I SAW THE WORLD END:
EXPLORING WAGNER’S “RING”

6 Afternoons, 2:00-4:00pm  (Wednesdays, 4/4 – 5/9)
Osher Lifelong Learning Institute:  University of California Berkeley

A San Francisco Opera prepares to mount Richard Wagner’s monumental four-opera cycle
The Ring of the Nibelung in June 2018, the company’s Dramaturg Dr. Clifford (“Kip”) Cranna explores the
myth, music, and majesty of Wagner’s unsurpassed masterpiece.

Richard Wagner was the towering figure of Nineteenth-Century opera, a genius whose work
affected virtually every other composer of his time. In this class, after examining the decades-long
creative process that brought Wagner’s Ring to its completion, we will look in close detail at this
operatic adventure which takes its viewer on a transformative journey through a world unhinged by
corruption and politics, and ravaged by greed and neglect, where the one true power is the
redeeming force of love. We will discover how Wagner uses evocative signature tunes
(“Leitmotifs”) to create his ever-deepening texture of interwoven meaning. Gods, mortals,
dwarves, giants, and dragons all become symbolic figures in Wagner’s potent cautionary tale about
the end of the world the birth of a new order. We’ll use video examples to examine in detail these
magnificent and mythic music dramas. No previous opera background required. Just watch, listen,
and enjoy.

The website for the class will provide detailed synopses of the operas and other background
information.

Week I:  The Ring of the Nibelung has a fascinating back-story. After briefly surveying Wagner’s
life and career, we will follow Wagner’s 28-year journey of discovery in Nordic and Germanic
folklore and myth as he develops his interpretation of Teutonic legend into his towering statement
about power, greed, love and redemption.

Week II.  The Ring begins with a “Prelude” (Wagner’s term), about the beginning of the world. In
Das Rheingold, the purity of nature is violated when the primordial Rhine Gold is stolen to fashion
a coveted ring that gives its maker ultimate power. We will discover how Wotan, head of the gods,
allows greed and lust for power to set in motion the inexorable forces of doom.

Week III.  The heroine of The Ring, who is destined to become the self-sacrificing savior of
mankind (but not the gods), is the warrior-maiden (Valkyrie) Brünnhilde, Wotan’s beloved
daughter. The third opera of the cycle, Die Walküre, is her story.
Week IV: The great hero of Teutonic myth becomes the fascinating central figure of the third installment of the Ring cycle, Siegfried, who slays a dragon, wins for himself the fateful ring, and sets on the path to claim his destined bride Brünnhilde.

Week V: We watch the world end, and a new one begin, as The Ring comes to its overwhelming conclusion in Götterdämmerung (The Twilight of the Gods), when the ring is returned to its riverbed home and the natural order is restored.

Week VI: We conclude our study of The Ring by exploring how Wagner’s pervasive influence has touched creative artists not only of his own time but also of future generations. We will compare and contrast varying interpretations of the cycle as modern producers and directors find myriad new ways to reinterpret The Ring. And we’ll talk about the back-stage world and get a behind-the-scenes viewpoint on producing, casting, and performing The Ring.

PROFESSOR CLIFFORD “KIP” CRANNA
Now in his 39th year with San Francisco Opera, where he serves as Dramaturg, Dr. Cranna earned his Ph.D. in musicology at Stanford University, and teaches at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and at the Fromm Institute at the University of San Francisco. He writes and lectures frequently on opera and is a regular moderator for the San Francisco Opera Guild’s “Insight” panel discussions. He has managed the commissioning of many new operas by composers such as Philip Glass, John Adams, André Previn, Jake Heggie, and others. For many years he was Program Editor and Lecturer for the Carmel Bach Festival. In 2008 he was awarded the San Francisco Opera Medal, the company’s highest honor, and in 2012 his work was honored with the Bernard Osher Cultural Award for distinguished efforts by an individual to bring excellence to a cultural institution. He was Dramaturg for the 2016 presentation of Wagner’s Ring cycle at the Kennedy Center.

Recommended Reading:


*The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* by Roger Scruton, 2016. This very recent study of *The Ring* examines the meaning of Wagner's masterpiece with the attention to detail and intellectual power.


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