGFRIED

Sieglinde has died giving birth to that hero, Siegmund's son Siegfried, who has been raised by Mime (Alberich's brother as well as his servant). Mime occupies a cave in the forest, not far from one in which Fafner, now in the form of a dragon, guards his treasure, the Rhinegold. Mime's plan is to put the fragments of the sword *Nothung* back together so Siegfried can use it to kill Fafner. In the opening of *Siegfried* Wotan, disguised as a nameless Wanderer, pops in on Mime and states his prophecy: The sword will be forged only by a hero. Mime understands that this means only Siegfried can put *Nothung* back together, and he resolves to do away with him once he has eliminated Fafner. Siegfried indeed forges the sword, and he and Mime seek out Fafner. In dispatching the dragon, Siegfried scorches his finger in its blood and when he puts it to his mouth finds that he can understand the language of the birds. One of them warns him of Mime's treacherous plans, and also tells him where to find the sleeping Brünnhilde. Siegfried quickly slays Mime and then follows the bird to the fire-circled rock on which Brünnhilde sleeps. When Wotan, as the Wanderer, challenges him he simply reverses the procedure in the duel between his father and Hunding by shattering the god's spear with his sword—and then makes his way through the fire to waken Brünnhilde and claim her as his bride.

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

The three Norns foretell the end of the gods. With the coming of dawn, Siegfried gives the Ring to Brünnhilde and leaves her to travel along the Rhine in pursuit of adventure—which he finds at the hall of the Gibichungs. Resident there are Alberich's son Hagen, his half-brother Gunther and his half-sister Gutrune. Hagen knows who Siegfried is and loses no time in plotting his death—first, however, giving him a potion that makes him forget Brünnhilde so he can be married to Gutrune. Hagen in fact sends Siegfried to bring Brünnhilde to marry Gunther, so that the Ring will pass into his (Hagen's) possession. Meanwhile Brünnhilde's sister and fellow Valkyrie Waltraute finds her and begs her to return the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, but Brünnhilde refuses and returns to her slumber. Now Siegfried once more makes his way through the magic fire, but this time by wearing the Tarnhelm, in the form of Gunther. He takes the Ring from Brünnhilde's finger and takes her back with him to the Gibichungs' hall as Gunther's unwilling bride. At what is to be a double wedding, at Hagen's command, Siegfried, in his drugged state, fails to recognize Brünnhilde, but she of course recognizes him, and spotting the Ring on his finger she lashes out against him for his perfidy. And then she conspires with Gunther and Hagen to kill her husband.

PROGRAM NOTES

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Hagen, Gunther, and their comrades in a hunting party come upon Siegfried as he rests on the banks of the Rhine, where the Rhinemaidens have been begging him to return the Ring. Hagen gives him a different drug, this one to restore his memory, and as he declares his love for Brünnhilde Hagen sends a spear into his back. Siegfried's body is carried back to the Gibichungs' hall, where Hagen kills Gunther in a quarrel over the Ring. Hagen is frightened off in his attempt to remove the Ring from Siegfried's finger, when the dead hero's hand rises defiantly. Brünnhilde, understanding clearly now, orders a funeral pyre built; she easily removes the Ring from Siegfried's finger and places it on her own, then mounts her horse and rides into the flames. The Gibichungs' hall collapses, the Rhine overflows and fills what is left of it, and when Hagen tries to clutch the Ring from Brünnhilde the Rhinemaidens drag him under the water. The flames reach Valhalla, and the rule of the gods is ended. ■