

FROM WILD CHILD TO HERO

Henrietta Bredin



Daniel Brenna as Longborough's Siegfried (2011)

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When Wagner began writing the libretto for *Siegfried* in 1851 he found it a liberating change after what he referred to as 'the terrible tragedy of *The Valkyrie*'. He was certain that it would become his most popular work and thoroughly enjoyed the portrayal of a child-like character who strode happily through the world, chasing bears and splitting anvils. This child, born from the incestuous union of the brother and sister Siegmund and Sieglinde, was going to be the ultimate hero, free from guilt, superstition and responsibility, a man of purity, innocence and vaulting courage. Wagner's imagination verged on the erotic as he described his vision of Siegfried, this 'beautiful young man in the shapeliest freshness of his power... the real, naked man, in whom I was able to discern every throbbing of his pulse, every twitch of his powerful muscles'.

The problem, as Wagner discovered, was that Siegfried's insouciant unknowingness as a boy is forgivable but as a man, it is a major drawback. His fatal flaw is stupidity. It is interesting that the point at which Wagner stopped work on composing the music for *Siegfried*, at the end of Act Two, leaving his hero in the depths of the forest outside Fafner's cave, is the exact point at which he must change and grow in understanding if he is to fulfil

his destiny and awaken Brünnhilde, asleep on her flame-surrounded rock. This is by no means a complete or instantaneous change. He is still an insolent, uncouth boy when he meets Wotan in his guise as the Wanderer, and he is a complete gaping innocent when he encounters the first woman he has ever seen. Siegfried, the boy who knew no fear, an asset when dealing with a surly dragon or an obstructive old man with a spear who is in fact your grandfather, must at least comprehend fear if he is to be a true hero rather than a cartoon action-man figure.

If you consider Siegfried's pre-history, his untold story, he emerges as a genuine child of nature. He never knew his mother, who died giving birth to him, and his only father figure is Mime, who cares for him and teaches him the skills of metal-forging with the single intention of using him to mend the sword Nothung and kill the dragon Fafner, thus enabling Mime to take the ring which will give him the power to rule the world.

Siegfried knows no other humans; he grows up in the depths of the forest and is therefore the embodiment of that peculiarly German concept of *Waldeinsamkeit*, the essence of being solitary in woodland, of drawing strength and pleasure from that state. He is more animal than human, essentially natural,



Siegfried awakens Brünnhilde - Otto von Richter (1892)



Neal Cooper as Tannhäuser with chorus (2016)

an example of what the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau formulated in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), that in their original state, humans were not social beings, but solitary, and that this was a healthy and happy way to be. He contended that the destructive vices of jealousy and envy did not exist until humans started to form societies - only then did they start to compare their abilities, achievements, possessions, and this led to an awareness of inequality, a demand for more respect. Each person wanted to be better than others; the solitary state of innocence was lost.

What happened to Wagner, in the 12-year period before he returned to his abandoned opera and finished it, is that he became (a little) less of a brashly swingeing, dare-all, invulnerable character himself. His marriage to Minna Planer was under extreme strain, chiefly due to the fact that he had become infatuated with Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his patron and great admirer of his music, a man who had paid many of his debts, who had let him and Minna and their assorted pets move into a house on his estate outside Zürich, the wealthy silk merchant Otto Wesendonck. Wagner plunged into the heady swirling currents of writing *Tristan und Isolde*, an opera about a love triangle that reflected his own situation. When relations between him, his wife and the Wesendoncks

reached crisis point he abandoned the lot of them and took himself off to Venice, a city to which he would return many times and in which he would eventually die. It proved the perfect place in which to work on *Tristan* but he was still not ready to return to *Siegfried*. In fact he thought that *Tristan* would prove a less overwhelming work for theatres to produce and that it might earn him enough to carry on with the *Ring*. His own radical musical experimentation put paid to that idea, as the opera was at first judged to be unperformable. Undeterred, Wagner carried on to compose a no less ambitious but more accessible work, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Finally, in 1869, Wagner returned to *Siegfried*, taking his hero triumphantly through the flames and completing Act Three.

A great deal happened during the years between 1857 and 1869 while *Siegfried* lay dormant. In 1859 Wagner moved to Paris, where he spent two years working on a revised version of *Tannhäuser*, which notoriously became a scandalous fiasco. Not long after this, the ban was lifted that had been placed on him going back to his native Germany after his participation in the Dresden uprising of 1849. Minna returned to live there but the marriage was irretrievable. She died in 1866. The stay in Venice had given Wagner, inspired by Titian's painting of the Assumption of the Virgin in the church of the Frari, the germ of an

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idea for *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, which he began to develop. His financial problems worsened, not helped by the fact that rehearsals (a great many of them) for *Tristan und Isolde* in Vienna failed to result in performances. The dramatic and entirely unexpected change in Wagner's fortunes came when the 18-year-old heir to the throne of Bavaria became King Ludwig II in 1864. He wrote a letter, a passionate outpouring of devotion to both Wagner and his music, and went on to pay Wagner's considerable debts and to commit to paying for stagings of his operas both existing and planned, in particular the *Ring* cycle. Before that, despite continuing difficulties in rehearsal, *Tristan und Isolde* finally emerged onstage, at the National Theatre in Munich, in June 1865, conducted by Hans von Bülow. Earlier that same year, von Bülow's wife Cosima had given birth to a daughter, Isolde - not his own child but Wagner's. Cosima and Wagner's affair gave an opportunity to members

of Ludwig's court who were concerned about the upstart composer's influence over their young and impressionable King, to make waves and insist on the two of them leaving Munich. Ludwig reluctantly agreed but remained faithful, paying for Wagner to make a home on the shores of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, where he completed *Die Meistersinger*. After Minna's death, Wagner tried to persuade Hans von Bülow to give Cosima a divorce but he refused until 1869, after Cosima had given birth to another daughter, Eva and a son, Siegfried.

Cosima and Wagner were married in 1870 and remained so until his death in 1883. She was 24 years his junior and outlived him by many years, dying in 1930 in Bayreuth, where Wagner had finally realised his dream of building a theatre devoted to the performances of his own work.

The baby Siegfried was celebrated by his father in the form of the *Siegfried Idyll*, a work for chamber orchestra composed as a present for Cosima, who awoke on Christmas morning 1870 to the sound of it being played by members of the Tonhalle Orchester Zürich gathered on the stairs of their villa at Tribschen. *Siegfried* the opera was finally finished in 1871, although it was not performed until it could form part of the complete *Ring* cycle, at Bayreuth, in August 1876.

Once Act Three of *Siegfried* begins we are in a different world. There is a new fluidity in the music, a bold freedom in the use of dissonance and chromaticism, a sense of the vast arc of the work, its huge structures and inter-connecting themes. *Siegfried* is unstoppable - he shatters the Wanderer's spear with a single blow, he breaks through the wall of flame, he finds a sleeping figure in armour on the mountaintop. Only when he removes that armour and discovers an entirely unfamiliar creature, no man but his first woman, does he pause. At last he feels fear, and conquers that fear by obeying his instinct, bending over to kiss her on the lips, bringing Brünnhilde back to full and glorious life. ■

Henrietta Bredin writes widely on opera and theatre and is deputy editor of *Opera* magazine. Her narrated song recitals - *My Dearest Hedgehog* and *Gounod and Georgina* - have been performed throughout the UK.

Richard and Cosima Wagner, photographed in 1872 (Fritz Luckhardt)

