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## **Der Ring des Nibelungen**

**Hendrich, Hermann**

**Leipzig, [1924]**

English translation of Prof. W. Golther's introduction, by I. Amter

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**T**HE song of the Nibelungen has been the inspiration of a great number of famous works in drawing, painting and literature, revealing most varied possibilities of conception and reproduction; thus, for instance, the drawings of Peter Cornelius (1822), the mural paintings of Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1834), the exquisite edition de luxe of Josef Sattler (1904). In the same manner, numerous artists have devoted themselves to delineation of the Nibelungen drama in colour.

The works of Richard Wagner present splendid, forceful pictures not only in the figures but also in the scenes, for the poet both conceived and saw them with the physical eye. Since the Bayreuth Opera Season of 1896, when for the first time the figures partly suggested by Hans Thoma were placed in the rich, effective landscapes of Prof. Brückner, scenes of true artistic merit and yet composed and subtly coloured in the spirit of the drama were unfolded to the world. Wagner had given minute directions in his letters to Prof. Doepler and Josef Hoffmann, which may be found in the edition of "Bayreuth Letters" published in Berlin 1907; but they were only partially comprehended and fulfilled in 1876. These pictures were created solely for the stage: for movement and the variation of light effects. The plastic art, however, is governed by other laws. Many attempts have already been made by painters and designers to extract visually impressive pictures from Wagner's works, especially from the Ring, and to reproduce them in their own arts. As a rule, nevertheless, these attempts at reproduction are superficial and artificial, or are prompted by untrue or incomplete scenes, or have strange, inharmonious features woven into them.

By order of King Ludwig of Bavaria, Echter painted 30 frescoes in the "Residenz" Theatre in Munich, on subjects taken from the poem of the Ring; but these works no longer satisfy our understanding of beautiful form or artistic drapery. Theodor Pixis, Knut Ekwall, Konrad Dielitz, F. A. Kaulbach and Ferdinand Leeke did not deviate from the traditional lines dominating Doepler's figures and Josef Hoffmann's scenic pictures painted at Bayreuth in 1876. Hans Makart's scenes from the Ring are intended only for an immediate effect. Balestrieri's coloured etchings (Siegfried's funeral procession passing down the moonlit landscape on the Rhine) conducts us through the power of the etching needle from the wild-wooded, rocky valley of the Rhine to the Hall of the Gibichungen. The beautiful Rheingold works

of Wilhelm Weimar and Hans von Wolzogen, the 40 Ring pictures of Hugo L. Braune, the 15 Nibelungen cartoons of Hugo Knorr, show us the new tendencies that were given a solid foundation by Franz Stassen in his masterly Tristan and Parsifal productions and by the numerous pictures of Hermann Hendrich. Drawing is Stassen's art: his motives are the separate figures of the poem and their symbolical surroundings. He proceeds, however, far beyond the limits of the action on the stage. Hendrich is a painter: he emphasises the heroic landscape, the colour effects of the entire picture — he conjures up an atmosphere of Nature. The figures are of lesser importance in most of his pictures, and sometimes are wanting altogether. An example. The sad melody with which the third act of Tristan and Isolde begins and which predominates for some time — that which in the drama is only sound, is moulded by Hendrich into a scene of a deserted rocky heath and a wide expanse of sea, and the silent world about from which emanate such tones. The form of the shepherd rises in vague outlines out of the horizon of the sea. With Hendrich we see with the eye what we hear in the drama. The fundamental tone is the same. Hendrich is the poet-painter of German folk-lore, as revealed in his marvellous creations of the Walpurgis Hall at the scene of the Witches' Sabbath in the Harz Mts., the Hall of Myths in the Giant Mts., and the pictures to Goethe's tales. He perceives the spirits as they weave on hill and dale, in wood and meadow, water, wind and mist, and lets us look at them in his pictures. Hendrich supplements and enriches the impressions that he received from Wagner's dramas, from this unquenchable source of German mythology and lore, of legends of the old gods and heroes. He thus is able to produce new paintings, independent of each other, and manifesting a strong resemblance to the true pictures on the stage, yet at no time descending to mere imitations of them. Hendrich relates that a performance of Tannhäuser at Hanover made a deep impression on him. "Like a dream of fortune, there hovered about my soul the longing some day to be able to paint such pictures." And he tells of the time of his studies at Munich: "The Schack Gallery with its Böcklin pictures and the splendid performances of Wagner at the Court Theatre, exercised a great influence on me." These are the strongest roots of his German art.

The 14 pictures of the Ring represent various phases of artistic conception and production, adhering more or less to the poem. They supply in part, in the same

manner as the sad melody in *Tristan*, the dramatic action. The landscape stands forth prominently everywhere.

"Auf dem Grunde des Rheins (At the Bottom of the Rhine). The green light of dawn, upwards bright, downwards dark. The top of a reef rises in the middle of the rolling waters, brightening with the dawn. A bright shimmer penetrates the flood from above, bursting forth at a high spot on the middle reef into a luminous golden lustre. A magic golden light pierces through the waters. The Daughters of the Rhine are encircling the reef in a graceful swimming movement." The words of the poem are an exact description of the first picture, in which the nymphs are playing in the green, sunny, surging waves. The painter has adhered minutely to the poet, but the dramatic action — Alberich's greed — is purposely omitted.

Freias Garten (Freia's Garden), where the golden apples of life grow, stretches before us like a meadow full of flowers and edged with woods, at the foot of the Mount of the Gods. It is a peaceful, sunny lea along the Elbe, with young maids entwined in dance.

Nibelheim (Nibelungen Home) is illumined with a golden splendour, like the palace of Mammon in the Walpurgis Hall. Before Wotan and Loge glisten the treasures of the cavern, from the dark depths rise the coils of the huge, green reptile — the master and guardian of the treasures.

Walhall (Walhalla) is a mighty structure framed of rocks, towering above the summit of the mount. A bridge leads to the edifice bathed in the red rays of the setting sun: golden drops trickle down into the green Rhine. Down in the valley are the evening shadows, night is approaching, but "the brough lifts its head in the heavenly glow" and offers shelter against night and greed.

"Far from here follow me then, out to the smiling home of the Spring" — Siegmund has fled with Sieglinde to the forest, which lies shrouded in the moonlight and the charm of spring. Driven from here by the storm, the Walsung had sought refuge in Hunding's house. Now the ties are torn, the home of the enemy is behind them.

Der Walkürenritt (The Ride of the Valkyrs) grows out of the picture of the thunderstorm: "Flights of clouds sweep by the edge of the rocks, as if driven by the storm. In the flash of the lightning, the Valkyrs are to be seen mounted on steeds". Birds announcing the storm precede them, the trees bend their proud tops, a fallow light lies on the land over which the gust of the wind takes its way.

Wotans Abschied (Wotan's Departure): On a low mound of moss lies Brunnhilde, covered with the long shield of the Valkyrs. Her features stand forth sharply

against the background of the glowing fire. Wotan stands before her, his look lingering once more upon her in pain, ere the god departs to leave his dearest child in the flames of the holy glow.

Waldweben (Whispers of the Woods), the sultry glow of midday on the rocks, on which lies the dragon basking in the sun at the entrance to the cavern. Beneath the linden is shadow and the cool breath of the murmuring spring.

Fearlessly the hero advances to meet the serpent in bloody combat at the deserted spot where Fafner creeps forth to quench his thirst.

Brunnhilde slumbers under the broad-boughed fir, still wrapt in night. In the background, the red of the dawn blends with the dull glow of the flames, he who should wake her is approaching, and soon the Valkyr is kissed back to light and life, and greets the sunlit day in an outburst of holy joy.

On a hill encompassed by a wide circle of fire rises the "ash of the world". The Norns are weaving the golden rope of Fate, at their feet bubbles a spring, whispering of wisdom. The world-tree of the Edda and the fir at the Brunnhilde Stone are moulded into one idea.

"On lofty seat, silent and dark, the shivered spear firm in his fist" — this the giant-image, the lord of the mountain, Wotan, spying from the summit into the heights and deeps, awaiting the end that the mournful song of the Norns has foreboded.

Siegfrieds Tod (Siegfried's Death) suggests the description in the song of the Nibelungen: The hero stoops down to the spring when Hagen's spear strikes him. Pale and bleeding, he falls among the flowers. The yellow evening light of the sun sinking to rest shines through the branches of the trees: the deep blue shadows of death fall upon this place of murder. All Nature mourned when the valiant Balder fell.

"The men raise Siegfried's body on the shield, and carry it away slowly over the rocky heights, in a solemn procession. The moon breaks through the clouds and illumines the funeral cortege on the heights." Wotan's last proud heroic thought, the last Walsung, is borne to the funeral pyre, to be consumed in the flames. The awful reveals itself to our eyes in the march of the mighty shadows cast by the light of the moon on the rocky wall above the Rhine and beneath the Hall of the Gibichungen. Siegfried in the realm of shades, "the race of the gods gone out like a breath" — this the tragic end of the hero shown to us in powerful lines by a masterly hand, this Wotan's dream of man's honour, eternal power and endless fame realized in Walhalla and the Walsungen.

