

Among the many surviving post-war *Ring* cycles, the 1959 Covent Garden performances occupy a particularly fascinating place. They unite an almost ideal cast of Bayreuth veterans with one of the great Wagner conductors of the German tradition, all captured in vivid BBC broadcast sound from a house whose Wagner performances had, by this time, become annual landmarks for British listeners. Heard today, this *Rheingold* offers not merely a starry cast list but a revealing snapshot of Wagner performance practice at the close of the 1950s: a style rooted in textual clarity, dramatic momentum and vocal characterisation, with the orchestra driven less toward symphonic monumentality than toward theatrical urgency. It is precisely this combination of seasoned singers, sharply profiled conducting and live theatrical electricity that gives the performance its enduring fascination.

In the 1950s, the BBC broadcast Richard Wagner's four-part *Der Ring des Nibelungen* every year, either from Covent Garden or from Bayreuth. By the time this Covent Garden cycle was broadcast in 1959, the radio audience would have been very familiar with the key principals: Astrid Varnay as Brunnhilde, Hans Hotter as Wotan, and Wolfgang Windgassen as Siegfried. But it is hard to imagine that any listener would have been disgruntled since they had the privilege of listening to some of the finest singers of the time in roles they had completely mastered. An added bonus in 1959 was that the singers came to Covent Garden in September 1959 comparatively fresh since there had been no *Ring* Cycle in Bayreuth that year.

Das Rheingold has a large ensemble cast but is led by Wotan and Alberich. Hans Hotter's mastery of the role of Wotan is unquestioned, able to convey the nuances of text with utmost clarity. Hotter had been singing professionally for nearly thirty years by 1959, but his magnificent portrayal of the arrogant deity in the opening of the cycle remains utterly captivating. Otakar Kraus, incidentally the same age as Hotter, provides us with an absorbing and convincing Alberich, which one reviewer noted 'was more than merely a nasty specimen of the power-maniac but a bully much wronged, so that his final curse had the ring of truth.' Critics also singled out the singularly plausible 'Loge of Richard Holm, the 'radiant' Freia of Una Hale, and the 'warm vibrant-voiced' Fricka of Ursula Bose – whom Opera magazine compared to Kathleen Ferrier. Singular praise indeed.

The newcomer to this production is the conductor Franz Konwitschny. Rudolf Kempe, the Royal Opera's music director, elected not to conduct the *Ring* as he had done in 1957, and instead invited Konwitschny, General Music Director of the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin, to come to London. Konwitschny was particularly attentive to the needs of his cast, ensuring that the orchestra supported rather than overwhelmed the singers. Critics naturally compared the two conductors, believing that Kempe constructed an over-arching narrative that treated the four operas as one entity, while Konwitschny concentrated in on small sections providing 'brilliance and surge' to create a true sense of excitement. The descent into Nibelheim is just one example of a thrilling Konwitschny 'surge' that can be heard in this BBC broadcast of *Das Rheingold*.

Quite apart from the stature of the performance itself, what is especially striking today is the quality of the original BBC engineering. Despite the inevitable challenges of a live 1959 Covent Garden relay, the balance between stage and pit is remarkably natural, preserving both vocal presence and orchestral detail with impressive consistency. There is a tangible sense of the theatre in the air around the voices, the orchestra emerging with clarity and weight while still retaining the excitement of live performance. For this release, Pristine's Ambient Stereo XR remastering has further opened out the original broadcast image, restoring depth, warmth and spatial realism to the soundstage. The result is a listening experience that brings this great Covent Garden *Rheingold* vividly into the present, allowing modern ears to appreciate not only the magnificence of the singing and conducting, but also just how expertly the BBC captured these landmark performances.



konwitschny
wagner: der ring des nibelungen

das rheingold

hans hotter
richard holm
otakar kraus
kurt böhme
michael langdon
marga höffgen

chorus and orchestra of
the royal opera house,
covent garden

conducted by franz konwitschny

live recording, 1959

PACO 235

Pristine
XR

WAGNER Das Rheingold

DISC ONE (73:30)

1. Scene 1 - Prelude (4:54)
2. Weia! Waga! Woge, Du Welle! (2:43)
3. Garstig glatter glichtiger Glimmer! (5:21)
4. Wallala! Lalaleia! (2:49)
5. Lugt, Schwestern! (6:37)
6. Der Welt Erbe gewann ich zu eigen durch dich! (4:26)
7. Scene 2 - Wotan! Gemahl! Erwache! (9:46)
8. Sanft schloß Schlaf dein Aug' (7:10)
9. In ihrer Mitte sei sie entführt! (3:45)
10. Endlich Loge! (3:45)
11. Immer ist Undank Loges Lohn! (7:21)
12. Ein Runenzauber zwingt das Gold zum Reif (3:15)
13. Hör', Wotan, der Harrenden Wort! (2:59)
14. Was sinnt nun Wotan so wild? (4:39)
15. Auf, Loge, hinab mit mir! (4:22)
16. Scene 3 - Hehe! Hehe! Hieher (1:13)

DISC TWO (77:18)

1. Dem Haupt füt sich der Helm (1:20)
2. Nibelheims Nacht walzt mich umher. Heil! Wer dort? (5:29)
3. Nehmt euch in acht! Alberich naht! Sein harren wir! (8:13)
4. Vergeh, frevelnder Gauch! - Was sagt der! - Sei doch bei Sinnen! (4:34)
5. Ohe! Hahaha! Ohe! Hahaha! Schreckliche Schlange! (6:55)
6. Scene 4 - Da, Vetter, sitze du fest! (5:36)
7. Gezahlt hab' ich; nun laßt mich zieh'n! (6:23)
8. Bin ich nun frei! Wirklich frei! (4:12)
9. Fasolt und Fafner nahen von fern (5:11)
10. Gepflanzt sind die Pfahle (6:19)
11. Weiche, Wotan, weiche! (5:16)
12. Hort, ihr Riesen! Zurück, und harret! - Halt, du Gieriger! (6:27)
13. Schwules Gedunst - Zur Burg fuhr die Brücke (3:12)
14. Abendlich strahlt der Sonne Auge (4:19)
15. Rheingold! Rheingold! Reines Gold! Wie lauter und hell (3:52)

PRISTINE
AUDIO

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CAST

Wotan - Hans Hotter
Donner - David Kelly
Froh - Edgar Evans
Loge - Richard Holm
Alberich - Otakar Kraus
Mime - Peter Klein
Fasolt - Kurt Böhme
Fafner - Michael Langdon
Fricka - Ursula Boese
Freia - Una Hale
Erda - Marga Höffgen
Woglinde - Joan Carlyle
Wellgunde - Josephine Veasey
Flosshilde - Marjorie Thomas

Chorus and Orchestra of the
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden
Leader: Charles Taylor

Conducted by Franz Konwitschny

BBC radio broadcast
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London
18 September 1959

XR Remastered by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a
photograph of Franz Konwitschny

Total duration: 2hr 30:46

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