

DAS RHEINGOLD

A Design Framework by Benjamin Burton

Two orchestral excerpts first drew me to *Das Rheingold*. First, the primordial, cosmic ooze of The Prelude slowly coalesces into the gleaming golden sap of nature itself; and later, the splatting horns of Nibelheim rip skin from skull while clanging anvils gnash like the teeth of hell. The score is intimate and infinite, profound and profane. **To me, this is the triumph of *Das Rheingold* – its ecstasies of creation and its hellish omens of death.**

The core of *The Ring Cycle* is in its existential mythology: cycles of death and rebirth showing us the inevitable destruction and reinvention of our lives and our nations. Like all major religions, it's a story about the beginnings and the ends of the world. It asks our deepest, most human question: **Where did we come from? And what happens next?**

Embracing *Das Rheingold* as creation myth, I rooted my design in the natural elements.

My most visceral connection to nature comes from my childhood. I grew up on an Ethiopian mountain near the Blue Nile River Valley in a rural, subsistence farming community. Natural elements made up my entire life: mountain mists; sunrises and sunsets; dirt roads and mud huts; the Blue Nile Falls and women fetching water in clay pots; the hearth fires at the center of every hut; great, black, billowing smoke clouds from the trash pit; rainy season storms with gargantuan lightning strikes that killed people I knew. I used my personal mythology and the emphasis on creation and destruction in *Das Rheingold* to make **the natural elements a guiding ethos of my design – everything is connected to water, earth, air, fire, or light.**



Benjamin outside a mud hut in Kiremu, Ethiopia

The idea of “long ago” is also important in mythologies. Memory naturally blurs, blends, and exaggerates reality in favor of emotional truth. Most myths are predicated on the existence of an elevated Beforetime: a miraculous past when Gods walked the earth, animals spoke, and miracles happened. This Beforetime frees myth from the natural rules of the world and releases these emotional truths from the bonds of logical rebuttal. It’s what makes myths their own Ring of Power: beacons of truth and light about the human experience – but shaped by the wrong hands, easily harnessed into vessels of propaganda to justify unspeakable crimes.

I embrace this mythic idea of “long ago” in my design of *Das Rheingold* by emphasizing ancient techniques and materials. In the landscape, petrified wood gives a tangible sense of time and nature. In the clothing culture of this world, ancient pattern shapes, the privileging of natural fibers, and a sense of the handmade (hand-spun yarns, hand-woven fabrics, or hand-knotted textiles) evoke a quality of antiquity. In the woven garments, patterns are made with as few cut edges as possible; all other fabrics (knits, nets, and ropes) are made through ancient knot or loop techniques. The magical quality of this world is allowed to accent garments with interwoven threads of gold and iridescent underlayers, but the prevailing logic is one of ancient, simple technologies.

***The Ring Cycle* is also about the opposing forces of love and power.** Among the many ways this conflict plays out, Alberich’s journey – the pain of his rejection fueling his pursuit of power – is the one I most connect to. The Rhinemaidens don’t just deny Alberich’s advances; they lure him in to deliberately humiliate him for the audacity of believing himself worth their attention. Shame breaks his hope for love and prepares him to steal the Rhinegold – after all, forswearing love is easy if you believe you’ll never find it anyway.

Like Alberich, rejection fueled my ambition growing up – when I didn’t fit in with my peers, at least I could still be respected for my intellect. I moved to the United States from Ethiopia when I was 7 years old. Suddenly, I was the new kid at school – small for my age, a total nerd, and wearing hand-me-down clothes two sizes too big. I was a perfect target for schoolyard bullying. I gave up hope of finding friends, and sought solace in my studies, fueling my ambition with my loneliness. Education was the sphere of power no one could deny to me; underwater on the playground, I was a king in the classroom.

Over the years, I’ve eroded into a normative social shape and become much more socially adept. But I still sometimes feel like the new kid from Africa: a small, awkward, outsider who doesn’t fit neatly into any standard niche. And when Rhinemaidens laugh and tell me I’m too ugly, too toady, too strange? **It’s all too easy to forswear their love and sink back down into the maw of ambition.**

I’m also deeply interested in the proletariat politics of *Das Rheingold*. Class consciousness is readily apparent in the opera: the exploitative scheming of the Gods, their broken bargain with the Giants, and the enslavement of the Nibelungs show a maligned laboring class under the thumb of the powerful. In my staging, I’ve integrated this idea one step deeper into the story. I’ve added Servants of the Gods to the stage, a constant visual presence of laborers in direct contrast to the leisure of the Gods. I also use the famous prelude to underscore a silhouette sequence introducing us to various

laborers before we see any other characters. They become the audience's way into the story, showing us their perspective of the bourgeois powerbroking of Gods and Kings.

And finally, *Das Rheingold* is about today. We live in uncertain times where the rules-based, liberal world order created after WWII by global institutions – NATO, the EU, the UN – has been deeply shaken. Emboldened authoritarianism, unpunished power-grabs, and a disregard for global order has violated our collective sense of stability and peace. There are loopholes everywhere to let powerful men masquerade as kings and gods. We are so power-drunk, so unconcerned with the human cost of our contracts that our authority cracks under the slightest moral scrutiny. ***The Ring Cycle* is about exactly these moments: the greedy, stormy thresholds right before empires fall.**

In the ultimate, triumphant procession of the gods over the Rainbow Bridge, there is a long, held note in the brass that gradually crescendos into the final climax. In Sir Georg Solti's famous recording of The Ring Cycle, he intentionally pushes this note one level too far – the warm and victorious trumpets become musically overexposed and start to scream. It's a harrowing reminder: **the day is done, and the gods are safe, but you know the end is near.**