

The Kieler Notung

Hidden

When we contemplate Notung, Siegfried's famous sword in the opera cycle "[Der Ring des Nibelungen](#)", long enough, possibly with the benefit of some alcoholic beverage, many different facets will emerge. I start with the Notung used in the Kieler version of the "Ring", played from 1997 - 2000. Here it is:



This Kieler Notung is a theatre sword with a soft wrought iron blade - and we have two of them. One is in one piece, the other one is broken in two pieces as required by the action in the two operas "Walküre" and "Siegfried". This particular Notung is rather big and heavy, so people can see it from far away.

So let's look at this particular Notung *first*. Anything special about it?

Certainly. Both blades have a maker mark saying: **Hugo Baruch** C^{ie}; Berlin C. The Internet knows a lot about this company. It produced and distributed stuff for theatres from 1887 to 1935; including all kinds of theatre weapons. The company quite likely did not make things like swords itself, however, but had them made by weapon experts in Solingen. That's why our Notung is made like a real sword, just not from hard steel.

Hugo Baruch was, of course, a Jew. Our Notung thus has Jewish roots and was made in or before 1935. It is thus quite possible that some Nazi brass watched some Siegfried forging and swinging a Jewish sword, feeling very Aryan while doing so. There is a certain irony in this, me thinks.

Siegfried's Way of Re-making Notung - Correct or Not?

Second, let's look at the re-making of Notung in "Siegfried". There are three points of interest.

1. Mime could not mend Notung by *welding* the pieces together.
2. Siegfried first *melts* the remaining steel and then *casts* a new Notung, using some mould that happened to be around.
3. After taking the cast blade out of the mould, Siegfried proceeds to do a lot of *hammering / forging* and *quenching*.

The whole procedure takes 30 minutes or so. This is already quite remarkable since it is one of very few occasions where lowly kind of work, done by craft people or artisans, is shown in large detail in a major work of theatrical art. We now must ask: is it correct what Wagner's characters are doing? For the time in some remote past where "The Ring" is supposed to take place or just for Wagner's time, i.e. roughly 1850 - 1870?

Let's look at this point by point.

1. Mime could not *weld* Notung.

Nobody then could weld a broken sword - and nobody could do it now. It is thus clear why the master-smith Mime must have failed in this task. The only way at going to mend a broken sword at any given time would have been by fire-welding the parts (assuming there were only a few). That is not impossible; it's actually done in the "Lord of the Rings", and it was also [done in real antiquity](#) on occasion. One would produce a "whole" sword in this way - but not a satisfactory one. The pattern-welded swords typical for Siegfried's time (roughly the time of the [Merovingians](#)) would show an ugly interruption of the pattern, and all swords, including later swords with a piled structure, would experience undesirable properties of the weld seam.

So Mime is not to blame. If a sword broke, it was just as dead as a decapitated human who couldn't be fixed by taping his head back on either.

2. Siegfried *melts* the pieces of the broken Notung and then *casts* a new Notung.

That is pretty much the only sensible way to redo Notung, so Wagner had no choice in this matter. Having Siegfried succeed in fire-welding the Notung pieces while Mime could not do this, would have been too trite and unbelievable. Siegfried needed to do something new and revolutionary. Casting was the only way. If Wagner knew that in Siegfried's time this was simply impossible is thus irrelevant.

Was melting and casting possible in Wagner's time? Certainly. [Huntsman](#) produced cast steel in 1740, and Krupp in 1851 caused a sensation with his huge cast steel block at the World exhibition in London, as detailed in the link. Neither Huntsman nor Krupp, however, had produced swords from cast steel by then and it took at least 20

more years or so before cast steel became a major issue. Whatever - it is perfectly possible that Wagner knew something about casting steel and recognized that this new technology had a large potential. I doubt, however, that he knew a lot and used his knowledge to imbue all kinds of deep meaning to the casting act.

3. Siegfried *hammers away at his cast sword and also quenches it.*

Does that make sense? The quenching, yes. If the broken Notung was made from good 0.7 % carbon steel, proper quenching would harden the edges by martensite formation. But what could be achieved by hammering? Heavy hammering would produce some cold-working and thus also some hardening. But all of that would be lost during the last heating before the final quench. So all this hammering just changes the shape obtained after casting and that makes no sense *if* the mould already provided for the shape desired. In all the performances of Siegfried that I have seen, the mould does just that. The first question then is: Why should Siegfried change the shape of the freshly cast sword by hammering? The second question is: why should there be a sword-mould around anyway, considering that nobody in the world has ever cast a steel sword before, certainly not Mime? The availability of a crucible that could take the temperature is also somewhat surprising.

Artistic license, perhaps? Wagner understandably could not worry about those pesky details and we thus are justified to assume that a mould that happened to be around just so would also provide for the right shape for the blade. Well, Wagner was smarter than that. His stage directions actually are:

Er gießt den glühenden Inhalt des Tiegels in eine Stangenform und hält diese in die Höhe Er stösst die gefüllte Stangenform in den Wassereimer; Dampf und lautes Gezisch der Kühlung erfolgen.

Siegfried, in other words, pours the molten steel in a "Stangenform", a mould for a rod. Then he quenches the filled mould in cold water since he is too impatient to wait for natural cooling

A mould for a rod - an utility item after all - might have been around, possibly from casting bronze on occasion; at last it's far more likely than a mould for a sword blade. This leaves Siegfried no choice but to forge the blade from the rod. It also allows him plenty of time to sing one of the best known arias of the Ring. The hammering thus does make sense, after all, if one follows Wagner's directions (which no self-respecting director would ever do, of course).

4. Siegfried *splits the anvil with the finished Notung*

Magic swords might do that. Real swords, no matter how great, will not. At least not the anvil used for their forging since this must have been a rather good and solid anvil by definition. Real swords would already have big problems to split a piece of wood that would be no challenge whatsoever for a standard non-magical axe. That's because the physics of hitting something with longish stick-like objects is [rather involved](#)

From a metallurgical point of view, the re-making of Notung is thus rather well done and somewhat ahead of the state-of-the-art of (Wagner's) time. It goes without saying that most of the Wagnerians are blissfully unaware of all the questions coming up in this context. However, some of these fellows did notice, for example [Lutz Köpnick](#), who wrote a learned 20 page article about the metallurgical aspects of the making of Notung by young Siegfried [1](#). He did mix up about everything that could be mixed up - Huntsman's crucible steel with the Indian wootz variety, smelting with melting, and so on - but to his ever-lasting credit he got the right ideas and asked some of the right questions.

Notung's Role in the Ring

Third, we now need to look at Notung's role in the "Ring". And that necessitates looking not just at the physical Notung that gives physical power to its wielder but also at what Notung symbolizes. I have given you a long module about ["swords and symbols"](#) but you don't have to read it all. It is obvious that first and foremost Notung is a [phallic symbol](#), projecting the sexual power of Siegmund / Siegfried in particular and the male principle in general. Siegfried says it outright: [4](#)

<i>Starr ward er und steif,</i>	Stiff and firm it is,
<i>herrisch der harte Stahl:</i>	masterful the hard steel:
<i>heisses Blut doch</i>	soon it will draw
<i>fließt ihm bald!</i>	hot blood!

Wagner aficionados know this, of course, and have remarked at length on the topic; e.g. our author from before [1](#). What nobody seems to have appreciated in this context is that the name "Notung" can be interpreted in [two ways](#). On the physical plane, "Notung" is something that "came to me when I needed it" ("Not" = need) or "releaser" in short. On the symbolic plane one might just as well associate the German word "Nötigung" with Notung, literally: to put somebody in need, to cause distress, but really meaning: "to force yourself on somebody" or simply "sexual assault". Notung then would mean rather something like "enforcer", "forcerator", "raptor"

It is remarkable in this context that many of the known names of "magical" swords are good names for their owners' penises, too. More details [here](#). It is also remarkable that there is no sheath for Notung. Siegfried runs around with a naked Notung, ready to stick it into any sheath coming his way.

When Siegmund rips Notung out of the tree he gains both a magical sword that gives him not only physical power but, by way of its magic, supreme power not to be resisted by mortals. We are certainly justified in assuming that the symbolic Notung was magical too, and that nobody could withstand the power of Siegmund's (and later Siegfried's) enforcer. Well, not quite. Wotan, Siegmund's daddy, actually breaks Notung with his power-[spear](#) (also a phallic symbol) while killing his son and thus demonstrates who so far still has the biggest.

In fact, the magic of the physical sword is no more remarkable than the magic of the symbolic one. The remarkable physical things Siegfried does with his super sword is: to cleave the anvil, kill the dragon, break Wotan's spear, and cut through Brünnhilde's armor. That might take some magic, indeed, but not all that much. For Siegmund, only the magic symbolic sword produces first sensational results:

1. Sieglinde, Siegmund's *sister*, immediately falls for it and needs to sheath it.
2. A little later Brünnhilde appears because Wotan ordered her to kill Siegmund. But she too falls head over heels for the guy with the sword (her (half) brother actually) and now tries to save his life.

One opera later, in possession of physical and sexual power, Siegfried now sets out "um das Fürchten zu lernen" (to learn fear) and that necessitates to stick Notung into somebody. In other words: he has to experience his first fight and his first fuck. On the way he encounters a "Waldvögelein" (little woodbird) and tries to emulate its singing: *Er bläst auf dem Rohr. Er setzt ab, schnitzt wieder und bessert. Er bläst wieder. Er schüttelt mit dem Kopfe und bessert wieder. Er wird ärgerlich, drückt das Rohr mit der Hand und versucht wieder.* This is a thinly disguised recounting of an unsuccessful first attempt at masturbation as suggested by the "Wald vögel fein" [5](#). I do work with the benefit of Arno **Schmidt**, as you now must realize.

By killing the dragon Siegfried becomes the owner of the Ring of Power. On a symbolic level a [ring is the female counterpart](#) of the male sword; [this link](#) will tell you more about that than you ever wanted to know. Siegfried now is the owner of the male and female power principle. However, killing the dragon didn't teach him fear so he sets out to conquer Brünnhilde (following the Waldvögelin's advice),

Eventually he makes it to Brünnhilde's fiery rock. Wotan, his grandfather, tries to stop him but can't and gets castrated by Notung (breaking his power spear). Siegfried now has the biggest and we will never see Wotan again. Finding Brünnhilde he first takes her symbolically (Notung cuts through her armor). Next he requests that she opens her eye (singular!):

	How shall I wake the
<i>Wie weck' ich die Maid,</i>	maid
<i>dass sie ihr Auge mir öffne?</i>	so that she opens her
<i>- Das Auge mir öffne?</i>	eyes?
<i>Blende mich auch noch der</i>	But when she opens her
<i>Blick?</i>	eyes,
	will the sight dazzle me?!

To "open her eye", guess what that means [2](#). And the first time you saw an open eye was quite dazzling, indeed, in times when porno was unknown.

Siegfried and Brünnhilde are technically still virgins. Brünnhilde is also Siegfried's aunt; so it takes a bit of prior rationalizing (via singing) before the deed is done.

End of Siegfried the opera.

The real Siegfried we meet once more in "Götterdämmerung". Somehow he got tired of Brünnhilde on her fiery rock and runs off to have some fun and possibly a beer or two. He gets stuck with King Gunther, his sister Gurtrune, and their half-brother Hagen, the captain of the armed men. Lots of men and one woman. Nobody is married. We have a homosexual group, in other words.

Wagner appears to be the opposite of a homosexual; his adventures with females are legendary, after all. But plenty of Wagnerians have certain suspicions; there are many learned articles and a whole book about Wagner's possible leanings in that direction [3](#). We may thus feel justified in following this angle for a while.

Siegfried actually left the "Ring" with Brünnhilde and thus appears at Gunther's court only with Notung and without the mighty female principle. He even agrees to having Brünnhilde recycled for Gunther who, as King in very Christian times when homosexuality was severely frowned upon, needed a cover-up wife but was unable to seduce a female on his own. He would have preferred Siegfried as partner and actually says so in quite blunt terms:

<i>Dein ist mein Erbe,</i>	yours is my inheritance,
<i>Land und Leut',</i>	my land and people:
<i>- hilf, mein Leib,</i>	may my body bear witness to
<i>meinem Eide!</i>	my oath!
<i>Mich selbst geb' ich</i>	Myself too I offer as your man.
<i>zum Mann.</i>	!

In the benighted good old times a gay marriage was frowned upon, however, and Gunther had to pretend normality with Brünnhilde. He was not very successful. Brünnhilde, to say it politely, is less than enthusiastic about his sword play.

Siegfried eventually takes back the Ring and thus becomes irresistible to all the gay men. He is also not quite sure on which side he actually stands. He likes "hunting", i.e. frolicking with the men but also likes to flirt with the good-looking Rhine maidens he encounters in the woods. Only after Hagen makes an end to the pretense and penetrates him forcefully from behind with his spear (we already [covered](#) what spears symbolize), does Siegfried remember that his one and only love object is Brünnhilde. Too late - there will be no survivors.

▶ All things considered, the hardware in the "Ring" is quite interesting, from various points of view. Its role so far has not been considered in depth, however, and I suggest that some Ph.D. students should go to work.

● Of course, all this is pure BS as you must have noticed by now. Or maybe not? The fact that I don't believe in Siegmund (sic) Freud most of the time doesn't mean that you need to follow my example. Believe! Or don't.

- 1) Lutz Köpnick: "Nothung! Nothung! Neidlicher Stahl!" Die Phantasmagorie des Schwertes in Wagners Der Ring des Nibelungen, Publication: The German Quarterly Volume: 66 Issue: 4 (1993) pp 490 - 509
- 2) If you can't guess, read "**Zettels Traum**" von Arno Schmidt. It's in there. In detail. On several pages. You just need to find them. The other 8000 or so pages also are quite interesting.
- 3) There is also the "Flying Dutchman", for example. The hero of the opera tries to get around the "cape". He wants to proceed from the front to the back, in other words. Obviously he is trying to come to terms with his homosexuality and wants to come out of the closet. The old-fashioned powers that were did not let him succeed, however, and eventually he curses God. As a kind of ironic punishment he then had to live - until hell freezes over - on board of a ship in the companion of (unwashed) men and only men. Only the true love of a woman, moving from a first encounter to full throttle within one day, could redeem him. He had to turn hetero again, in other words. That was tough. Discos and clubs had not been invented by then (even for a bit of background music you needed to hire a full orchestra!) and it thus usually required a long time before just a first one-night-stand could be enacted; not to mention something like a betrothal as minimal requirement. It thus takes a lot of singing before things finally get straightened out (with most everybody ending up dead as is proper in serious opera, of course).
- 4) The English translation loses the double-meaning contained in the German original. "*Heisses Blut doch fließt ihm bald!*" could mean that hot blood flows because of it; i.e. Notung draws blood, or that hot blood flows through it. That makes no sense for a sword, of course, but a lot of sense for what a sword symbolizes. Hot blood has to flow into it to get it "*starr und steif*" ("*stiff and firm*") and hot blood will flow due to its first use, considering that Brünhilde is still a virgin.
- 5) The word "Waldvögelein" is a combination of Wald (= wood), Vogel (= bird) and "klein" (= small); the latter two are combined into the standard diminutive "Vög(e)lein". The slight rearrangement to "Wald vögeln fein" now has a different meaning. "Vögeln" is popular German slang for shagging, and "fein" is fine. It's fine to shag in the woods, in other words. Perfectly reasonable advice for a novice to the art.