

Longwood Symphony Orchestra – December 4, 2010
Borodin & Wagner
Program Notes
By Steven Ledbetter

ALEXANDER BORODIN

Symphony No. 2 in B minor

Alexander Porfiryevich Borodin was born in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) on November 12, 1833, and died there on February 27, 1887. He composed his Second Symphony between 1869 and 1876. It was premiered in 1877 under the direction of Eduard Nápravník. The score calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo) and a second piccolo, two oboes (second doubling English horn). Two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings. Duration is about 26 minutes.

On February 27, 1887, a forty-four year old professor of chemistry at the St. Petersburg Medico-Surgical Academy suffered a fatal heart attack while attending a fancy-dress ball and died almost instantly. He left behind him a modest but respectable body of work in the fields of organic and physiological chemistry including extensive research on the polymerization and condensation of aldehydes. His chemical test for urea was widely used in clinical laboratories. He also left behind him two completed symphonies and the start of a third, an evocative symphonic poem, songs, string quartets and other chamber music, and an unfinished opera on a historical Russian subject, *Prince Igor*. For this scientist, whose life was sadly cut off in its prime, was also one of the most gifted of nineteenth-century Russian composers, Alexander Borodin.

The illegitimate child of a Russian nobleman (according to the custom of the time, the infant was given the name of one of the prince's serfs, Porfiry Borodin, as a transparent device to legitimize his birth), the boy was raised by his attractive and intelligent mother. He received an unusually strong background in languages, learning both French and German from a housekeeper and a governess; to these he added later studies of English and Italian. He also demonstrated an interest in music at an early age, but there was no thought of his becoming a professional musician, though he composed little pieces for his own amusement and that of his friends from childhood. A passion for chemistry seemed to point to a more suitable career. He attended the Medico-Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg, from which he graduated "with distinguished honors," though not without some criticism from one of his professors for the amount of time he spent hearing and playing chamber music.

His double life, as scientist and musician, and its sudden end when he was just in his forties, means that Borodin's output is not especially large, and several major works were left unfinished. Happily the Second Symphony is one of these. Borodin worked on it at the same time he was conceiving his opera *Prince Igor*, which occupied him for eighteen years, and which he did not live to finish. But the symphony took only eight years.

The first performance was only mildly successful, but after some minor re-orchestration it was successfully performed in 1879 at the Free Music School under the direction of Rimsky-Korsakov. Borodin told Vladimir Stasov, the cultural critic who was a close friend of many of the Russian "Five" that the music was intended to evoke images of old Russian scenes, probably because of the close connection with the composition of his opera and its historical setting.

The first movement opens with an aggressive theme, un-harmonized and rhythmically potent. (If it sounds familiar, it might be because Robert Wright and George Forrest used it in the song "Fate" from the Broadway musical *Kismet*, which is based on themes by Borodin.) There is a constant interplay of two thematic ideas in the main section and a lyrical theme in the secondary key. This music was evidently intended to suggest an assembly of the old Russian princes.

The Scherzo in F (Prestissimo) has no program attached. Rimsky-Korsakov felt that it was different in character from the rest of the symphony. The trio offers a striking contrast in 6/4 time with exotic oboe solos.

The third movement's Andante opens with a brief introduction for harp and clarinet, after which the horn sings a melody in the style of a *psalterii*—intended to evoke the old Slavonic style of troubadour-style singers, with a contrasting middle section.

The third movement runs directly into the Finale, which is the longest and most elaborate movement. The opening rhythmic passage is clearly related to one of the best-known of Borodin's works, the Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor*, which is not, perhaps, surprising, because Borodin was imagining here a banquet of heroes with music provided by the *gusla* (a bowed stringed instrument of the Balkans) and flutes—an image also to be found in the opera as a setting for the famous dances.

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)

Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey, from *Götterdämmerung*

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Saxony, on May 22, 1813, and died in Venice on February 13, 1883. The planning and composition of Die Götterdämmerung lasted from October 1848 (when Wagner created a prose draft of the libretto) to November 21, 1874, when he completed the full score. The first performance took place in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus on August 17, 1876. The excerpt known as Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey connects the Prologue and Act I. It calls for three flutes (third is an optional piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets (trumpet 3 is optional), three trombones and tuba, timpani, tenor drum, cymbals, triangle, harp), and strings. Duration is about 10 minutes.

Wagner originally conceived what was to be his greatest work as early as 1848; it was finally realized on the stage twenty-eight years later, in 1876, with the first production in his own theater at Bayreuth of the complete tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Nibelung's Ring"). Few artistic creations of such scope and power exist in the European tradition. Perhaps only two literary works—Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust*—can be mentioned in the same breath with Wagner's gigantic composition. All three of these mighty creations present an all-encompassing world view in a work of epic size that spanned the entire universe, dominating the creative lives of the artists who envisioned them.

The characters and basic outline of the plot for the *Ring* come from old Norse and Germanic myths in which Wagner read widely during the 1840s. Although the *Ring* ostensibly deals with gods, giants, dwarves, dragons, magic helmets and an all-controlling ring of power, its philosophical and ethical basis grows directly out of mid-nineteenth century European social problems, particularly those generated by the unfettered capitalism of the industrial revolution. It is surely no coincidence that Wagner wrote an essay on "The Nibelung Myth as a Sketch for a Drama" in 1848, the same year that Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*. Wagner imagined his story in terms of powerful and flexible symbols that could be visualized on the stage. Gold, in itself an innocent natural object, becomes tragically destructive when it is

desired by everyone because of the power it confers. The opposition of Power and Love lies at the heart of Wagner's drama, during the course of which one world order ends and another is born.

Götterdämmerung (*Twilight of the Gods*) is the final component of this massive work. It tells in part of the death of the great hero Siegfried. In the prologue Siegfried is seen bidding farewell to Brünnhilde, once an immortal Valkyrie now made mortal for disobeying her father Wotan. Siegfried sets off in quest of heroic adventures that will make him worthy of her.

The opera opens just before dawn as three Norns, the spinners of the thread of fate, recount what has happened so far and try to predict the outcome. But their thread suddenly breaks, leaving them as blind to the future as everyone else. They depart as the sky brightens into dawn. As the sun rises, the hero Siegfried sets out to undergo a series of adventures, with the enthusiastic encouragement of Brünnhilde, with whom he has just spent the night.

The orchestral tone poem known as "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" (here preceded by the music of Dawn) functions as the link between the prologue and Act I. It is built up of many musical themes already connected in the listener's mind with Siegfried (his lively horn call, which gives this excerpt the character of a great symphonic scherzo), of past events (the Magic Fire behind which Brünnhilde slumbered before Siegfried's kiss awakened her) and the mighty stream of the Rhine itself, followed by the song of the Rhinemaidens whose loss of the gold had set in motion the whole tragic train of events.

RICHARD WAGNER

Immolation scene (Finale), from *Götterdämmerung* (*The Twilight of the Gods*)

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Saxony, on May 22, 1813, and died in Venice on February 13, 1883. The excerpt known as Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene is the closing passage of the entire monumental four-opera work that comprises The Nibelung's Ring. In addition to the soprano solo, it calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns (numbers 5 to 7 doubling Wagner tubas), three trumpets and bass trumpet, three trombones and contrabass trombone, tuba, two timpani players, cymbals, suspended cymbals, triangle, tamtam) six harps (playing two parts), and strings. Duration is about 18 minutes.

To conclude this enormous work, Wagner created an extraordinary scene (hardly realizable on stage!) in which one world is destroyed—the world of the Norse gods, who operate on the basis of power relations devoid of love, and who lose their role through ignoring the very laws by which they have that power—and a new world is created, a world identified by the closing music of the score, which has been labeled "redemption by love."

In the final scene, Siegfried has been murdered—stabbed in the back by Hagen (ostensibly his punishment for perjury, but the so-called perjury had been manipulated by Hagen through the use of a potion that caused Siegfried to forget events he was asked to swear to). Brünnhilde learns the truth only after she has taken part in the plot to avenge her lover's supposed infidelity.

All of the problems since late in the first opera, *Das Rheingold*, have been caused by the notorious ring of power, crafted by the Nibelung Alberich from gold that he had stolen from the Rhine maidens in the opening scene. The gods tricked Alberich into getting the ring, but the furious Alberich put a curse on it: Whoever does not have the ring will desire it above all else.

The only way that this curse can be lifted is by returning the ring to the Rhine maidens, who can melt it down to its original state of pure, natural gold. Siegfried was wearing the ring when he was murdered. In the closing scene Brünnhilde takes it from his hand, puts it on her own, and rides her horse into the flaming funeral pyre set up to consume the hero's body. This action generates first a great flood of the Rhine, bringing the Rhine maidens to reclaim the ring from Brünnhilde's dead hand. Hagen, the son of Alberich, who had murdered Siegfried, attempts to seize the ring (in a concert performance, one vocal line is omitted), but the Rhine maidens drag him under and drown him.

As the waters recede, the clouds at the back of the stage clear to reveal Valhalla, the bright home of the gods on a distant mountaintop, taking fire and destroying all of the gods and heroes.

Throughout all four evenings that are required to present *The Nibelung's Ring* complete, Wagner creates an astonishing symphonic web of musical themes to represent characters, objects, and ideas in the story. Debussy once referred to them sarcastically as calling cards, as if to let the audience know that Siegfried, for example, is about to enter.

But Wagner employs his themes with far greater subtlety than that. Many of these "leitmotifs" are musically derived from others and serve to point out important dramatic connections. Probably the most significant of all of them, for understanding the moral strength of Wagner's plot, occurs at the end of scene 1 and the beginning of scene 2 of *Das Rheingold*. We first hear the theme related to the ring itself in scene 1 when the flighty Rhine maidens foolishly tell Alberich of the power that it would bestow on one who disavows love. At the end of that scene, Alberich seizes the Rhine gold, curses love, and rushes off to make the ring that will give him absolute power. The orchestra is filled with references to the dark, dissonant, twisted theme of the Ring; during the orchestral interlude between scenes, this theme becomes harmonically simpler, gradually turning into a bright, major-key fanfare in rich brass sounds, just as we see Valhalla for the first time. This *should* clue the alert listener into the significant fact that the Ring (an object of evil) and Valhalla (presumably an object of moral authority) have some important relationship—a theme that Wagner works out in the rest of the story.

In the concluding scene, Brünnhilde's self-immolation, Wagner's rich symphonic web reminds us of many of the earlier incidents through the reworking of specific musical themes connected with them, finally resolving this great epic of power, lust, hate, and murder into the theme of the new world order, in which love is understood to overcome loveless power. The theme known as "redemption by love" had been heard very occasionally from the end of *The Valkyrie* (part 2 of the tale) onward, but here it soars and sings in the fullest musical development as it casts aside the past and revels in the possibilities of the future.

BRÜNNHILDE

(allein in der Mitte; nachdem sie lange, zuerst mit tiefer Erschütterung, dann mit fast überwältigender Wehmut das Angesicht Siegfrieds betrachtet, wendet sie sich mit feierlicher Erhebung an die Männer und Frauen).

(Zu den Mannen)

Starke Scheite
schichtet mir dort
am Rande des Rheins zuhauf!
Hoch und hell
lodre die Glut,
die den edlen Leib
des hehrsten Helden verzehrt.
Sein Ross führet daher,
dass mit mir dem Recken es folge:
denn des Helden heiligste
Ehre zu teilen,
verlangt mein eigener Leib.
Vollbringt Brünnhildes Wunsch!

(Die jüngeren Männer errichten während des Folgenden vor der Halle nahe am Rheinufer einen mächtigen Scheiterhaufen, Frauen schmücken ihn mit Decken, auf die sie Kräuter und Blumen streuen)

BRÜNNHILDE

(versinkt von neuem in die Betrachtung des Antlitzes der Leiche Siegfrieds. Ihre Mienen nehmen eine immer sanftere Verklärung an)

Wie Sonne lauter
strahlt mir sein Licht:
der Reinste war er,
der mich verriet!
Die Gattin trügend,
- treu dem Freunde, -
von der eignen Trauten
- einzig ihm teuer -
schied er sich durch sein Schwert.
Echter als er
schwur keiner Eide;
treuer als er
hielt keiner Verträge;
lautrer als er
liebte kein andrer:
und doch, alle Eide,

BRÜNNHILDE

(alone in the middle; after she gazes for a long time, first with deep shock, then with almost overwhelming grief at Siegfried's face, turns with solemn exaltation to the men and women)

(To the men)

Strong logs
stack for me there,
on the banks of the Rhine.
High and bright
may the fire burn,
which will consume the noble body
of the mightiest hero.
Bring his steed here,
that with me he may follow the warrior,
for to share in the hero's
most holy honor
my own body yearns.
Obey Brünnhilde's wish!

(During the following, the younger men erect a mighty pile of logs in front of the hall near to the Rhine's banks; women adorn it with coverings, on which they strew plants and flowers)

BRÜNNHILDE

(sinks anew into the contemplation of the countenance of Siegfried's body; her face gradually takes on an evermore tender appearance of transfiguration)

Like pure sunshine
his face shines on me:
he was the purest one,
he who betrayed me!
Deceiving his wife,
faithful to his friend,
from his own beloved,
his only true love,
he separated himself with his sword.
More honest than he,
no man ever swore an oath.
Truer than he,
no man ever kept a treaty.
Purer than he,
no man ever loved.

alle Verträge,
die treueste Liebe -
trog keiner wie er! -

Wisst ihr, wie das ward?

(nach oben blickend)

O ihr, der Eide
ewige Hüter!
Lenkt euren Blick
auf mein blühendes Leid:
erschaut eure ewige Schuld!
Meine Klage hör',
du hehrster Gott!
Durch seine tapferste Tat,
dir so tauglich erwünscht,
weihtest du den,
der sie gewirkt,
dem Fluche, dem du verfielst:
mich musste
der Reinste verraten,
dass wissend würde ein Weib!

Weiss ich nun, was dir frommt? -

Alles, alles,
alles weiss ich, -
alles ward mir nun frei!
Auch deine Raben
hör' ich rauschen;
mit bang ersehnter Botschaft
send' ich die beiden nun heim.
Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott! -

*(Sie winkt den Mannen, Siegfrieds
Leiche auf den Scheiterhaufen zu tragen;
zugleich zieht sie von Siegfrieds Finger
den Ring ab und betrachtet ihn sinnend)*

Mein Erbe nun
nehm' ich zu eigen. -
Verfluchter Reif!
Furchtbarer Ring!
Dein Gold fass' ich
und geb' es nun fort.
Der Wassertiefe
weise Schwestern,
des Rheines schwimmende Töchter,
euch dank' ich redlichen Rat.
Was ihr begehrt,
ich geb' es euch:

And yet, all the oaths,
all the treaties,
the truest love—
none ever betrayed as he did!

Do you know how that happened?

(looking upward)

O you, of oaths
the eternal protector [Wotan],
turn your gaze
onto my blooming sorrow:
behold your eternal guilt!
Hear my charge,
mightiest god!
Through his bravest deed,
which you so yearned for,
you sacrificed him
who accomplished it
to the curse that fell upon you:
me this purest of men
had to betray,
in order for a woman to be made wise.

Do I know now what benefits you?

Everything, everything,
everything I now know,
everything is revealed to me now!
Even your ravens
I hear rustling;
with a message both desired and feared,
I send them both home again.
Rest, rest, O god.

*(She signals to the men to bear Siegfried's
body to the funeral pyre; at the same time she
takes from his finger the Ring, and
contemplates it thoughtfully)*

Now I take my inheritance
For myself. -
Accursed circle!
Frightful ring!
I take your gold
and give it away again.
The wise sisters
dwelling in the depths,
the Rhine's swimming daughters,
I thank you for your honest advice.
What you desire

aus meiner Asche
nehmt es zu eigen!
Das Feuer, das mich verbrennt,
rein'ge vom Fluche den Ring!
Ihr in der Flut
löset ihn auf,
und lauter bewahrt
das lichte Gold,
das euch zum Unheil geraubt.

(Sie hat sich den Ring angesteckt und wendet sich jetzt zu dem Scheiterhaufen, auf welchem Siegfrieds Leiche ausgestreckt liegt. Sie entreisst einem Manne den mächtigen Feuerbrand)

(den Feuerband schwingend und nach dem Hintergrunde deutend)

Fliegt heim, ihr Raben!
Raunt es eurem Herren,
was hier am Rhein ihr gehört!
An Brünnhildes Felsen
fährt vorbei! -
Der dort noch lodert,
weist Loge nach Walhall!
Denn der Götter Ende
dämmert nun auf.
So - werf' ich den Brand
in Walhalls prangende Burg.

(Sie schleudert den Brand in den Holzstoss, der sich schnell hell entzündet. Zwei Raben sind vom Felsen am Ufer aufgefliegen und verschwinden nach den Hintergrunde zu). (Brünnhilde gewahrt ihr Ross, welches zwei junge Männer hereinführen. Sie ist ihm entgegengesprungen, fasst es und entzäumt es schnell; dann neigt sie sich traulich zu ihm)

Grane, mein Ross!
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Weisst du auch, mein Freund,
wohin ich dich führe?
Im Feuer leuchtend,
liegt dort dein Herr,
Siegfried, mein seliger Held.
Dem Freunde zu folgen,
wieherst du freudig?
Lockt dich zu ihm
die lachende Lohe?

I now give to you:
from my ashes
take it as your own!
The fire that consumes me
will cleanse the curse from the ring!
You in the waters,
melt it down
and preserve only
the bright gold,
which was stolen from you for such harm.

(She has put the ring on and now turns toward the pyre on which Siegfried's body has been placed. She seizes from one of the men a great burning torch)

(swinging the torch and pointing to the background)

Fly home, you ravens!
Report to your lord
What here by the Rhine you have heard!
Pass, too, by
Brünnhilde's rock -
Tell him who still smolders there,
Loge, to get to Valhalla!
For the end of the gods
is now coming on.
Thus—I throw the torch
into Valhalla's mighty fortress.

(She hurls the torch into the pile of wood, which quickly takes fire. Two ravens have flown up from the rocks on the bank and disappear into the background)

(Brünnhilde notices her horse, which two young men lead in. She leaps toward it, seizes it, and quickly unbridles it; then she leans toward it confidentially)

Grane, my steed,
Greetings!
Do you also know, my friend,
where I am leading you?
In the glowing fire
there lies your lord,
Siegfried, my blessed hero.
Are you neighing joyously,
eager to follow him?

Fühl' meine Brust auch,
wie sie entbrennt;
helles Feuer
das Herz mir erfasst,
ihn zu umschlingen,
umschlossen von ihm,
in mächtigster Minne
vermählt ihm zu sein!
Heiajoho! Grane!
Grüss' deinen Herren!
Siegfried! Siegfried! Sieh!
Selig grüsst dich dein Weib!

(Sie hat sich auf das Ross geschwungen und hebt es jetzt zum Sprunge. Sie sprengt es mit einem Satze in den brennenden Scheiterhaufen. Sogleich steigt prasselnd der Brand hoch auf, so dass das Feuer den ganzen Raum vor der Halle erfüllt und diese selbst schon zu ergreifen scheint. Entsetzt drängen sich Männer und Frauen nach dem äussersten Vordergrund).

(Als der ganze Bühnenraum nur noch von Feuer erfüllt erscheint, verlischt plötzlich der Glutschein, so dass bald bloss ein Dampfgewölk zurückbleibt, welches sich dem Hintergrunde zu verzieht und dort am Horizont sich als finstere Wolkenschicht lagert. Zugleich ist vom Ufer her der Rhein mächtig angeschwollen und hat seine Flut über die Brandstätte gewälzt. Auf den Wogen sind die drei Rheintöchter herbeigeschwommen und erscheinen jetzt über der Brandstätte. Hagen, der seit dem Vorgange mit dem Ringe Brünnhildes Benehmen mit wachsender Angst beobachtet hat, gerät beim Anblick der Rheintöchter in höchsten Schreck. Er wirft hastig Speer, Schild und Helm von sich und stürzt wie wahnsinnig sich in die Flut.)

HAGEN

Zurück vom Ring!

(Woglinde und Wellgunde umschlingen mit ihren Armen seinen Nacken und ziehen ihn so, zurückschwimmend, mit sich in die Tiefe. Flosshilde, den anderen voran dem Hintergrunde zuschwimmend, hält jubelnd den gewonnenen Ring in die Höhe. Durch die Wolkenschicht, welche sich am Horizont gelagert, bricht ein rötlicher Glutschein mit wachsender Helligkeit aus. Von dieser Helligkeit

Do the laughing flames
entice you to him?
Feel how my breast also
burns,
the bright fire
has laid hold of my heart.
to embrace him,
to be embraced by him,
to be united with him
in the most intense passion!
Heiajoho! Grane!
Greet your master!
Siegfried! Siegfried! Behold—
Joyously your wife greets you!

(She has swung herself onto the horse and draws him up to leap. With a single bound, she springs onto the burning pile of logs. Immediately the flames sparkle and rise up high, so that the fire fills the entire space before the hall and seems to seize on it, too. In terror the men and women press to the extreme foreground)

(As the entire stage seems to be filled with flame, the glare suddenly dies down so that only a cloud of smoke remains, moving toward the back and settling as a dark layer of cloud on the horizon.

At the same time the Rhine overflows its banks and the waters cover the area of the fire. On the waves the three Rhine maidens swim by and appear over the pyre. Hagen, who has been watching Brünnhilde's behavior with the ring with growing anxiety, flies into the greatest alarm at the sight of the Rhine maidens. He hastily throws off his spear, shield, and helmet and rushes madly into the flood.)

HAGEN

Away from the ring!!

(Woglinde and Wellgunde twine their arms around his neck and pull him backwards into the depths.

Flosshilde, swimming in front of the others towards the background, holds the regained

beleuchtet, sieht man die drei Rheintöchter auf den ruhigeren Wellen des allmählich wieder in sein Bett zurückgetretenen Rheines, lustig mit dem Ringe spielend, im Reigen schwimmen. Aus den Trümmern der zusammengestürzten Halle sehen die Männer und Frauen in höchster Ergriffenheit dem wachsenden Feuerschein am Himmel zu. Als dieser endlich in lichtester Helligkeit leuchtet, erblickt man darin den Saal Walhalls, in welchem die Götter und Helden, ganz nach der Schilderung Waltrautes im ersten Aufzuge, versammelt sitzen. Helle Flammen scheinen in dem Saal der Götter aufzuschlagen. Als die Götter von den Flammen gänzlich verhüllt sind, fällt der Vorhang)

ring high in exaltation. Through the layer of clouds lying on the horizon breaks forth a red glow of growing brightness. Illuminated by the brightness, one sees first the three Rhine maidens on the gentler waves of the Rhine, which is now gradually returning to its bed, merrily playing with the ring, swimming in circles.

From the ruins of the hall, which has collapsed, the men and women watch in the greatest apprehension the growing firelight in the sky. As this finally reaches full brightness, one sees Valhalla, with all the gods and heroes gathered, just as Waltraute described it in Act 1. Bright flames seem to set fire to the hall of the gods. As the gods are entirely concealed by the flames, the curtain falls.

--translation by S.L.

© Steven Ledbetter (www.stevenledbetter.com)