



ON THE TOWN

Where to go, who to see, and what to do for the month of April

ONE RING *to* RULE THEM ALL

An opera lover braces for a masterwork's landmark production.

DAS RHEINGOLD. APRIL 11–26.
\$50–390. BROWN THEATER,
WORTHAM THEATER CENTER,
501 TEXAS AVE. 713-228-6737.
HGO.ORG

I FIRST HEARD THE OPENING strains of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (better known as the Ring Cycle) in a graduate literature class, during a fellow student's presentation on Wagnerian influence in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Like many writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Proust worshipped the German master's operas, even using him as one of the models for the fictitious composer Vinteuil in the *Remembrance*.

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Just as Proust's seven-volume novel begins with the narrator in a liminal state between waking and sleeping, the opening note of *Das Rheingold*, the first of the Ring Cycle's four operas, seems to emerge from the depths of the unconscious. When my classmate started the recording, at first I didn't hear anything. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, I became aware of a deep, sustained note played on the double basses—so low and so quiet, I felt it before I heard it. The note was soon joined by a second, higher note to form a perfect fifth.

An E-flat and a B-flat. Those two notes are all the listener hears for 16 measures—about half a minute, although it feels longer—before the entrance of a majestic, ascending horn figure, the first of the Ring's famous leitmotifs, evoking the dawning of day. A few measures later, bubbling up from beneath the music like water from a hidden spring, the strings enter softly with a series of hypnotic arpeggios that grow faster and louder as the music builds to a tremendous crescendo, the curtain opens, and the three Rheinmaidens, mermaid-like creatures who guard the gold of the opera's title, burst into rapturous song.

The prelude has been widely interpreted as a musical representation of the origin of the world, with primordial matter giving birth to water and water giving birth to life. I had never heard anything like it. Yes, I was familiar with "Ride of the Valkyries" from its use in *Apocalypse Now*, and had heard a few other fragments of Wagner in a college music history course, but now, for the first time, I felt like I was actually *experiencing* the music. This is hardly an uncommon reaction. In 1868, after attending a concert of Wagner's works, Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Wagner's

friends (although they later fell out), wrote that "every nerve and fiber of my being is excited, and I can't think when I have experienced such a lasting sense of exaltation."

Few artists in history have inspired stronger passions—positive and negative—than Wagner, and no other musical work has attracted as many interpretations as the four-part, 15-hour Ring Cycle, composed over the course of 26 years, from 1848 to 1874. Everything about the Ring was revolutionary, from its music, to its ambition, to its staging. It was a project so enormous that it required the construction of its own theater in the provincial Bavarian town of Bayreuth, which still holds a festival devoted to Wagner's operas every summer.

In the broadest terms, the cycle tells the story of the downfall of the gods and the rise of men. Drawing on German folklore, Icelandic myths, and Ancient Greek drama, Wagner unfolds a tale of greed and revenge, heroism and love, and fills it with magicians, oracles, dwarfs, dragons, immortal (but hardly infallible) deities, as well as a golden ring that gives its bearer amazing power but carries a terrible curse.

The same might be said of Wagner's masterwork. Beginning in the late 19th century, right-wing German nationalists began interpreting the Ring as a parable about the decline of German culture and its regeneration through a race of blond, blue-eyed *übermensen*. Their cause was bolstered by Wagner's notorious anti-Semitism; in 1850, under a pseudonym, he wrote the essay "Judaism in Music," blaming the Jews for everything wrong with European civilization, and purporting to examine "the natural revulsion aroused in us by Jewishness." A half century af-