

The libretto in brief

David McVicar

Act I

The fugitive Siegmund breaks into the dwelling of a tribal chief, Hunding and falls senseless by the hearth. Hunding's wife, Sieglinde is alone in the house and she revives the stranger. He is wounded and she begs him to stay till her husband returns. Hunding arrives and questions the newcomer. Siegmund is reluctant to tell them his name but recounts his life story. Raised in the forest by his father Walse, he has lost his family. His mother was killed by hostile raiders and his twin sister abducted. Walse himself has abandoned his son in the forest and Siegmund has made his own way in the world, finding misery and trouble wherever he goes. He is being pursued by a fierce tribe who he has fought in a vain attempt to save a young woman from a forced marriage. Hunding, just returned from call to arms realises that Siegmund is the enemy of his kinsmen. He gives him hospitality for the night but tells him he will die in combat, come dawn. Left alone and weaponless, Siegmund recalls that his father promised him a magical sword in his moment of greatest need. Sieglinde has given Hunding a potion to make him sleep and steals in. She explains that she too was the victim of a forced marriage and tells Siegmund that a mysterious stranger arrived at her wedding, thrusting a sword as challenge to the guests into the trunk of a tree that stands at the centre of Hunding's dwelling. Only the bravest will be able to pull it from the tree. As they tell each other more of their life stories, the couple begin to recognise

each other as their lost sibling. They realise that the sword was planted by their father Walse. Sieglinde exultantly declares Siegmund's real name and he wrenches the sword from the tree. The twins fall passionately into each others' arms.

Act II

The chief God Wotan has created nine Valkyries as handmaidens to gather the slain heroes of the World to serve as warriors in his fortress of Valhalla. He commands his favourite of these children, Brunnhilde to protect Siegmund in the coming fight with Hunding. His wife and the guardian of marriage, Fricka appears. The lovers have fled Hunding's house and she is outraged that Wotan, in fact their father Walse smiles on their incestuous coupling. She demands that he withdraw the magic from Siegmund's sword, citing her glory and Wotan's own laws. He realises that he is caught in a trap of his own making. Alone with Brunnhilde, he vents his anger and desperation. He has sought to create a free hero who can accomplish a task he, bound by law cannot; to wrest the all-powerful ring of the dwarf Alberich, the price paid to the giants to build Valhalla from the giant Fafner who now protects the ring in the form of a dragon. He abandons his plans and orders her to withdraw her protection from Siegmund. The fleeing lovers stop to rest, Sieglinde driven almost insane with terror at their pursuers. As she sleeps, Brunnhilde appears to Siegmund to tell him he must follow her to Valhalla as a dead hero. But he refuses to leave Sieglinde behind on Earth, saying he would rather kill them both with Walse's sword. Brunnhilde senses a new life in Sieglinde's womb and decides to defy Wotan's decree. When Hunding rushes forward to fight, she tries to shield Siegmund but Wotan appears

and shatters the sword on his spear. Hunding kills Siegmund and Brunnhilde steals away with Sieglinde, carrying the broken pieces of the sword. Wotan takes away Hunding's life and then, enraged at Brunnhilde's defiance, sets off in pursuit.

Act III

Brunnhilde's eight Valkyrie sisters gather with the slain from battle, awaiting her arrival. They are shocked to see her bearing a woman on her horse and fleeing Wotan. She begs them for help but they refuse in terror. She tells a grieving Sieglinde that she bears Siegmund's child and urges her to hide in the forest where Fafner lurks, as Wotan will not follow her there. She gives her the broken sword and then names her child as Siegfried, the noblest of heroes. As Sieglinde flees, Wotan arrives in fury. He condemns Brunnhilde to live as a mortal woman and dismisses the other Valkyries. In despair, she defends her actions as the enactment of Wotan's true will for is she not part of him? He is deeply moved by her words and agrees to protect her with a magical fire that only the bravest of heroes will dare to pass. He bids her farewell and sends her to sleep. He then summons the fire-god Loge and surrounds her with a ring of flame. He departs in sorrow.