

DIE VALKYRIE

Richard Wagner; the second music drama in the Ring of the Nibelung

Wandering the earth as the human Wälse, Wotan fathered two children with a human woman, the Wälsung twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde. Designating Siegmund as the one who would retrieve the Ring from Fafner, Wotan separated the twins. Sieglinde entered a loveless marriage with Hunding, while Siegmund was put through endless trials, all the while being kept ignorant of his parentage and purpose in life.

Act One

An exhausted Siegmund seeks shelter from a raging storm. As he is revived and tended by Sieglinde, the two of them are attracted to each other. Hunding, returning home, invites Siegmund to tell his life story. Years ago, Siegmund returned from hunting with his father to find their home burnt down, his mother murdered, and his twin sister abducted.

Today, he has killed savages who were forcing their sister into marriage, and is fleeing from the family's vengeance. Realizing that Siegmund has killed his own kinsmen, Hunding is obliged to offer his enemy shelter for the night but warns that he will have to fight for his life the next morning. Understanding his predicament, Siegmund calls upon his father's promise of a sword in time of need.

Sieglinde, having drugged her husband's drink, feels free to tell her own life story: At her wedding to Hunding, a stranger thrust a sword into the tree trunk that stands in the middle of their house. The pair recognizes that they are Wälse's twin children. Naming the sword "Nothung" (the needed one), Siegmund wrests it free. Brother and sister embrace rapturously and flee into the night.

Act Two

Wotan orders his daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, to ensure Siegmund's safety in his battle with Hunding. Fricka, the goddess of marriage and fidelity, demands that he honor wedlock and punish the incestuous lovers. Wotan yields, but when alone with Brünnhilde vents his humiliation. He explains that in order to protect the gods, he has sired nine Valkyrie-daughters who will bring to Valhalla heroes for its defense. To restore the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, he has also raised Siegmund as a lawless warrior and has given him the sword, Nothung. But Fricka has made Wotan realize that Siegmund is not the free agent he had envisioned, and he is forced to resign himself to the power of her argument. He instructs his daughter to protect Hunding instead. She resists, but fails to change his mind. When Siegmund learns that he must follow Brünnhilde to Valhalla, but that his sister-lover may not join him, he refuses and aims his sword to kill Sieglinde. Moved by Siegmund's heroism, Brünnhilde relents, promising her protection. In the ensuing fight, she shields him until Wotan arrives and shatters Siegmund's sword with his spear. Hunding kills Siegmund, and Wotan, dispatching Hunding, sets off in pursuit of Brünnhilde, who has fled with Sieglinde and the fragments of Nothung.

Act Three

The Valkyries gather with their heroes culled from battle. When none of her sisters will risk helping her, Brünnhilde bids Sieglinde escape, giving her the fragments of Siegmund's sword from which one day the lovers' son will forge a new weapon. Sieglinde, ecstatic over the news of her pregnancy, flees into the forest. Wotan sentences Brünnhilde to be confined to eternal sleep, defenseless against the first man to wake her. She reminds her father that his true desire was to protect his son, and asks that she be encircled by fire that only the bravest hero can penetrate. Wotan concedes and bids his favorite daughter a sad farewell.