

The libretto in brief

David McVicar

Act I

In a cave in a forest, the dwarf Mime has raised Siegfried alone and in ignorance of his true parentage. As the result of a bargain made with the chief God, Wotan the giant Fafner has taken possession of the golden hoard of the Nibelung dwarves including the magical Tarnhelm, created by Mime which can shape-shift its wearer into any form and the all-powerful Ring that the dwarf King, Alberich has forged from the Rhinegold, stolen from its guardians in the river Rhine, the Rhinemaidens. Transformed by the Tarnhelm into a dragon, Fafner now guards his hoard in the depths of the forest. Mime bitterly complains to himself about Siegfried's wild and violent behaviour and his own inability to forge the pieces of the invincible sword called Nothung, the bequest Siegfried's mother gave to him at his birth. If he were able to remake it, he could persuade Siegfried to fight and kill Fafner and win the Ring for Mime. Siegfried bursts into the cave with a bear he has tethered in the forest to torment the dwarf. He snaps the latest sword Mime has crafted for him into pieces and angrily berates the dwarf. He questions Mime about his origins, asking why he alone, of all the creatures he has seen in the forest has no father or mother. Mime tries to convince him that he is actually his child but Siegfried refuses to believe him. Mime is forced to reveal the truth. Years ago, he found Siegfried's mother in labour in the forest. Despite his efforts to help her she died in childbirth, with her last breath telling the dwarf to name her son Siegfried and giving him the shattered fragments of a sword that

had belonged to his father. Siegfried asks what her name was and he tells him that she was Sieglinde. Siegfried is deeply moved but asks for more proof of Mime's story. Mime shows him the fragments of the sword, Nothung. Siegfried joyously demands that Mime forge the pieces together so that he can leave him and the forest forever, armed with his father's sword. He rushes away leaving Mime in despair as he has tried and failed to remake the sword many times. At that moment a mysterious stranger appears at the entrance to the cave asking to rest by Mime's hearth. He calls himself the Wanderer and despite Mime's efforts to make him leave proposes a strange game of riddles, staking his head as the prize. Mime agrees and questions the Wanderer about the inhabitants of the world. The Wanderer correctly names the dwarves of Niebelheim, the mighty Giants that once walked the earth and finally the race of Gods who rule over the world from their fortress of Valhalla. In terror, Mime recognises the Wanderer as the God Wotan, who nows travels the earth in disguise. The Wanderer demands that Mime answer three questions in return. He asks him to name the family most loved but most harshly treated by Wotan. The dwarf correctly names the Walsung twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, Wotan's children and Siegfried's parents, sacrificed by Wotan to assuage the anger of his consort, Fricka. The Wanderer asks him to name the wise dwarf that has raised Siegfried and the sword that will be his. Mime, of course knows the answer but is unable to answer the final question; who can forge the invincible sword that will win back

the Ring from Fafner? Mime panics as the Wanderer tells him that only he who has never known fear is capable of the deed. He leaves Mime's life in the hands of this hero and departs. Siegfried returns, angry that Mime has not mended his sword. Mime tells him that he must learn fear if he is to make his way in the world and promises that the fearsome dragon can teach it to him. Excited to learn, Siegfried impulsively begins to forge the fragments of the sword himself. As he works, a plan forms in Mime's mind to drug and then kill Siegfried once the fight with Fafner is over, seizing the Ring for himself. He busies himself making a potion for this purpose. Siegfried successfully reforges the sword and then sets off into the forest to learn fear.

Act II

Alberich keeps watch outside Fafner's forest lair, awaiting the hero who is destined to kill the dragon. He senses the approach of someone, but it is the Wanderer who arrives. He instantly recognises Wotan, who once robbed him of his all-powerful Ring to pay the Giants for his fortress, Valhalla. He furiously accuses the Wanderer of seeking dominance over the Ring and the World but the God calmly denies any interest in obtaining the magical treasure. Furthermore, he encourages Alberich to try to make a deal with the dragon, offering a warning of Siegfried's imminent approach in return for the Ring. Fafner awakes inside his cave and refuses to yield any of his treasure. The Wanderer leaves Alberich to fight it out with his brother, Mime and vanishes, leaving Alberich angry and confused.

As he creeps away into the forest, Siegfried arrives, closely followed by Mime. Siegfried chases the dwarf away and lies down under the trees. He wonders about his father and mother and realises he has never seen a mortal woman. The song of a wood bird fluttering above seizes his attention and he tries to answer it's call with a reed pipe. The sound he makes is pitiful, so he answers instead on his metal horn. His call raises Fafner who now emerges from his lair. Siegfried challenges Fafner and the dragon attacks. Siegfried, unafraid stabs the dragon in it's heart. Mortally wounded, Fafner tells Siegfried more of his history before dying. As Siegfried wipes his sword clean his hand is burnt by the fierce, hot blood of the dragon and he sucks at his fingers. Suddenly he realises that he

can understand the language of the birds and the wood bird tells him about Fafner's hoard, encouraging him to take the Tarnhelm and the Ring. As Siegfried explores the dragon's lair, Alberich and Mime encounter each other and viciously argue about possession of the Ring. When they see Siegfried emerge from the cave with both Ring and Tarnhelm, Alberich vanishes. The wood bird sings again to Siegfried, warning him of Mime's wicked intention to kill him. As Mime tries to lure Siegfried into drinking his drugged refreshment, Siegfried understands the true meaning underlying his honeyed words. In a fit of loathing, he kills the dwarf with his sword. Laying the bodies of Mime and Fafner together, he collapses in exhaustion. The wood bird returns and promises to lead Siegfried to a wondrous bride who lies asleep on a mountain top, guarded by magic fire. Siegfried leaps to his feet and the bird guides him out of the forest.

Act III

The Wanderer summons the Earth Goddess, Erda from her eternal sleep. Their child, Brunnhilde one of Wotan's Valkyrie daughters now lies asleep on the mountain top Siegfried is seeking, punished by her father for giving aid to the Walsung twins. Erda finds her wisdom drawing to it's end, and she is unable to answer his urgent questions about the future. The Wanderer no longer fears the end of the Gods, content to bequeath the world to Siegfried and lets Erda descend once more. As Siegfried approaches Brunnhilde's rock, the Wanderer calmly greets him. But Siegfried is impulsive and challenging and the Wanderer's wrath is roused. He threatens Siegfried with his spear, symbol of the God's all-powerful sway over the World but Siegfried shatters it with his sword. The wanderer quietly leaves in defeat and Siegfried plunges into the fire that guards the sleeping Brunnhilde. On the mountain top, Siegfried sees a sleeping figure encased in armour. He removes it to discover Brunnhilde. Gazing at the sleeping woman he finally learns the meaning of fear. Although terrified, he longs to wake her and kisses her lips. She awakens, greeting the sun and asking which hero has released her from eternal sleep. She joyously recognises Siegfried as Sieglinde's child but is terrified in turn as he tries to embrace her. Realising that she is no longer a daughter of the Gods but a mortal woman she overcomes her fear and bids farewell to the world as she had known it. The lovers fall ecstatically into each others' arms.