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The Ring Trilogy / TIMOTHY KING

Mary and I spent the last three evenings of 2017 in Vienna, seeing *Die Ring-Trilogie* at the Theater an der Wien. We had heard about it in early December from Vienna-based friends. They warned us that reviews had been mixed, but the idea behind it sounded intriguing. We are very glad that we decided to go.

In this note, I have used the past tense to describe the Trilogy, since what we were seeing was its fourth and final cycle, at least for this year, and very possibly for all time. It consisted of nine hours of music spread out over three evenings as compared with sixteen hours of music and four evenings of a full Ring Cycle, but it would be a mistake to think of it as primarily a compression of, or series of deletions from, the original. Its restructuring and change of focus was much more radical than that. Its literal starting point, centre-stage for all three evenings, was the stabbing in the back of Siegfried by Hagen. This was Wagner's starting point too, when he began to write a verse-drama, *Siegfried's Tod* in 1848. He subsequently decided that some sort of prequel was needed to provide explanatory background, and accommodate other material, and so wrote *Der Junge Siegfried* (later *Siegfried*). There followed *Die Walküre*, to describe the circumstances of Siegfried's conception, and why and how Brünnhilde had been punished for attempting to save the lives of his parents. Wagner also decided that the trilogy needed a prelude, which became *Das Rheingold*. Unlike the verse-dramas, the music was composed in the sequence of their performance, and by the time it was performed in 1876 *Siegfried's Tod* had become *Götterdämmerung*—not merely the death of one man but the destruction of the Gods.

This Trilogy, while using only Wagner's own words and music, put things back on a human scale. The only Gods were Wotan and Loge, the only Valkyries were Brünnhilde (almost entirely after her loss of divinity) and her sister, Waltraute. Nothing of Erda or the Norns, no Fricka, Freia nor Fasolt, and Valhalla was mentioned only in passing. The titles of the three operas were those of three members of the younger generation, Hagen, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, and we saw the dramas as they appeared to each of them as

flashbacks triggered by the killing of Siegfried. This was a useful dramatic device: In Hagen's memory the bottom of the Rhine could metamorphose into Nibelheim with no concern for the passage of time. Siegfried could imagine the occasional presence of one or both of his parents from time to time, even though he had actually never known them. A central revolving stage allowed scenic transitions to be as smooth as changes in memory, although it has to be said that the sets themselves were mostly sparse and uninteresting.

The first evening was the story as it had been perceived by Hagen. The opening was that of the Second Act of *Götterdämmerung*, where he swears to accept his father Alberich's demand that he avenge him by seizing the Ring. We then saw him as a boy of about six or seven, brought along by his father to see the Rhine maidens playing in the muddy bottom of the Rhine. He then saw the participation of his lustful father in the fun, and the discovery and theft of the Rhine Gold. The action then moved, seamlessly with no change of set, to Nibelheim where his father had forced his uncle, Mime, to forge the Ring and the Tarnhelm. Two men dropped by. These were Wotan, looking like a mafioso, and Loge, in a brown tweed suit. They tricked and tortured his father into surrendering the Ring, Tarnhelm and the rest of the gold (in black garbage bags), to which he responded with a dreadful curse. One might note in passing that the costumes were modern, casual and often tatty. Siegfried in particular favoured T-shirts.

In the second Act, we were now at the court of the Gibichungs, observing Hagen hatch a plot whereby Siegfried would marry his half-sister, Gutrune and help his half-brother, King Gunther, to marry Brünnhilde. Conveniently (the English synopsis says "unexpectedly", but that is stretching credibility too far) Siegfried dropped by, drank the potion, fell instantly in love with Gutrune, swore blood brotherhood to Gunther, and set off with him to collect Brünnhilde from their mountain top. At this point, an audience who knew nothing about the original Ring would know no more about Siegfried's pledge to Brünnhilde than did Gutrune. The actual seizure of the Ring and the abduction of Brünnhilde would not be seen until the third opera of the Trilogy, *Brünnhilde*. Instead Siegfried soon returned to report that his mission had been successful. Hagen summoned his vassals-- a men's chorus in false noses and shorts. Wedding preparations began, and Gunther eventually arrived with a manifestly unhappy Brünnhilde. When Brünnhilde realized that Siegfried had betrayed her, she sought revenge and told Hagen that Siegfried's back is vulnerable to his spear.

If one knew the full Ring reasonably well, Hagen was easy to follow. If one didn't, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible. Our Vienna friends, who had had opera subscriptions there for many years, but had also spent considerable periods in New York and in Paris where they had also had opera subscriptions, had seen the Ring operas before but not as a cycle, and one of them in particular found it very difficult to follow. This was not a question of language. Our friends are bilingual, and there were German surtitles, (although Wagner's verse-dramas are a considerable distance from modern colloquial German and could be difficult to absorb at the speed they passed

by.) But the main problem was that there was no way to understand the relationships between the characters—who, for example, were these two gentlemen who appeared in what to an untutored eye could still have been the bottom of the Rhine, and why had they come?

The second opera was *Siegfried*. As *Siegfried* died, his life flashed before his eyes. There was no bear, nor did the Wanderer pose questions for Mime. Instead it began where he insisted on learning his own origins from his foster father Mime. As Mime started to tell him, the scene moved to the interior of Hunding's house and the action to the opening Act of *Die Walküre*. It is possible that there were cuts, but it appeared more or less complete to me, and it was immediately followed by the conclusion to the Second Act of the full version. The rationale for Wotan's intervention in the fight between *Sigmund* and Hunding was left to the third opera of the Trilogy, *Brünnhilde*. Indeed since there was no scene between Wotan and Fricka on either evening, it was never really explained.

The second and third Acts of *Siegfried* appeared to follow the full version fairly closely, beginning with the repair to Nothung and ending with the awakening of *Brünnhilde*. There must have been cuts to keep the evening much shorter than its original, but nothing major was lost. No attempt was made to present *Fafner* as anything but human. In all three operas, there was a great deal of stage business that I personally did not care for. Some of this I found merely irritating, and some I did not understand at all. This is of course to be expected in opera productions in Germany and Austria, especially at the Theater an der Wien, which has the reputation of being the most non-traditional of the Viennese opera houses. Some of these may have been explained in the very extensive programme notes that my lack of German prevented me from reading. But I was puzzled by the very full black garbage bags carried by the Songbird. We had last seen such bags stuffed with gold in *Nibelheim*, but it is impossible to believe that even in *Siegfried*'s wildest imagination these could be linked. It is implausible that Mime had told *Siegfried* about *Nibelheim*. Equally curious, *Siegfried* found *Brünnhilde* not lying stretched out on a mountaintop but standing upright and shuffling her feet—almost dancing—in an apparent trance, wearing her riding clothes and sunglasses. We learnt on the following evening that this was how Wotan had left her. To my eye, she was in a cave that looked as though it were cut from a coal seam, but perhaps the blackness resulted from the ring of fire, which was otherwise absent. The cave contained a piano, which somehow *Siegfried* managed to bring to the court of the Gibichungs.

Brünnhilde's own flashback saw a girl of perhaps thirteen or fourteen, brilliantly cast to resemble her eventual adult form, at the knee of her father Wotan. Since there was no sign of Fricka, and the Hunding-*Sigmund* fight has already been staged, the action of the first Act was that of the later part of *Die Walküre*—the condemnation of *Brünnhilde* by an angry but gradually softening Wotan, and her banishment to the mountain cave, where she eventually is aroused by *Siegfried*. The night of love led smoothly into the first act of *Götterdämmerung*, with the departure of *Siegfried* followed by a visit from *Brünnhilde*'s sister *Waltraute*, and then by the return of *Siegfried* to the

cave disguised as Gunther, where he seized the Ring, and abducted Brünnhilde. Then it was back to the Kingdom of the Gibichungs where the arrival of King Gunther and his new bride was eagerly awaited by the Gibichung chorus.

Most of the final Act of the opera was its equivalent from *Götterdämmerung*, with Siegfried's refusal to return the Ring to the Rhine maidens, followed by the stab in the back from Hagen. His body was laid on a hospital trolley, which was eventually parked in what looked like a corridor on the centre of the revolving stage. Here it was joined by the piano and by other members of the cast as their lives came to an end. Doors at the end of the corridor were eventually closed, but it continued to rotate slowly. The young Hagen and the young Brünnhilde came back on the stage to watch—dramatically illogical, but seeming to justify the closing words of the English synopsis, which were “Hope for a new world dawns.” At that moment, 2017 had about 90 minutes left to run. Naturally I wondered whether any of us would dare to express a similar hope as 2018 dawned.

On all three evenings, musical standards were high. The Theater an der Wien was built in 1801, long before Wagner and Richard Strauss scored their operas for orchestras with 90 plus players, its pit cannot accommodate more than about sixty players. Responsibility for both the revised scoring and conducting belonged to Constantin Trinks, with the Radio-Symphony Orchestra of Austrian radio (whose concertmaster, incidentally, is Irish—Maighread McCrann) and to my ears there was no significant loss from a smaller orchestra. It may even have helped the singers. The singing was almost never less than competent, and mostly better than that, although Siegfried (Daniel Brenna) had a few bad patches, and Hunding (Stefan Kocan) had to be sung from the pit (by Samuel Youn, who was very good as Hagen.) Wotan (Aris Argiris) and Mime (Marcel Beekman) were excellent. But the real star was Ingela Brimberg as Brünnhilde. The cast descriptions in the programme suggest that this may have been her first Brünnhilde—I would be surprised if it were her last.

The adaptation had been done by the stage director Tatjana Gürbaca and the Dramaturg, Bettina Auer. It was imaginative, and, as drama, worked remarkably well. But it requires an audience that is already familiar with the full Ring, and this would limit its appeal in all but a handful of cities. In most places, audiences get relatively few chances to see a Ring Cycle and would not regard this Trilogy as a satisfactory alternative. It seems likely that we were seeing its last performances.

January 2018

The Ring in Dresden / Mary Spollen

The opportunity to hear a Ring Cycle conducted by Christian Thielemann with the Staatskapelle Orchestra was reason enough to visit Dresden in January 2018. Dresden is a lovely city to visit but preferably in May rather than January. However, temperatures at zero and a biting cold wind did not interfere with the enjoyment of nine days in Dresden.

The Dresden Ring, directed by Willy Decker, began life in 2001 when *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walkure* were produced and the other two operas followed in subsequent years. So it has been around for a while but is none the worse for that. There was no revival director credited in the programme, so presumably we got the production as originally envisaged. Sets were by Wolfgang Gussmann, who was also credited, together with Frauke Schernau, with the Costumes.

The predominant stage effect of this production was the use of 'theatre-style seats'. The stage was covered with rows and rows of theatre seats, both in front and behind the performance area, creating the concept of a play within a play. This effectively reduced the stage area, concentrating the singers towards the front. The seats were pastel coloured in *Das Rheingold* and glowed red when Brunnhilde was surrounded by fire. The singers moved among them, climbed over them (with some difficulty!), sometimes sat in them to observe the action or to interact with the singers on stage. There was also a black gauze curtain across the stage which was pulled back by Erda to begin the action in *Das Rheingold* and closed again by her as the gods entered Valhalla. It was also used to good effect to shroud Brunnhilde in her encounter with Siegmund on the battlefield and it was closed very slowly by Wotan at the end of *Die Walkure* after his poignant farewell to Brunnhilde.

Das Rheingold opens with Alberich sitting on the seats to the front of stage with a number of other men, watching the frolicking Rhinemaidens. To join them, Alberich had to climb over the rows of seats. The Giants, dressed in over-sized suits and hats, moved in unison to the music, which was very effective. Loge, complete with red spectacles, red scarf and a red streak in his hair, was lowered on to the stage while standing on a red arrow. At the end of *Das Rheingold* while the gods are making their way to Valhalla, Loge watches them from the front seats. The 'gold' was an enormous golden ball and the Tarnhelm was represented by a gold bowler hat. Alberich kept the gold in a safe in Nibelheim and when it was delivered to Wotan it came in blocks that had to be assembled like a jigsaw. When the giants fought over it, Fasolt was killed by being hit with a chunk of gold.

Die Walkure opened with Wotan and Siegmund sitting on the front seats, backs to the audience. At the end of the Prelude, Siegmund climbs over the seats to reach the stage. For Hunding's house the stage was panelled in ash, with a large ash-clad column centre stage into which Notung was imbedded. When Hunding arrived home – dressed like a business executive – he threw his coat over the hilt of the sword. Hunding carried a huge silver sword, the match in size of the gold-coloured Nothung. Wotan's confrontation with Fricka takes

place in Wotan's workshop, surrounded by models of classical buildings and figures, among which can clearly be seen a model of the Frauenkirche, the iconic Church in central Dresden. The red-haired Valkyries arrive on white arrows from flies – no dead heroes, but each carrying a long spear. Again movement is hampered by the seats but they also serve to hide Brunnhilde from Wotan. At the end of *Die Walkure* Brunnhilde appears lying on top of a white circular disc while the seats glow red.

The seats are replaced by chairs piled high on one another in *Siegfried*. There is no fire for the forging, only a three-sided space lit from within. The woodbird is sung offstage, with a teenage boy shepherding Siegfried on stage. When Siegfried reaches Brunnhilde, she is on a bare stage, dressed in red, with neither helmet nor armour.

In *Gotterdammerung* the Gibichung palace has an air of decadence to it. Guttrune is shown as having an incestuous relationship with her brother while also a sexual relationship with her half-brother Hagan – which she revenges by killing him at the end of the opera. For the ending the Director took some liberties with the libretto. There was no funeral pyre and no conflagration. Nor does Siegfried's hand rise when Hagen tries to take the ring. In fact, the stage work seemed to peter out, leaving Brunnhilde with no particular focus for the Immolation scene. She returned the ring to the Rhinemaidens - with Wotan looking on - and then joined the gods from *Das Rheingold* on the seats at the back of the stage.

Christian Thielemann had assembled an impressive array of singers. Singing Wotan/The Wanderer, **Vitalij Kowaljow**, the Ukrainian bass, who sang the role for Opera Ireland in *Das Rheingold* in Dublin in November 2009, was for me the ideal Wotan. His voice has beauty and power and his portrayal was both noble and frustrated, knowing that the time of the gods was coming to an end. He had more to do in this production than is usual, appearing as a witness to all the main actions and was even represented by a silent Wanderer in *Gotterdammerung*. Rather than sitting in despair in Valhalla, he observes Siegfried's death and is watching as Brunnhilde returns the ring to the Rhinemaidens. **Petra Lang**, (who sang Ortrud in Berlin in November) singing Brunnhilde, was at her best in *Die Walkure*, acting the role as a petulant teenager. Her Act III duet with Wotan was the highlight of her performance. She did not appear to reach the heights of her role either in *Siegfried* or *Gotterdammerung* but the ending of the Ring did not support her either.

There was some doubt as to who would sing the title role in *Siegfried*. **Andreas Schager** was listed to sing Siegfried in *Gotterdammerung* and on the day he also sang in *Siegfried* but in the subsequent cycle, the role was sung by Stephen Gould. We later heard that Andreas Schager had only two days rehearsal. In these circumstances he did very well. Christian Thielemann complained publicly that there had not been enough rehearsal time allotted for *Siegfried* and on a tour of the Semper Opera we were informed that a 'sold out' opera performance was cancelled to make way for additional rehearsals.

Peter Seiffert has sung Siegmund for many years and while his interpretation is solid, his high notes are no longer reliable. His Sieglinde, **Elena Pankratova**, met the challenges of her role with ease and handled the obvious brutality of Hunding with resignation. Singing the roles of Hunding, **Georg Zeppenfeld** proved himself an ideal 'baddy' with a rich rumbling bass voice. He also sang the roles of Fasolt in *Das Rheingold* and Fafner/Dragon in *Siegfried* and was impressive in each. Other outstanding roles were **Kurt Streit** as Loge, **Albert Dohmen** as Albrich, **Gerhard Siegel** as Mime, **Christa Mayer** as Fricka/Waltraute and **Stephen Milling** as Hagen,

The playing of the **Staatskapelle Dresden** was exemplary under their Musical Director, **Christian Thielemann**. The acoustic in the Semperoper is warm and direct and, with the production drawing the singers down stage, the sound between stage and pit was well balanced. Maestro Thielemann appeared to give the orchestra free reign in Siegfried's Funeral March and the result was thrilling.

The changed ending aside, nothing in this production interfered with the story that Wagner is telling and having Wotan watch over all the crucial events only helped to unify the action. Musically and dramatically this Ring was certainly worth the winter trip to Dresden.

Mary Spollen

Some pictures from the 2018 Ring Cycle can be seen on the Semperoper web site at www.semperoper.de/schedule/january2018