

THE BERLIN *RING* IN SPRING

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The curtain rises in silence to reveal a vast, empty, tunnel-like space stretching, it seems, to infinity. White amorphous shapes cover the floor of the space. Gradually, three of the shapes begin to move as the low E flat sounds in the orchestra, and sleek figures in shiny green emerge, the first signs of life in this blank landscape. The Rhine-maidens are born at the same time as sound/music itself is born as the single, long-drawn note is joined by another, and a rising series of notes emerges. Three filmy green curtains, one behind the other, are drawn up from the floor in wave-like pleats, and undulate gently. The Rhine is created.

Thus begins Götz Friedrich's famous **Ring** at Berlin's Deutsche Oper. It all seemed very appropriate since outside the opera house, the bare trunks of the trees were just beginning to put forth their leaves. Anyone familiar with Götz Friedrich's production history – the ground-breaking **Tannhäuser** which galvanized Bayreuth in 1972, the superb **Parsifal** there in the 1980s and the excellent **Meistersinger** in Berlin in 1993 - will understand with what anticipation I awaited this revival of his **Ring** production which premiered in the mid-eighties. This beginning of **Das Rheingold** was a wonderful introduction to the cycle. But the thrust of Friedrich's production was not wholly seen until, after our exposure to the Gods in scene two, we move to Nibelheim. Then the front part of the stage lifts like a shell, opening to reveal the bowels of an industrial plant. Alberich has certainly moved on since his humiliation by the Rhine-maidens, and his rape of their gold. Now, his power assured by the ring magically fashioned from the Rhinegold, he sits at a desk with microphone amid a bank of TV monitors showing his enslaved Nibelung workers. Dressed in black suit, red bow tie and

buttonhole, he is the perfect corporate dandy and unscrupulous boss figure. We see the workers' output as gold ingots appear on a conveyor belt. Later, when Wotan and Loge appear, and Alberich is keen to demonstrate the power of his ring, the "dragon" he conjures up is a monstrous piece of machinery: a vast arm ending in a digging bucket and a huge industrial saw with menacing teeth.

The thrust of the director's reading of the tetralogy is becoming clear and is linked to the late twentieth century concern with the despoiling of the environment and with eventual ecological catastrophe. Designer, Peter Sykora's vast time tunnel set, inspired perhaps by the Washington subway, was in his words, a visual metaphor for 'the encapsulation of personages who have themselves shot up the heavens', its purpose being to create a timeless space 'reaching from the early Christian catacombs to an atomic waste-storage area'.(1). Friedrich himself listed one of his purposes as showing 'what human beings had done to their history and natural surroundings.'(2)

The director's interpretation becomes clearer in the last scene of **Das Rheingold** as the frenzied struggle for power centered on the ring fashioned from the stolen Rhinegold reaches its ugly climax: Wotan chops off Alberich's hand to get the ring; and later Loge picks up the severed hand still dangling bloody fragments of flesh, and casually tosses it away. Previous to this, Alberich has been compelled to call up the enslaved Nibelungs in order to bring the gold they have mined. They appear from the back of the tunnel as a silhouetted black mass wearing headlamps, indistinguishable as individuals. Fafner's killing of Fasolt to gain the ring confirms the human disaster set in sore by the initial rape of the gold. In this context, the Gods final ceremonial dance in the direction of the orange glow revealing Valhalla is shown as especially crass. Little wonder that Loge in this production now sits disconsolately at the side of the stage.

The Prologue to the Ring tetralogy, then, has made a fine start to this production. And the musical side has been equally fine: an excellent, straightforward reading from conductor Donald Runnicles, refreshingly free of quirks of interpretation; a dynamic performance of Alberich from the impressively voiced Tomasz Konieczny; a Loge (Burkhard Ulrich) whose brilliant performance dominated the stage from his first appearance; and an excellent Wotan in Mark Delavan.

DIE WALKÜRE

The first act of the tetralogy proper in this production cuts off the tunnel space with a metal, studded wall. Hunding's dwelling resembles a prison designed to incarcerate Sieglinde. The door is barred, placed between high-set slit windows, and a dead tree completes the dreary monochrome of the dark grey interior. Menacing red industrial night lights provide the only colour. The bleakness is of course part of Friedrich's vision, but since the audience looks at nothing else for an hour or so, I found this rather a problem. Even when Spring causes the wall to burst open, all we see is a tree with white, desiccated foliage. Of course some splendid singing could have supplied some of the romantic rapture conveyed by the music, but this was not to be: despite his good stage performance as Siegmund, Clifton Forbis was hardly at his best, the voice here sounding unpleasantly gritty and unfocussed; as Sieglinde, Violetta Urmana's stolid stage performance was not helped by her healthy but unsubtle singing. Only the Hunding (Reinhard Hagen) was impressive both vocally and histrionically.

The second act reveals the full tunnel space again. Now, in the foreground, are broken architectural models of a city in ruins. These possibly resemble Berlin in 1945.

The dire consequences of the behaviour of a Wotan or an Alberich in any time period are implied. The centre of this act, Wotan's long scene with Brünnhilde, is superb, Mark Delavan's pointed delivery movingly conveying Wotan's agonized dilemma. This culminates in his stripping off and hurling away his armour at the climax of "Das Ende! Das Ende!" Throughout, whatever the extremity of the emotion, the singing has remained a model of properly focused vocal production. His Brünnhilde, Evelyn Herlitzius, has a lovely stage presence and proved an extremely active performer. So, could this delightfully slim, tiny figure produce a Wagnerian-sized voice? The answer is a qualified yes, qualified because the effort to produce it affects the vocal quality. While her quiet singing often produces quite beautiful, steady notes, as soon the music moves to louder notes at the top of the stave, the forced vocal production produces a broad wobble which makes identifying the pitch difficult because of the lack of "centre" in the unfocussed note. But different ears hear differently and what to my ears is extremely irritating clearly doesn't worry others, as the applause suggested. Act 3 continues the idea of a timeless setting by dressing the valkyries in costumes comprising elements from different periods: hair styles one

perhaps associates with Pre-Raphaelite paintings are teamed with whitened faces, shields and helmets, and leather trouser-suits dotted with studs.

Again the stand out singer of the act was Mark Delavan. In his angry denunciation of Brünnhilde's defiance in attempting to save Siegmund, his voice rang out, heroic and untiring; yet his farewell to his most-loved daughter was sensitive and very moving.

The act ends in visual and aural splendour as huge flames shoot up from the six wells surrounding Brünnhilde's rock to accompany the "Magic Fire Music".

SIEGFRIED

Peter Sykora's settings for **Siegfried** continue Friedrich's bleak vision of a degraded environment. Wagner's forest setting for Mime's cave in the forest has the appearance of an outer city slum: the forge sits beneath an old tent made of army camouflage; behind are a series of gauzes with cutouts of flowers and foliage, presumably Mime's attempts to entertain Siegfried as a child; such attempts are repeated in the child's tent stage right surrounded by crude, home-made toys and in the coloured lights which Mime switches on at one point. Some of the geometric toys become useful props in the "three questions" game which Mime and the Wanderer play, each successful answer marked with a cube or a cone. What lifts the grim location into a dynamic performance space is the playing of the characters: Stefan Vinke's blond, blue-eyed, over-grown schoolboy look is perfect for the young Siegfried, especially given a vigorous performance and a really fine voice; Burkhard Ulrich now moves to the part of Mime, in a performance as compelling as his Loge; the Wanderer is played by the rich-voiced Eglis Silins.

In act two, the degraded environment continues as the area surrounding Fafner's cave - the hoarding spot for both the gold and the ring - is represented by a series of dark drapes, dim and gloomy in effect. Fafner's dragon form proves to be yet another ugly piece of machinery and the lovely music for the "Forest Murmurs" is accompanied by only an ugly red glow. Again, as in the previous act, the performers, now with the excellent Alberich of Tomasz Konieczny added, compensate for the visual gloom; yet it is a relief to see the dark drapes finally lift to reveal the full tunnel space as Siegfried rushes off to find Brünnhilde. The strategy is repeated in act three when an initial grim studded metal wall, the setting for the Wanderer's confrontation with Siegfried, first reveals the flames surrounding Brünnhilde's rock through a porthole, and then lifts to reveal her rocky bed in the vast space of the tunnel set. Just as the iron wall echoes the act one **Walküre** set, so too the lifting of the front stage section for Erda's appearance is a reminder of a similar strategy revealing the Nibelheim set. The lightening of the visual gloom in the last part of the act is echoed by the addition of the female voice to the predominantly male voices we have heard for two acts. It is doubly welcome, since Brünnhilde is now sung by Janice Baird. Her voice, though not large, is accurate in pitch and free of the unsteadiness of Herlitzius, and her stage presence is equally engaging.

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

The fine singing and vigorous performances which have distinguished **Siegfried** are unfortunately largely missing from the final evening. In particular, the tired-sounding voice and lack-lustre performance of the new Siegfried, Alfons Ebers, make us long for his predecessor; while the squally, unfocussed singing of Herlitzius, back as Brünnhilde, makes their treatment of the rapturous duet which follows the dawn music rather a trial to listen to....to my ears, at any rate. With the change to the Gibichung Hall, only Matti Salminen's excellent playing enlivens the scene; Gunther (though quite well sung by Markus Brück) is played as a complete wimp, who almost faints during the arm-cutting (surely a mistake since Siegfried speaks of Gunther's formidable reputation along the Rhine); while the replacement Gutrune, Heidi Melton, who also sings competently enough, has the ample figure of the stereotyped Wagnerian singer. The Brünnhilde-Waltraute scene is quite without intensity, reduced in the end to two quarrelsome sisters, and the horrifying final scene where Siegfried-as-Gunther unwittingly overcomes his own bride falls flat. In part this may be due to the fact that, while Eberz wears Gunther's cloak, he still looks like Siegfried, and the disguise-effecting tarnhelm is nowhere in sight. In all, one of the dullest first acts that I've seen.

Thank heavens, then, for the superb Deutsche Oper chorus who, together with Salminen's sonorous "Hoiho!" sequence and his dominating stage presence, restore the excitement of the opera in act two. But act three sees a regression, despite Hagen's dynamic contributions. Siegfried's re-telling of his life with Mime is stolidly sung and his final verse after Hagen has stabbed him, is not at all moving. For a brief sequence Herlitzius shows just what an interesting artist she can be in the quieter moments of her final scene; in particular the vocal shadings of the section where she sings of Siegfried's radiance shining upon her are especially lovely. But the climactic finale, with its loud, high notes beginning at "Flieg heim, ihr Raben!", brings a return of the unsteadiness which has blighted much of the first two acts. Nevertheless, the conclusion of Friedrich's **Ring** is satisfying. A combination of smoke, lighting, and real flames provides a realistic conflagration; the green Rhine gauzes suggest a return of the river, together with the Rhinemaidens who claim the ring; and a crowd of working class people drift in to gaze with horror on the devastation. Finally, we are left only with the vast tunnel space and those amorphous white shapes we saw at the beginning of the cycle; a return to ground zero. Perhaps, it is implied, from this devastated landscape a better world may arise.

Enough remains of Götz Friedrich's vision for us to understand the impact of this production which premiered in the mid 1980s. The reenactment of a tale of man's brutal actions and the environmental consequences, played out in a vast nuclear-shelter-like tunnel space, is even more appropriate now than twenty five years ago.

References

1. quoted in Carnegie, P(2006). *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*. London: Yale U. P.

pp.352-353.

2. quoted in *ibid.* p352.