

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE SEATTLE “RING” 2005

By Tom Borer



Sunday, August 7, 2005: PRE-EVENING: DAS RHEINGOLD

It must be said that Seattle, its institutions and media, are fully aware of what is descending onto them in the form of Richard Wagner’s tetralogy, “Der Ring des Nibelungen”, a stage festival play for Three Days and a Pre-Evening. Coverage in brochures, newspapers and TV is certainly very prominent, quantitatively and visually.

One fine example is the attention the cycle receives in the Sunday Seattle Times. Music critic Melinda Bargreen gratefully recycles every possible known stereotype about Wagner: from the unavoidable Wagner trademark, the valkyries’ horned helmets, to the simplistic “rampant anti-semitism” of the composer, the ego-maniacal seducer of many wives to the ruthless exploiter of Ludwig II – it’s all there. She sketches an overview of the “Ring’s” happenings that could have been written pre-Wieland Wagner, almost as if his readings and those of Chéreau, Friedrich, Hall, Kupfer and all the others had never happened in-between – a kind of pre-penicillin medical view. Although she tries hard to bring us a bit closer to the world of the “Ring”, there is no reference to the all-important web of leitmotifs that really form the spine of the tetralogy; and she goes on to nonchalantly revising the work’s family tree by naming Hagen Alberich’s father – schlafst du, Hagen, mein Sohn? (cf. page J3, “Who’s Who in The Ring”). But the visual presence in the paper is certainly impressive. Keep trying!

In the same Sunday Feature the cycle’s conductor Robert Spano showed himself convinced that “Wagner was a rotten person, no doubt about it.” Hm. Despite his qualifications in the same article I am not quite sure as to whether this would be, say, a helpful attitude towards the task at hand. Holy Simplicissimus! (Side thought: an essay about the development of Wagner stereotypes in America.)

Seattle Opera Director Speight Jenkins on the other hand offers us a very insightful introduction to the four operas in the August issue of “encore”. I would think his concluding remarks, that “the Ring’s overall power comes not only through its great music and fascinating story but, in large part, through how the two together relate to each listener’s fabric of memory.” are getting right to the core of today’s reproduction attempts of the tetralogy.

“The two together...”: In recent years we have witnessed an increasing weight shift towards the stage, the direction and the acting, neglecting the musical aspects in favor of the visual. It appears that story and stage are in need of renewed and different interpretation, while the music in a certain sense is still “untouchable”. And I don’t think this can be simply explained because we’ve got no Furtwänglers and Soltis anymore – there are a number of younger hopefuls to take over: Gergiev, Pappano, Thielemann. They should have the insight and the clout to set that balance straight again. Let’s see.

I have only one strong reservation, however, about Mr Jenkins’ otherwise highly interesting reflections on The Ring, when he says about *Götterdämmerung*: “... the text is nowhere near as rich with complex meanings as the text of the others.” I have found The Third Day to be as loaded and summed up with meanings as can be. One example: (“Hagen, mein Sohn!) Hasse die Frohen!” – These prophetic three words must have been bin Laden’s directive to Atta, Zarqawi and a whole generation of haters, and they tell us more than a hundred pages of so-called terror expert analyses. Can this diverging view possibly be explained with the overwhelming difficulties associated with a meaningful translation of Wagner’s texts that we are looking at this so differently? How in heaven do you translate Brünnhilde’s “...Alles ward mir nun frei.”? Certainly not with a simple “...everything became now clear to me.” More about the translation problem later.

Of course Seattle is not Bayreuth. It can’t be, and rightly so doesn’t want to be.

For the “Wagnerianer” Bayreuth feels like going to church on Easter Sunday, while Seattle seems closer to a relaxed outing to Disney Land. It simply is a different world, not only as far as dress code, or rather its absence, or the opera etiquette with regard to scene applause is concerned. Already now I am dreading the “premature” move of the last act’s curtain of “Die Walküre”. Will I be allowed to listen to the final bars of The Magic Fire Music?

I certainly don’t want to belittle Seattle and its opera. To the contrary.

I think both the venue and the people who make it happen are extraordinary. Speight Jenkins’ devotion to Wagner and his greatest work deserve unqualified praise. It is a huge task these days to – first of all, have a concept – then bring together a conductor, a director with his multitude of helpers as well as all the singers – characters – required for this world of its own, to craft a coherent sequence of four major operas. Who will be the weakest link?

Whenever I am sitting in the dark, waiting for the broad and quietly flowing E-flat Major to slowly crescendo to agitated waters flowing around the submerged rock in the Rhine, I wonder what the journey will show us until the two ravens are sent home by Brünnhilde and Hagen is finally drowned by greed and the Rhine maidens. (Another side note: whatever is Alberich doing at this point?)

This time my disappointment set in very early – as soon as it became clear that this Rhine was not a majestic stream but a shallow muddy side creek, at least in the orchestra. The stage of the first scene, Alberich and two of the three Rhine maidens consoled me to a certain extent, above all Richard Paul Fink's Alberich and Mary Phillips' Wellgunde. The first scene stage setting was certainly something special visually!

The two transition parts in the music, Alberich fleeing with the gold, so breathtakingly transforming to that majestic motif preparing us for Walhall, and that dramatic descent to Nibelheim: both remained equally shallow, restrained, even cheap with that tape insert of the anvil hammering. I can't remember ever having heard such an ill-balanced orchestra, with the heavy brass sounding almost like persiflage from the right, when the giants made their entry. The rest of the brass, the woodwinds and the strings were kept in a kind of Mantovani sound range and lacked both the chromatic qualities so important in this music as well as the coherence and telling development of the leitmotifs.

I thought Loge did quite a good job, although at times he was pretty close to inviting the audience, sit-com conditioned and ever ready for a spontaneous laugh as it seemed, to make their premature contributions to the performance. Alberich's curse and Erda's dark voice were impressive. Donner and Froh however didn't seize their opportunities towards the end of the "Pre-evening"; especially Donner's "heda hedo" was very, let's say, reserved. Greer Grimsley was a well-balanced Wotan and I'm looking forward to his narration and the farewell from his daughter this evening. Again, the hollow solemnity of the Gods ascending to Walhall was inadequately supported by the conductor. The orchestra leader was certainly my single most disappointment of the first day.

It can be very refreshing to see the Rhine Maidens swimming and fooling around in the Rhine, as designed by Wagner and not by some para-Wagner stage director. The same goes for Walhalla and Nibelheim, but then the "naturalistic" approach, here intended by design, must be supported by an adequately strong contribution, if not almost musical leadership, from the orchestra pit. Unfortunately I didn't find that on the opening night.

Monday, August 8, 2005. FIRST DAY: DIE WALKÜRE

What can I say about this Walküre? I think it was as good as it gets in 2005. The Wälsungen pair was near perfect in voice and balance. The strong dark bass of Stephen Milling's Hunding was a revelation, as was his acting. Wagner's instructions for the stage were recreated to the dot: 1876. Set and lighting designs were absolute state of the art.

Even Siegmund's and Sieglinde's love had a kind of late 19th century restraint and avoided today's blatant histrionics.

Again, my only quibble then was about what came from the pit. Wagner's music is written in a way that brutally uncovers inadequacies from the orchestra. The first few bars of the Walküre's short overture are revelatory, so to say, like its pendant, the first bars of Mahler's Second. If that tremolo in the strings does not come across strong, convincing and dry – listen to Solti! – envisioning Siegmund's flight in the subsiding storm is already decisively reduced. And the Wälsungen-Blut in the coda was simply not blossoming. The heavy brass associated with Hagen's brutality came removed from the orchestra body again, almost like a deliberate forerunner of the Fernorchestra in Mahler's Eighth. On the other hand strings, woodwind and the other brass sounded by far not rough enough but had that polished shine of a toothpaste commercial's background music.

I don't want to appear as if I'm just concentrating nagging on Maestro Spano's output, but I had a look at the orchestra pit during the intermission. It is large enough to house a Strauss opera size orchestra. The first and second violins were divided to the left and right of the conductor, as has become standard today. There seemed to be enough space to integrate the heavy brass into the orchestra texture. And I must say that over time the orchestra's contribution became more pronounced, the leitmotifs more coherent and the chromatics, above all in the third act, finally became more colorful. Although still, Wotan's exit in blazing anger at the end of the second act sounded... somewhat upset, not really, really angry. But enough of that.

Brünnhilde's "hojotoho" at the beginning of the second act was just glorious (Jane Eaglen, still fresh?), and Wotan's failed negotiation with his wife was one of the best I've ever heard. I have not found any real weaknesses in the second or third acts, neither with the singers nor with the directing, except for my reservations below. The set designs were simply breathtaking and the rocks in the third act looked as hard as Wotan's initial anger with his daughter. Greer Grimsley's stamina after the grueling second act stayed rock solid as well. Jane Eaglen's Brünnhilde made a very convincing plea for a protective fire to her father, although her upper register was not always firm and unforced, and the visual part on stage of the greatest father-daughter farewell ever conceived was influenced by (her) physical realities.

Of course Patrice Chéreau and his two protagonists, Donald MacIntyre and Gwyneth Jones, had, probably forever, set the standard for the stage part of this scene so high I'm always finding myself disappointed by other productions. And given the general naturalistic approach on stage, this (fire marshall approved?) fire most probably would fail to frighten anybody away, with the consequential danger for the real hero to find the place congested once he made it there...

Oh, and kudos to the Seattle audience. Absolute silence until seconds after the last bar! Marvellous! My apologies!

Wednesday, August 10, 2005. SECOND DAY: SIEGFRIED

Again, set and lighting designers Thomas Lynch and Peter Kaczorowski have surpassed themselves. In all three acts! I liked Alan Woodrow's portraying of a poised nature boy Siegfried and the difficult role of Mime was handled well by Thomas Harper. Alberich and Wotan were again very convincing. Ewa Podles' superb lower range as Erda made for a fascinating exchange with her former lover who now sees the God's end coming near. Greer Grimsley as Wotan was certainly clearly supporting his claim as one of the few leading singers of this role today. Jane Eaglen's "Heil dir, Sonne!" was one of the most beautiful I've ever heard. The restrained acting was again maintained on "The Second Day", especially by Siegfried and Brünnhilde, and the long slow crescendo at the end of the third act maintained balance and tension until the pair finally laughed death in his face. Of course there was a certain physical restriction and stiffness in acting related to Brünnhilde again on stage, and I don't know to what extent it was the director's guidance or the lack of natural agility by Ms Eaglen.

I must say I've never ever before heard an audience laugh at Siegfried's findings, "Das ist kein Mann!". Was it translation again, as there were certainly no overdone histrionics to induce that spontaneous sitcom reaction again? I don't want to appear as a humorless grim purist, but omnia tempus habent!

It seemed to me that the orchestra and Maestro Spano were slowly raising to the occasion with their contribution. The heavy brass was still sounding separated from the orchestra texture but was no longer so extremely disconnected as in *Das Rheingold*. And the score's wonderful chromatics started to blossom – the Forest Murmur was simply poetic, both on stage and in the music. Only that short virtually symphonic poem opening the third act with almost a dozen leitmotifs converging didn't quite succeed in causing the usual goose pimples.

August 12, 2005. THIRD DAY: GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

The final day of the tetralogy contains several scenes I myself consider to be of highest importance for the understanding of the whole Ring universe, and many of them are based on that (neglected?) axis of evil, Alberich and Hagen. The latter's watch of Gibichungen Hall in the first act and then the promise to himself in the second, these scenes are so pivotal for the understanding that their evil is not that simple black and white good and bad we've become accustomed to in countless TV stories.

That said I've heard darker Hagens, and I would have preferred to hear and see Stephen Milling in that role, although I again liked Richard Paul Fink's Alberich. The Three Norns, naturalistic again instead of being positioned behind computer consoles, were too static for my taste, although I know this scene requires considerable fantasy and concept to keep it alive. Another great transformation music, Siegfried's *Rheinfahrt*, remained

unremarkable, but I liked Waltraute's (Nancy Maultsby) sad and desperate plea to her sister.

The visual impact of Gibichungen Hall was a disappointment for me. Although I realize it was supposed to be sort of an antipode of the (Flinm/Bayreuth) three-story glass and steel Wall Street impression, I am sure Stephen Wadsworth and Thomas Lynch have underestimated the builders of that time. Again I wish Hagen's call to arms would have been sung by Stephen Milling, but I was very impressed by the choir (excellent language coaching!).

I thought the second act directing was by far not as compelling as Chéreau's version (just compare i.e. when Brünnhilde is introduced to the crowd by proud and hollow Gunter, her arms hanging as if she were a swan with broken wings...).

Siegfried's ominous quibble with the water birds opening the last act of the cycle was on track, naturalistic, poetic and deep with the sinister warnings, so extremely difficult to sing and done quite well by the three Rhine maidens. What followed after that somehow fell short of my expectations again, with Siegfried's murder, the shocked by-standers and the relatively uninvolved funeral march. Of course – again – what happens in the music is so important there, it's really way more than half the brain impact of these developments.

The two secco staccato chords: nothing comparable has ever been written to describe utter shock. Although the development was seemingly inevitable, now it had become a fact. But I see I'm carried away again... I don't think Robert Spano succeeded in creating that very shock and the following testament of a hero. I had the impression that Ms Eaglen no longer had the fire, the color and the stamina to carry the final scene. The two ravens were sent home rather unceremoniously, and the twilight of the Gods appeared to be a kind of a final merry-go-round parade involving enormous technical forces, but generating less than adequate emotional impact for me.

I wasn't really sure if Alberich wasn't waiting behind the scenes for the curtain to fall, to just start all over again and mount a renewed attempt at the Rhine maidens and the Ring...

FOR ME THERE NEVER IS

a final analysis of a Wagner opera. When I think back to the "Götz Friedrich-Ring" in London (1983?) I still remember the great conducting (Colin Davis), the extremely abstracted stage concept and some impressive singers/actors (MacIntyre, Jones, Behrendt, Salminen as Hagen – whatever happened to Alberto Remedios?), fantastic costumes and surprising stage transformations in plain sight. There are things I recall fondly, others seem to change with time. It will probably be the same with the Seattle Ring.

I will say this: I congratulate Stephen Wadsworth, Thomas Lynch and Martin Pakledinaz for their strict adherence to a concept throughout the four operas. Once the decision was made to go the naturalistic approach, they stuck to it like super glue, and I think that was the production's greatest success. I'm sure we will continue to wildly discuss the "naturalistic" versus the (what?) "modernist/interpretative/symbolistic" attempt towards an interpretation of a Wagner opera. Attempts they will remain.

For me the highlights were Greer Grimsley as Wotan, Richard Paul Fink as Alberich, Stephen Milling's Hunding, Margaret Jane Wray's Sieglinde and Richard Berkeley-Steele as Siegmund. To a good extent I also liked Alan Woodrow as Siegfried, and in the beginning, Jane Eaglen's Brünnhilde. There were numerous others, like Ewa Podleś as Erda or Peter Kazaras' Loge. Nobody, I thought, really fell short.

Given the fact that the text of Wagner's operas takes a far more important role in the trio music/text/stage than in other composers works, translation of his texts is a critical question. I must admit that I only found the time at irregular intervals to compare the English captions shown with the original text. I am not sure but I think the English text used in Seattle (Jonathan Dean) was not Lionel Salter's translation of the Ring text. Any translation attempt must be an almost insurmountable task. In some of the moments I was reading the captions I had the impression of a "modernized" style and vocabulary being used, one possible explanation for a certain, say, trivialization of Wagner's original intentions.

Again: how can you possibly translate the anger, contempt, bitterness and utter frustration in the words: "...meld ihr, dass Wotan's Speer gerächt was Spott ihr schuf!" Results can either be long and unwieldy, incongruent with the time available in the process of the drama, or it might be short and more or less fit the music, but miss most of its strong message. I suspect the latter was applicable for the Seattle Ring in most of the instances I was able to make comparisons.

I am still somewhat disappointed about what came from the orchestra pit, although I had the impression of a steady improvement in coming to terms with the tight net of leitmotifs spanning the whole four nights, and with the orchestra colors slowly brightening, although memorable moments à la Solti, Boulez, Barenboim and Davis did not come to me. Robert Spano, like Bayreuth's last replacement Ring conductor Adam Fischer, was a polished, time-keeping, unobtrusive if unremarkable conductor. But the Ring score demands way more than that.

For right now my 'final' thought about the "Jenkins-Ring" is this:

Well done, Mr Jenkins, following your conviction it had to be The "nature pure" Ring. But please: given your talent(s), your enthusiasm and not least your resources, try a "modern reading" of The Ring next time. I herewith promise I'll be there!

