

A new perspective on Wagner

Eberhard Kloke

With four scenes and lasting around two-and-a-half hours, Das Rheingold is the shortest evening of Richard Wagner's Ring des Nibelungen. To enable the preliminary evening of the Ring tetralogy to be staged by smaller companies, Eberhard Kloke has produced a reduced version for 54 instrumentalists and 11 soloists. Here he describes his working criteria:

My life-long conceptual and practical research into Richard Wagner's work and the impact it has had over the years led me to investigate how the score of Das Rheingold could be reduced and condensed for a smaller orchestra.

This led to my discovery of the "Coburg version", which Wagner acknowledged and allegedly authorised (this does not exist as a score, but only as altered individual parts). An ad hoc arrangement for small orchestra, it dispensed with the classic Ring instruments and would not be regarded as an "authentic transcription" by today's standards.

Das Rheingold was written for conventional opera houses with an open orchestra pit rather than for a hidden orchestral sound (see Bayreuth's hidden orchestra pit). It should always be borne in mind that, ever since the invention of audio recording and amplified sound, the "mystical abyss" (hidden, invisible orchestra) has been a kind of anachronism: the concept of an indirect orchestral sound (Parsifal was of course written for the acoustics of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus) has been overtaken by technological progress. Mention must also be made of the great improvements in instrument making over the past 125 years. In Wagner's day, one of the main reasons for having a "hidden" orchestra was to eliminate any distracting, unintentional sounds produced by the instruments!

Owing to technological developments, the notion of sound has increasingly moved away from mixed, hidden/covered and disguised sound towards:

- a) open sound structures
- b) analytically conceived and tested sounds
- c) highly detailed sounds, enabling musical clarification of a clearly visible and directly audible (spatially discernible) orchestral sound

“A work of art exists only through its manifestation.”

Richard Wagner

However, this does not mean that a performance is better or more authentic the further it moves away from the original recording medium or the original character of the piece. Instead, the perspectives of a work, the production (performance!) and thus also the reception of music are altered by the aforementioned changes and developments.

My main reason for producing a new transcription of Wagner's Das Rheingold for 11 soloists (including doubling) and 54 instrumentalists was therefore to offer an alternative version of the piece that would be practical to perform, while essentially remaining true to Wagner's score. However, this attempt should not be confused with the concept of historically accurate performance – see the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's recent experience with Das Rheingold.

This transcription changes the soundscape and therefore the sound structure within the orchestra, as well as the balance between the stage and the orchestra to no small degree.

I have counteracted the supposed loss of the “grand opera” character by adding a radical compositional and tonal depth and substance, with a fine balance between the soloists and the considerably smaller orchestra.

This version will have an impact on the practical aspects of opera performance, offering variable casting alternatives with more streamlined voices to deliver the words more clearly. Clarity of text and transparency of sound will increase the importance of the stage performance, in keeping with Wagner's idea of music theatre.

In this context, mention should be made of Wagner's “last words” to the singers before the world première of the Ring in 1876: “Enunciation! The big notes will take care of themselves; the small notes and the text are what matter.”

The transcription process, which I have now completed, has enhanced and “modernised” the range of orchestral expression through increased differentiation on the one hand and the introduction of new instruments on the other.

This enables both a broader sound, as well as a more condensed sound, especially as the classic Ring instruments, such as the Wagner tuba, bass trumpet and contrabass trombone, have been integrated into the transcribed version. The new instruments – alto flute, heckelphone, contrabass clarinet, contrabassoon (passages) and cimbasso (as a link between the tubas and trombones) – play an especially important role, adding drama and psychological depth.

Brief mention should be made of the following notation problem: some of the notation for the transposing instruments – particularly the Wagner tubas – was left in an experimental state in *Das Rheingold*. Wagner was inconsistent in his notation for these instruments, sometimes using and sometimes not using a key signature.

This meant I had to verify when, where and for how long the versions with or without a key signature should be used, based on the storyline and dramatic flow. With a key signature: Walhall (Valhalla): the “innocence” of the natural instruments is missing after the curse; closing tableau: at the end, everything is finally resolved in the “redeeming” key of E flat major. Without a key signature: Prelude: pastoral scene, so a natural sound without a key signature. The current transcription of *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie) offers another way of opening up Wagner’s music drama for new and alternative venues, as well as for new styles of performance.



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DIE TRANSKRIPTION IST KONZIPIERT FÜR 54 INSTRUMENTALISTEN.

The transcription is for 54 instrumentalists

Instrumentation:

11 soloists

(doubling of the parts of Woglinde and Freia, Mime and Froh, Fasolt and Donner)

Wotan, Donner (Fasolt), Froh (Mime), Loge

Fricka, Freia (Woglinde), Erda

Alberich, Mime (Froh)

Fasolt (Donner), Fafner

Woglinde (Freia), Wellgunde, Floßhilde

Orchestra

2 2 2 2 - 4 2 3 1 - 3 timp-perc,

hp - string quartet (10 8 6 5 4 = 33)

Woodwind: 2 2 2 2 = 8

1st fl (picc),

2nd fl (alto fl, picc),

1st oboe (c.a.),

2nd oboe (c.a., hph),

1st clarinet in Bb (in A, in C, bass cl in Bb),

2nd clarinet in Bb (in A, bass cl in Bb+A, cb.cl in Bb),

1st bassoon, 2nd bassoon (cbn)

Brass: 4 2 3 1 = 10

1st horn in F (Wagner tuba in Bb),

2nd horn in F (Wagner tuba in Bb),

3rd horn in F (Wagner tuba in F),

4th horn in F (Wagner tuba in F),

2 trp in Bb (in E flat),

3 tenor-bass trb (1st also bass trp in E flat/C,

3rd also contrabass trb);

1 cimbasso/contrabass trb

- 2 timp+perc, 1 hp = 3

String quintet: 10 8 6 5 4 = 33

Tutti: 54 musicians