

# WNO Music Director Philippe Auguin on *The Ring*

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## WNO MUSIC DIRECTOR PHILIPPE AUGUIN ON *THE RING*



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### **Wagner is a big part of your operatic repertoire. What draws you so strongly to his music?**

To give a complete answer, it would be necessary to explain what a real conductor (I mean, a conductor as the composer wants him to be) is actually doing during the performance, during the rehearsals, before the rehearsals. To explain, it would need a book.

Instead, let's use a metaphor: the conductor is a painter who sees clearly the image in his mind before making it visible for the others. Only he sees the work and sees what needs to be done to make, let's say, the *Mona Lisa*, visible. This active part of the creation of the conductor grows with the richness, the dimensions, the complexity, and the length of the score, as well as the vastness of the discourse of the composer.

The active part of creation requested of the conductor by Wagner is huge: an intellectually and artistically gigantic task. Every bar is a kaleidoscope within itself, but at the same time there are myriad elements one needs to master:

to memorize, conceptualize, coach, rehearse, and conduct while adjusting connection and balance between stage and orchestra; and to perform with a constant alacrity of reflexes during 17 hours, but also with raw sensitivity and complete emotional abandon. Consequently, he is a painter, a set designer, a stage director, and an actor at the same time—to the acme of each of these roles to the maximum during 17 hours—narrating a history of the world.

### **You have conducted *The Ring* several times now. How has your approach changed since your first cycle?**

I have conducted seven cycles of *The Ring*, not counting performances of the four titles given separately. During the rehearsals of the first cycle, one experiments with various technical solutions to concretize the intentions of the composer. Afterwards, there are no technical questions left open, from the very first rehearsal. It is only a gain of always more accurate efficiency at all levels. But I knew *The Ring* by memory already before the very first time. Some people say that life is not a dress rehearsal; I say that the experience of conducting *The Ring* was never for me an occasion to grow my repertoire list, but an experience of a lifetime, in full artistic and emotional awareness.

### **What have been the most rewarding aspects of conducting *The Ring*?**

*The Ring* is a part of me, but at the same time a living organism I dialogue with. I assume you will have the same answer from writers or painters who live a lifetime with a masterwork. Even when I go years without conducting it, it is there: a friendly presence and source of unlimited joys to whom I am endlessly grateful; a universe of feelings, beauty, passion, and fascination that offers itself to me.

### **In your experience, how has the energy been different among cast and musicians performing an entire *Ring* as opposed to performing the operas individually?**

The first problem: the extension of the rehearsal time due to the length of the tetralogy is a real challenge for memorization. What was practiced, coached, shaped, and dramatically accurate on day one needs to feed the



interpretation and the technical mastery for the remainder of the four evenings. The first 10 pages of *The Rhinegold* rehearsed during the first orchestra solo session should remain present in the memory and in the fingers of the musicians while rehearsing the last 10 pages of *Twilight of the Gods*, approximately 2,000 orchestral score pages later. And through the stage rehearsals and through the performances of the three cycles.

The second problem is the proportionally reduced time of rehearsals for the complete *Ring* compared to an isolated run of *Siegfried*. Six solo orchestra rehearsals for a run of *Siegfried's* performances is no luxury. But we do not have proportionally 24 solo orchestra rehearsals for *The Ring*! *The Ring* as a complete cycle that the audience experiences is only the visible part of the iceberg.

For the conductor, it is the equivalent of Shakespeare's tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*—for an actor who would memorize all the roles. And for me physically: I was once asked how I could stand through four hours of *The Valkyrie* after *The Rhinegold* and still know I have *Siegfried* and *Twilight of the Gods* to come. I answered: And how is it possible to be in tears during three of these four hours? Life is too short to save one's energy while conducting *The Ring*. The most extraordinary experience of surpassing oneself is the destiny of an artist.

#### **What are the specific challenges of leading *The Ring* that are different from other Wagner works?**

Wagner remains the most influential personality in the history of music. For the development of musical language, he can be compared only to Schoenberg, Debussy, and Stravinsky: his 11 major works are 11 different worlds. There are 11 different Wagners.

It is true also for *The Ring*: four different Wagners coexist. To take it extremely schematically and only talking about the texture of the orchestral writing: *The Rhinegold* orchestra is related to *Lohengrin's*, transcended by extraordinary inventions.

*The Valkyrie* has a darker texture—"the most tragic of my works," Wagner said—calling tempests, thunders, and magic fire unique in the history of music.

*Siegfried's* orchestra reaches a critical size in the first act. Resuming after seven years of pause, dedicated to *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Master-Singers of Nuremberg*, Wagner invents a new over-dimensional proportion, exploding the frontiers of orchestral virtuosity.

*Twilight of the Gods* transcends all dimensions and all difficulties, exhausting all thematic variations of all the motives in order to give us the ultimate feeling of accomplishment.

#### **For you, what is the most important thing that audiences take away from *The Ring* experience?**

The system of the leitmotif is remarkably efficient: Wagner puts in our memory sound signals associated with images, ideas, or characters. Each time he calls upon these sound signals, he loads them with more signification and emotion. Each time the leitmotifs appear, our ear discerns what is different and associates the new added element with a dramatically meaningful situation. That is the reason we cry in the third act of *Twilight of the Gods* when the heartbreaking cantilever of the oboe, singing the theme that we associate with Sieglinde, shyly reminds us of her cruel destiny, nine hours after she's left the stage. That is the reason we are transported by the melody associated with the miracle of love, sung in full exaltation by Sieglinde nine hours before, when it crowns the last appearance of Valhalla's theme: the world transfigured by love, the dawn of the promise of a better world.

From the very first instant, from the very first note of *The Rhinegold*, Wagner takes us by the hand into his fantastic world. The orchestra is his voice, calling the maelstrom of human passions and destinies, calling up thunder, rainbows, and delirious sunrises. One cannot escape the overwhelming emotional transfiguration *The Ring* offers. One remembers forever the last chord, pointing out to an eternity of light.

How could anyone miss this experience, one so absolutely unique to western civilization? ●