

Virginia  
Opera

Presents

# DIE WALKÜRE

Music by :

[Richard Wagner](#)



Study Guide

## 2010-2011 SEASON

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# Premiere

Munich, Königliches Hof- und National Theater, 26 June 1870; first performance as part of the complete *Ring des Nibelungen* at Bayreuth, 14 August 1876.

## Characters and Voice Types

(in order of appearance). Wagner somewhat loosely designates the vocal categories for the Valkyries in the autograph manuscript.

## Principal Characters in the Opera

Sigmund	tenor
Sieglinde	soprano
Hunding	bass
Wotan	baritone
Brünnhilde	soprano
Fricka	mezzo-soprano
Gerhilde	soprano
Waltraute	mezzo-soprano
Schwertleite	mezzo-soprano
Ortlinde	soprano
Helmwige	soprano
Siegrune	mezzo-soprano
Rossweisse	mezzo-soprano
Grimgerde	mezzo-soprano

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1845 Richard Wagner decided to write an opera based on material from the old German poetry, “Song of the Nibelungs.” At that time he was much involved in liberal politics and he saw the opportunity to make ethical and moral points allegorically; after the 1848 Revolution he was exiled from his native Germany to Switzerland for firebrand political activities. He initially planned an opera called *Siegfried’s Death*, which decades later became *Götterdämmerung*. As he prepared the libretto he found that more and more situations in the story needed explaining and eventually wrote *Young Siegfried* (now *Siegfried*), *Siegmond und Sieglinde* (*Die Walküre*), and *Das Rheingold*. The story was written backwards, as it were, but he composed the music starting at the beginning with *Das Rheingold*.

*Die Walküre* remains the most popular and most often performed opera from Wagner’s *Ring* cycle. Although he took over twenty years to complete the composition of the cycle, when he did work on it he accomplished much in a short time. The first act of *Die Walküre* in particular was written at a feverish pitch in the winter of 1854 and the spring of 1855. Perhaps his imagination was captured by the illicit love between Siegmund and Sieglinde, for Wagner himself was involved with Mathilde von Wesendonck, the wife of one of his major benefactors, the Swiss industrialist Otto, a typical Wagnerian gesture. Through the characters of Hunding and Fricka, Wagner was able to attack conventional ideas of marriage and his own first wife, Minna. Unrelated to Wagner personally, however, is the other and more shocking aspect of the love between Sieglinde and Siegmund—they were born twin brother and sister. Somehow Wagner’s music is able to weave a magic spell over this repellent idea and we find ourselves approving of their passionate love for each other and repelled by Hunding’s crudeness.

The composer called *Die Walküre* the first day of his trilogy of operas comprising *The Ring of Nibelungs*. While most people would consider *The Ring* to consist of four operas each of an entire evening’s entertainment, Wagner looked upon *Das Rheingold* as a prologue, although it is over two hours in length and could hardly be given on the same evening as *Die Walküre*. Nevertheless, *Das Rheingold* does serve as a prologue to the rest of the cycle, for it is only with *Die Walküre* that things really start happening. *Das Rheingold*, although possessed of beautiful music, is somewhat static in both action and characters. It is about gods, giants, and dwarfs and power through gold. Wagner is writing a drama about ethics and the meaningless nature of worldly possessions. In the world of *The Ring*, love, not money, is everything. In the words of the opera authority William Mann, not only is love all-powerful, but

Fear is the beginning of death, and humanity’s struggle for power is rooted in fear. Everybody in *Das Rheingold* ultimately succumbs to fear. The only solution to this predicament is fearless love. But Wotan’s misdeeds can only be put to rights by the self-sacrificial heroism of some independent agent. Not a god, a dwarf, or a giant. And therefore man had to be created by the gods so that he might right the wrong and supplant the gods as ruler of the world. The creation of man was an act of willful self-destruction by the gods.

It is therefore no coincidence that *Die Walküre*, and in particular its first act, contain the most glorious music in the cycle and that this is the most loved and most often performed opera from the tetralogy. The first act of the opera seems especially warm and passionate to us because Siegmund and Sieglinde are the first humans to appear in *The Ring* and Wagner responded to this in his music. Although the second and third acts of the opera deal extensively with Wotan and Brünnhilde, father and daughter are at odds because of Siegmund and Sieglinde, and *Die Walküre* is really *their* opera.

# DETAILED STORY NARRATIVE

## Act 1

As the opera opens the orchestra portrays a wild storm. Then Siegmund the Walsing (Volsung) is exhausted from escaping through the forest from his enemies. He stumbles into a house for shelter. It is the home of Sieglinde the Hunding. Sieglinde and Siegmund feel an immediate attraction toward each other.

They are soon interrupted by Hunding, who demands to know the identity of the visitor. Siegmund identifies himself as “Woeful” and tells of his life, which has been full of disasters (**“Friedmund darf ich nich heissen”**). He then learns that Hunding is a relative of his enemies. Hunding declares that they will sleep, but in the morning he and Siegmund will fight to the death. Siegmund, left alone, calls on his father Wälse for the sword, called “Nothung” (Needful) he was once promised. Sieglinde returns, having given Hunding a sleeping potion.

She tells Siegmund about her wedding, where a one-eyed stranger appeared and inserted a sword into a tree which no one has been able to pull out (**Der Männer Sippe**). Sieglinde tells Siegmund how unhappy her marriage is; and he embraces her and claims that he will free her from her bondage, a forced marriage. Moonlight floods the room and Siegmund compares their love to the coming of Spring (**“Winterstürme wichen den Wonnemond”**).

Sieglinde hails him as Spring itself (**“Du bist der Lenz”**) and then asks if his father is really “Wolfe,” as he stated earlier. Siegmund says that his father’s name is actually Wälse and Sieglinde thus recognizes him as her twin brother, Siegmund. He extracts the sword from the tree and, claiming Sieglinde as a bride, escapes with her into the forest.

## Act 2

This act begins high in the mountains, in a rocky gorge. Against a stormy sky Wotan, the chief of the gods, orders his warrior daughter Brünnhilde to defend his mortal son, Siegmund. Brünnhilde is ecstatic to do his bidding and after noting the arrival of Fricka, goddess of marriage and wife of Wotan, flies off to do so (**“Hojotoho!”**).

Fricka is angry and demands from her husband that he defend Hunding’s marriage rights against Siegmund. Wotan implies, however, that Siegmund could save the gods by winning back the Ring from Fafner the dragon before the Nibelungen dwarfs get a hold of it. Wotan then realizes that if he does not enforce the law he will lose his powers and therefore must accede to his wife’s demands. Fricka leaves and Brünnhilde returns. Wotan tells her of the theft of the gold and Alberich’s curse on it (**“Als junger Liebe”**). Brünnhilde is astonished when her father, against his true wishes, orders her to fight for Hunding. She is left alone in the darkness and withdraws as she sees Siegmund and Sieglinde draw near. Siegmund is comforting the distraught Sieglinde, who does not feel worthy of him. Siegmund watches as she falls asleep. Brünnhilde appears to him as if in a vision and sings the announcement of death (**Todesverkündigung**): he will soon go to Valhalla (**“Siegmund! Sieh auf mich!”**). Siegmund declares that he will never leave Sieglinde and that if the sword has no power against Hunding, he will kill both himself and his bride. As a result of this, and despite Wotan’s command, Brünnhilde decides to help him and then vanishes. Hunding approaches and Siegmund accepts his challenge but as he is about to be victorious Wotan appears and, dismissing Brünnhilde, shatters Siegmund’s sword with a bolt of lightning. Hunding kills Siegmund and Brünnhilde escapes with Sieglinde and the broken sword. Wotan contemptuously tells Hunding to go kneel before Fricka and follows Brünnhilde, intending to punish her.

### Act 3

Atop the Valkyries' rock, Brünnhilde's eight warrior sisters have come together, bearing slain heroes to Valhalla ("**Ride of the Valkyries**"). They are surprised to see Brünnhilde arrive with Sieglinde. Hearing that she is fleeing Wotan's wrath, they are apprehensive about hiding her. Sieglinde is fraught with despair until Brünnhilde informs her that she is carrying Siegmund's child ("**O hehrste Wunder!**").

Eager to be saved, she accepts the pieces of the sword from Brünnhilde and flees into the forest to hide near Fafner's cave, where she will be safe from Wotan. When he appears, he decrees that Brünnhilde shall become a mortal woman and when her sisters protest he silences them by threatening them with the same fate. Alone with her father, Brünnhilde attempts to justify her actions by claiming that in disobeying him she had really acceded to his wishes ("**War es so schmähhlich?**").

Wotan, however, is unrelenting and decides that she must lie sleeping, prey to any man who comes across her. Brünnhilde, softening his anger, asks that in sleep she be surrounded by a wall of fire that can only be penetrated by the noblest of heroes. They both believe this will be the hero whom Sieglinde will bear. Sadly renouncing his daughter ("**Leb' wohl**"), Wotan kisses Brünnhilde's eyes, which will cause her to sleep and to become mortal. He then summons Loge, the spirit of fire, to encircle the rock. As the flames appear, Wotan sings an incantation forbidding access to the rock to anyone who is afraid of his spear ("**Magic Fire Music**").

# Meet the Composer Richard Wagner

Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813 to a theatrical family. He grew up wanting to be a poet and playwright but at the age of fifteen he discovered the music of Ludwig van Beethoven, was electrified by it, and decided to become a composer. Although he had almost three years of formal training in harmony, he never mastered an instrument and taught himself music largely through studying scores. As a student at Leipzig University he drank, dueded, and gambled. All of his life he shamelessly borrowed money he could not, or had no intention of, paying back. When in his early twenties, Wagner conducted in several small German theaters and began to compose operas. For example, in 1833 he took a position as chorus master at Würzburg where he became familiar with a great deal of the standard repertoire and where he wrote his first opera, *Die Feen* (The Fairies), a typical German fairy-tale opera of the period. It was only performed posthumously, in 1888. He decided to try to conquer Paris, the operatic capital of Europe, in 1839. During the two years he and his wife lived in the French capital, Wagner was unable to get an opera performed and was reduced to doing musical hackwork such as copying, in order to survive. In 1842 he returned to Germany for the premiere of his opera, *Rienzi*, based on the model of French Grand Opera. The work was a success and he was engaged as conductor of the Dresden Opera. There he spent six years, gaining fame as an opera conductor and composer. After the 1848 revolutions, Wagner had to flee to Switzerland for a combination of reasons, mainly his participation in insurrections and because he had accumulated large debts in Dresden. He hoped that a new society produced by revolution would cause his debts to be erased and would be more supportive of artistic activity. For several years he did not compose but instead theorized about the future of opera in various essays and worked on the libretto to the four operas comprising *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. His essays appeared in a volume published in 1851 called *Opera and Drama*.

In *Opera and Drama*, which was revised in 1868, Wagner's colossal ego comes through. His own works were clearly indebted to several musical sources such as the German operas of Weber, Marschner, and others, to the French grand operas of Meyerbeer and Auber, and to Italian bel canto opera, particularly Bellini's *Norma*, which Wagner had conducted and adored. Yet Wagner liked to construct musical smoke screens to make it appear that he was totally original, indebted to no one. Just as he never paid his monetary debts, so he never acknowledged musical ones – quite the opposite, for he spilled much ink denigrating both French and Italian opera as “tinsel opera,” where the audience went to be seen, seek romantic assignations, play chess, gamble, eat and drink, and listen to star singers perform dazzling circus feats of virtuosity, rather than pay attention to the drama. There is a much darker side to this, in fact: not only did Wagner denigrate French and Italian opera, he felt peoples of Latin and Semitic heritage were racially inferior to Germans. His autobiography, *Mein Leben* (My Life) later became the prototype for Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) and Wagner's music became inextricably linked with the Nazis to the point that his music is unofficially “banned” in Israel even today. All of this brings up the fascinating question of how such an unattractive, selfish, ruthless personality could write such glorious music, tied to “ethical” libretti.

A look at some of the principles stated in *Opera and Drama* will help explain Wagner's rationale. He criticized the opera of his own time as debased, superficial entertainment that catered to a degenerate society that was in need of redemption (the theme of many of his operas). He believed that drama had reached its zenith in ancient Greece and had been deteriorating for 2,000 years, partly because the dogmas of the Church conflicted with art. He felt that currently (after 1848) art could ennoble those who aspired to high ideals; and he was the one to lead the way, to redeem society, as it were. This was naturally a very idealistic time in Europe, and it is no coincidence that Karl Marx was simultaneously trying to redeem society in his own way. Wagner's strengths were not precisely politics or industry but music and literature and these were

the tools he planned to use in his quest to better society (and his own reputation). Alfred Einstein has called him a “power-politician in music.”

And Wagner certainly knew the power that music and art in general held in mid-nineteenth century Europe, especially with the void left because of the decline of organized religion after the French Revolution. Music itself became a kind of religion or a source of spirituality and opera in particular was a source of vicarious living, a supreme source of escape, as was the novel. (No work of art presents this concept more clearly than does Flaubert’s 1857 novel, *Madame Bovary*) Wagner, realizing all this, was like a Madison Avenue advertising executive; he “read his public” and gave them what they wanted and in consequence gained vast power and prestige. One can clearly see this by looking at how Wagner planned his own opera house – the *Festspielhaus* – he had built at Bayreuth. Earlier in the century composers such as Beethoven and Berlioz had promoted the idea of “artist-as-hero” in their compositions. Wagner took this exalted position still further with the concept of “artist-as-oracle.” First, he chose the isolated small town of Bayreuth for this theater. Audiences would not be surrounded by the confusion and tempting sensory delights (such as art museums) of a big city such as Munich or Berlin, but would come specifically to Bayreuth for one purpose only, to hear Wagner’s redemptive stage works. The theater was built on a hill as a place of special prominence, just as fortresses and cathedrals had been situated. Nor was this a typical opera house but instead was given a special name that connoted function: a *Festspielhaus* (festival playhouse) where the festival seasons were devoted entirely to the works of Wagner, with one exception, Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9. This still holds true today. As a place of worship, Bayreuth was kept dark, an innovation at the time, for the auditoriums of opera houses had always been as brightly lit as possible, so that the audience could see everyone’s fine clothing and jewelry and could socialize as much as possible. Wagner, however, wanted all attention focused on his message on stage, wanted the audience to have no worldly distractions from the drama. To further reduce distractions, he buried the orchestra underneath the stage, so that one cannot see the tops of the bassoons or the harps, or even the conductor beating time. Thus, the sound of the orchestra seems to emanate from a deep, mysterious source. And the operas were long, taking the listener relentlessly into Wagner’s special sound world. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that one is physically and psychologically altered after experiencing a Wagnerian performance. Of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner stated that “If it well performed, it should drive the listener insane.” The *Ring* itself is heard over a period of four nights and in experiencing it, one has devoted the better part of a week to Wagner’s world.

After 1851 Wagner considered that he no longer wrote operas, the name affixed to Italian and French entertainments; he instead called his works “music dramas” and the musical and literary features of the music drama helped, along with the features of his *Festspielhaus*, to further his ends. In the *Ring*, he chose Germanic-Teutonic mythology as the subject, not only because of his beliefs in Aryan supremacy, but because he believed this mythology could edify, could redeem. The musical texture was continuous in the orchestra, like a Beethoven symphony, constructed of musical themes called “leitmotifs” (leading motives), which Wagner called “melodic moments of feeling.” These could represent a thing, a person, or an idea, and were transformed musically to portray dramatic and psychological needs. The vocal part, in theory, was to be as far away from Italian singing style as possible; rather than a continuous vocal line, it was to be intermittent and declamatory. Thus, the whole idea of arias with pauses for applause was eliminated – the orchestral music kept flowing, taking the listener deeper and deeper into Wagner’s world. In order to heighten the musical and dramatic unity and thus the power of this music dramas, Wagner stated that all the elements of the work – text, music, costumes, sets, lighting, stage directions – should be guided by one hand, his own. This ideal fusion of the arts – which in fact German composers such as E.T.A. Hoffman and von Weber had been writing about for decades – Wagner called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total or collected work of art.

Wagner interrupted composition on *The Ring* cycle to compose two operas: the chromatic *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859, known for the “love-deaths” of the hero and heroine, and *Die Meistersinger*, his only “comedy,” in a diatonic C major. Each was in its own way necessary for the completion of Wagner’s major life’s work, *The Ring*; *Tristan* for the portrayal of death through passionate love in *Götterdämmerung*, and *Meistersinger*, for the fairy-tale setting of *Siegfried*, with its glorious C-major love duet between Brünnhilde and Siegfried at the end of the work. After Wagner finished *Tristan* he suffered several bad years. His revised version of *Tannhäuser* was a failure at the Paris Opéra (making him detest Paris even more than previously), *Tristan* was abandoned by the Vienna Opera as unperformable, and he was tormented by creditors.

He was rescued in 1864 by King Ludwig of Bavaria, who at age eighteen was a fanatical Wagnerian. Ludwig put the entire resources of the Munich Opera at Wagner’s disposal. At this time Wagner fell in love with Cosima Liszt von Bülow, the daughter of Franz Liszt and married to a close friend of Wagner’s, the conductor Hans von Bülow. While still married to von Bülow, Cosima gave birth to two children by Wagner. Thus did Richard Wagner repay friendship. After Wagner’s first wife died, he and Cosima were soon married.

Undoubtedly the high point of Wagner’s life was the opening of his own opera house, the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth. There in August of 1876, the first complete *Ring* cycle was given. Wagner’s final work was “the most sacred of all my works,” *Parsifal*, composed between 1877 and 1882. The following year Wagner died in Venice.

# A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

# The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b>Soprano</b>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<b>Mezzo-Soprano</b>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball)
<b>Tenor</b>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<b>Baritone</b>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<b>Verdi Baritone</b> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<b>Bass</b>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<b>Buffo Bass</b> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	<b>Basso Cantate</b> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

# Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

# Die Walküre Essay Questions

## Literature

1. Compare and contrast Wagner's *Die Walküre* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Find symbols and imagery common in both; how are they different?

## Mythology

2. List the Norse gods that are in *Die Walküre*. Like in all mythology Norse gods had certain responsibilities and "jobs." What were they and are there any similarities to Greek gods? If you were to add another God or Goddess to the opera what would their responsibility be and how would you make them affect the story?

## Music

3. Throughout history many have believed that Opera was about a "fat lady" with horns and braids, this is a falsehood. After you view the production what stereotypes about opera do you feel are really stereotypes?

## History

4. Research a part of Norse history and give a brief presentation or written report on it. You can research Gods and Goddess, the journeys the Vikings took, or even the way they lived.
5. Of the four operas in the "Ring Cycle" Wagner started with number four then he wrote number three, two and one. He realized that after he finished each one he needed a story before it to explain the events in each opera. Do you feel that writing these operas in reverse was beneficial to him or not, and what problems do you think this may have caused him? List movies, books or plays you can think of where the creator may have worked in reverse?