

WAGNER'S **RING** IN DRESDEN

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Wagner's appointment in 1843 to a position at the Dresden opera, following the success of the Dresden premiere of **Rienzi** and the acceptance of **Der Fliegende Holländer** for production there, finally provided the composer with a secure, paid position after the miseries of his Paris sojourn. **Tannhäuser**, too, was produced there and **Lohengrin** begun. An appropriate and promising place, then, to see Willy Decker's production of the **Ring**, conducted by Christian Thielemann.

DAS RHEINGOLD

Das Rheingold certainly seemed to fulfil that promise. Decker, presumably following Bertold Brecht's politically-based contention that a stage production should strive not to attempt a depiction of reality, but rather to emphasize the created, "staged" nature of the performance, proceeded to do just that. During the introduction music, a black curtain was drawn back to reveal rows of theatre chairs facing up stage, the Rhine Maidens popping up from these as their singing began; later a huge white proscenium arch and stage was pushed in and the "theatre" was complete. The Rhine Maidens, bald and dressed only in simple white coverings received their green costumes from Alberich (Albert Dohmen) and gradually put them on. They were occasionally applauded by a small audience in the chair-rows during their cruel treatment of Alberich. A white globe at the back later revolved, as the Rheingold music began, to become a golden globe which sank down with Alberich as he snatched the gold.

For the scene with the gods in the mountains, a curtain showing painted mountains was drawn across, and Wotan demonstrated *Valhalla* by means of a small white model of a Greek-style temple. Fasolt and Fafner, two rather jolly workmen in hats, appeared through the curtain which was drawn back to reveal a mass of cardboard cut-out mountains. Later, a huge red stylized arrow descended from above with Loge (Kurt Streit) peeping cheekily from behind it.

The scene down in Nibelheim featured a large fissure in the "rocks" behind the chairs, plus a large safe in which Alberich stored the gold mined by the Nibelung slaves who had sprung up from the chairs. The magic *tarnhelm* created by Mime

(Gerhard Siegel) emerged as a gold hat with a brim. The rows of chairs rocked up and down to create the writhing of the dragon conjured up by Alberich as he boasted of the tarnhelm's transformative power to Wotan and Loge. The two had arrived in Nibelheim via Loge's descending arrow. The return to the gods' mountain scene revealed that many of the cardboard mountains had fallen down, suggesting the inevitable decline of *Valhalla* and its gods, a fate implied later in the scene by Erda. The gold brought up by the Nibelungs when Wotan forced the captured Alberich to summon them, at first seemed oddly shaped gold pieces, but when piled up to cover Freia at the giants' demand, once more became the golden globe of the first scene. Tansel Akzeybeck's beautifully sung Froh summoned only a rather tame light effect for the rainbow bridge, while the impressive Donner of Derek Welton commanded the fall of the back curtain to reveal a large version of the *Valhalla* model, and a path leading to it. This *Valhalla* leaned perilously to one side, further suggesting the decline of its inhabitants, and prompting Wotan's indecisive glance back at Erda, as the gods moved to enter Valhalla.

Throughout, the playing of this superb orchestra was excellent under Thielemann's baton, and the singing uniformly good. This was especially true of the fine Wotan sung by Vitalij Kowaljow, an impressive Fricka from Christa Mayer and a masterly performance from Kurt Streit as Loge. Add to this the intelligent and extremely detailed direction by Decker of the singer-actors, and it seemed that **Das Rheingold** promised an interesting tetralogy. The following parts, however, brought many disappointments.

DIE WALKÜRE

For the first part of the tetralogy, the theatre seats remained in front of a room with walls of light coloured wood and a stylised tree pierced by a large sword, its size suggesting "stage prop" rather than practical weapon. Wotan was present from the beginning, and ensured that the exhausted Siegmund entered the house where the unhappy Sieglinde awaited her brutal husband, Hunding. Towards the end of the scene, the entrance of Spring, as Siegmund described it, was created when Wotan's signal caused the walls to be lifted, freeing the exit of the new lovers. Both the Sieglinde, Elena Pancratova, and Hunding, Georg Zeppenfeld, gave fine performances; however Peter Seiffert as Siegmund seemed to be suffering from a cold since the lower notes were croaky, and the upper notes unsteady. A pity then that he held the cries of "Walse!" for an unpleasantly long time. The latter part of this act, some of

Wagner's most beautiful and 'romantic' music seemed all too cool. Perhaps the stylised theatricality which worked well in the tale of the gods in **Das Rheingold**, was less appropriate to the human story of Siegmund and Sieglinde. The first scene of the second act took place in a room crammed with models of buildings and statues including those of his offspring, Siegmund and Sieglinde, all symbols of his thrust for power and his defence in the face of the threats to the gods. When these were undermined by Fricka's destruction of his plan via the Volsungs, he hurled them about despairingly. His scene with Brünnhilde as she tried to understand his plight was well played despite Petra Lang's tendency to overplay the *Valkyrie* as rebellious teenager. In scene two, Siegmund and Sieglinde, in flight from Hunding, took shelter in the row of theatre seats in front of a curtain which then framed Brünnhilde's announcement of Siegmund's death. Siegmund's fight with Hunding disappointingly took place off stage but he crawled back on stage for his death and for Wotan to collapse, grief-stricken, upon his body. The *Valkyries'* ride in the third act had them descending from above on large grey arrows similar to Loge's transport, each arriving as her singing part began... a very effective strategy. Their descent was into a stage now completely covered with the rows of chairs. Wotan's scene, as he angrily confronted Brünnhilde with her disobedience in attempting to save Siegmund, showed Kowaljow in fine voice, despite the overplaying by his Brünnhilde. His final agreement to her wish for a protective ring of fire, and his softly-sung farewell was most moving, a dramatic contrast to the vocal splendour of his calls to Loge to begin the fire. The glowing of the backs of the rows of chairs was the answer to his call.

SIEGFRIED

The first two acts of Siegfried marked a low point in Decker's staging, partly because of ugly sets; after all, whatever their function, an audience has to look at such sets for some hours. Mime's hut consisted of a pile of abandoned chairs within two awkward, crooked, confining walls through which Siegfried burst with a toy teddy bear (no realistic animal costume for this production). Stephen Gould's excellent Siegfried seen in Vienna some years ago seemed a distant memory given his unconvincing performance here, and his rather coarse vocalisation. Mime, however, brought a fine performance from Siegel. For the forging scene, Siegfried pulled up a segment of the floor so that the forging process was invisible behind it. Another ugly set greeted us in Act 2, backed by a curtain, illustrated with crudely-painted trees, concealing Fafner's

cave. Fafner as dragon was a collection of wooden segments which fell apart in answer to Gould's lack-lustre blows. The woodbird here, while sung off stage, was represented on stage by a young boy who became Siegfried's companion and carried his horn; while Siegfried's comprehension of what Mime really intended behind his friendly words was signalled by the boy pointing at him. In the end the two pal up as mates in the quest to find Brünnhilde.... a remarkably silly idea. Even the lovely moment of the Woodland Murmurs brought no quiet, thoughtful singing from Gould. Act three brought superb playing from the orchestra, uplifting the spirits after the dreary prior scenes. It was enlivened by an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of angular walls with a drape covering Erda, and thrilling singing from both Wotan and Erda (Christa Mayer). A curtain for the transition to Brünnhilde's rock lifted to reveal, behind the sleeping Brünnhilde, the inevitable rows of chairs into which Siegfried and the child entered. The side walls continued the "not-for-real" sets with blue flats painted with white clouds. The wonderful scene of Brünnhilde's awakening, when all attention should be directed upon her, was spoiled by distracting reactions from the boy and Siegfried, a surprising directorial decision. Petra Lang now in a long red dress, impressed with both her acting and her vocal performance, so that the final scene with Siegfried and Brünnhilde erased some of the earlier disappointment.

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

Following the coiling of a serpent-like rope by the Norns about a now-cracked globe, the scene of the lovers' awakening brought us a new Siegfried in Andreas Schafer, handsome, lively, and in excellent voice. A curtain during Siegfried's Rhine Journey allowed us to appreciate without distraction the excellent orchestral playing of the Dresden Staatskapelle. Gunther's palace featured a wide acting space within an oblong proscenium arch containing padded easy chairs, a drinks table and back windows revealing (painted) mountains outside. In this elegant environment, with Gunther (Martin Gantner) and Gutrune (Edith Haller) in formal dress, Siegfried, still wielding the over-large sword, seemed out of place. Certainly Andreas Shager 's over-enthusiastic performance seemed like over-playing, yet who could complain about a vibrant, good-looking Siegfried who sang well. When the hero, his memory affected by Hagen's potion, and now smitten with Gutrune, agreed to overcome Brünnhilde on behalf of Gunther, the two young men exchanged jackets. The Waltraute/Gutrune scene showed great intensity thanks to Christa

Mayer's, superb, detailed performance as Waltraute; then, following the latter's despairing departure at Brünnhilde's determination to keep Siegfried's ring, Gunther watched as Siegfried overcame the woman whom Hagen's potion had erased from his memory. After a fine scene from Siegel and Dohman, as Alberich urged the sleeping Hagen to obtain the ring, the latter called the Gibichung vassals with impressively sung "hi-hos". The vassals entered carrying chairs, and their exciting chorus work was delivered with stylized movements with chairs, their bodies, and their spears... a most effective piece of choreography. Petra Lang's performance as Brünnhilde confronted Siegfried may well have brought back memories of the *femme-fatale* acting of silent films, yet it was well sung and effective, and brought further stylised movements from the chorus. Act three re-acquainted us with the Rhine maidens who drew across a curtain illustrating the Rhine to establish the setting. Shager's continued overplaying of Siegfried as enthusiastic charmer while he traded quips with the Rhinemaidens' calls to return the ring, may well have been a directorial decision by Decker, keen to stress the performance of both Lang and Shager as "acting", not as attempts at realism. Siegfried's tale, however, to Hagen and the vassal hunters about his previous interactions with Mime, seemed rather more realistic; this, then, and his excellent singing, made Siegfried's narration and the last verse as he dies, particularly moving. The final scene, which should be the climax of the tetralogy, was rather tame despite Lang's quite impressive performance of Brünnhilde's farewell to Siegfried. The Rhine maidens appeared and, despite Hagen's attempts, Brünnhilde handed them the ring; the gods were revealed sitting in the rows of chairs up stage, then the red lighting of the chairs and a smoke effect erased their presence.

In all then, Dresden's Ring, while sometimes disappointing as a production, was distinguished by generally very fine orchestral playing and some excellent singing from some of the principals. Thielemann showed himself to be a very fine conductor, his flexibility with tempos, though, not free of certain habits such as slowing up for emphasis before climaxes and indulging in frequent pauses. The most surprising of the latter was the very long pause just before the last great melody of **Götterdämmerung**. From memory, only Solti pauses here, and then very briefly, in his famous recording, while other conductors forge straight ahead.