



Richard Wagner

(1813-1883)

## Wagner's style

- ▶ Wagner's musical language was considered revolutionary:
  - ▶ Linear chromaticism was so prevalent that it almost completely undermined the feeling of tonality
  - ▶ Wagner studiously avoided authentic cadences through frequent deceptive cadences, creating "unending melody"
  - ▶ Wandering tonality takes us rapidly from key to key (often without any key-confirming cadences)
  - ▶ Harmonic sequences are common—with chromatic chord progressions being repeated at different pitch levels
  - ▶ Non-functional harmonic progressions (such as parallel diminished sevenths or dominant sevenths) are common
  - ▶ Very long non-harmonic tones blur the harmonies

## The Ring Cycle

- ▶ Wagner's most ambitious project is his "Ring Cycle": a set of four operas based on the legend of the Ring from Norse mythology
  - ▶ It involves dwarfs, giants, dragons, Valkyries (warrior women), Nibelungs (subterranean dwellers), heroes, gods and goddesses
- ▶ The four operas (lasting 17 hours over four nights) are *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*
- ▶ The plot is far too complex to summarize here, but has to do with a stolen ring, a magic helmet, the fortress of Valhalla, twins, incest, Rhine maidens, and magic fire
- ▶ There are numerous leitmotifs representing all of these characters, places, and ideas in the drama

## Richard Wagner

- ▶ Richard Wagner was an influential opera composer who had many disciples in the late nineteenth century
- ▶ In his music dramas (which he called *gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total art works") Wagner maintained control over all aspects of performance, working as librettist, composer, vocal coach, and stage director—he even built his own opera house in the small town of Bayreuth
- ▶ Wagner unified his operas through this use of recurring themes called *leitmotifs*—each of these leitmotifs represents a character, place, or idea, and is transformed as the drama progresses
- ▶ Wagner was also a master of orchestration

## Tristan und Isolde

- ▶ Wagner's first influential opera was *Tristan und Isolde*
  - ▶ Synopsis:
    - ▶ Act I: Tristan kills Isolde's fiancé in battle. Isolde heals Tristan, then recognizes him and attempts to kill him with her own sword, but she looks into her eyes and she cannot do it. Tristan takes Isolde captive as a bride for King Mark. Isolde asks Brangane to poison Tristan, but she substitutes a love potion, which both of them drink and declare their love for each other...
    - ▶ Act II: Tristan and Isolde meet secretly when King Mark is out. Tristan observes that only in the long night of death can they be together. King Mark arrives and discovers the lovers. A fight ensues and Tristan is mortally wounded...
    - ▶ Act III: Tristan is dying, waiting for Isolde. Just as she arrives, he dies with her name on his lips. Isolde dies of grief at his side.

## A few leitmotifs from the Ring Cycle

<p>The ring</p>	<p>The sword</p>
<p>The Valkyries</p>	<p>Siegfried's Horn Call</p>
<p>Sleeping Brunhilde</p>	<p>Wotan's Spear</p>
<p>Siegfried</p>	<p>Magic Sleep</p>