

Nuremberg with Cranach and Acrobats

Mark Berry reports on a revival of Harry Kupfer's Berlin 'Meistersinger'

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. James Morris (Hans Sachs), Burkhard Fritz (Walther von Stolzing), Dorothea Röschmann (Eva), René Pape (Veit Pogner), Florian Hoffmann (David), Katharina Kammerloher (Magdalene), Paul O'Neill (Kunz Vogelgesang), Arttu Kataja (Konrad Nachtigall), Roman Trekel (Sixtus Beckmesser), Hanno Müller-Brachmann (Fritz Kothner), Peter-Jürgen Schmidt (Balthasar Zorn), Patrick Vogel (Ulrich Eisslinger), Peter Menzel (Augustin Moser), Yi Yang (Hermann Ortel), Bernd Zettisch (Hans Schwarz), Andreas Bauer (Hans Foltz), Alexander Vinogradov (Nightwatchman); Staatskapelle Berlin/Staatsopernchor Berlin/Daniel Barenboim (conductor); Harry Kupfer (producer), Hans Schavernoeh (designs), Buki Schiff (costumes), Franz Peter David (lighting), Roland Giertz (choreography). Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin, 19 March 2008

This was a frustrating *Meistersinger*: in many ways good, but it could easily have been better. The Prelude to Act I did not augur well, combining a somewhat uninflected smoothness of line with a surprisingly hard-driven quality. The combination put me in mind of Karajan on an off-day. Like Karajan even at his most unappealing – and I speak as an admirer in general – Daniel Barenboim would not have been capable of allowing the performance to fall below a certain level. There was, for instance, no doubt that he had command of the work's structure. (If only one could have said that of Antonio Pappano during the Royal Opera's *Ring*.) But the trick, if one can call it that, of Wagner conducting is to combine over the drama's vast span a Furtwänglerian *Fernhören* (long-distance perception) with attention to detail, so that command of both short- and long-range aspects – and the reality is far more complex than this, involving numerous intermediate stages – dialectically heightens the effect of the other. One can look more synchronically at both score and performance, and see an equally important, related but distinct, problem for the conductor to address. Wagner, as Boulez has written, 'refused to sacrifice expressiveness to polyphony, endowing each part in the polyphonic web with such expressive power that there is almost a conflict of interest: everything sings and sings "unendingly"'.¹ Not only balancing but in a sense also heightening that conflict is the conductor's task. This requires an almost superhuman attention to Boulez's 'everything'.

As so often with Barenboim, drawing upon his expertise in both French music and Mozart, there was beautiful highlighting of woodwind detail. There were times, however, when he and his orchestra simply sounded careless. Anyone can make mistakes, but there were more than one might have expected, perhaps most glaringly from one of the horns just before the Trial Song. There were, moreover, times when Barenboim sounded insensitive not only towards the singers, but towards the stage events as such. Pierre Monteux once tellingly referred to 'the indifference of *mezzo forte*'; here, especially during the second act, there was too much indifference of harsh orchestral *forte*. Whilst there were moments when the Staatskapelle Berlin sounded

¹ Pierre Boulez, 'Richard Wagner: The Man and his Works', *Orientalisations*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, tr. Martin Cooper (London and Boston, 1986), p. 227.

its usual, burnished self, there were too many when it did not. Indeed, the moments when the performance moved up a gear brought into heightened relief what had been missing, for instance when we heard the cellos' rich mahogany in the Prelude to Act III, itself beautifully paced, and subsequently the conjuring up of an appositely *Tristanesque* ecstasy in the triangle between Sachs, Eva and Walther. Perhaps conductor and orchestra had allotted more time to rehearsal of Prokofiev's *The Gambler*, the new opera for these Berlin *Festtage*, which incidentally received a magnificent performance. *Die Meistersinger*, however, does not play itself.

René Pape had originally been slated to play Hans Sachs. As Pogner, his attention to text and line was exemplary, but I cannot have been the only one wishing that he had taken on the greater role. James Morris therefore found himself in an invidious position. He was strongest in the third act, but for much of the second, he struggled to establish the force of personality that must be clear by this stage. It is here, not in the final act, that Sachs must come into his own. Roman Trekel and Hanno Müller-Brachmann shone as Beckmesser and Kothner, offering more rounded portrayals than is generally the case. In this, they were assisted by Harry Kupfer's revived production. Beckmesser rightly emerges early on as an impressive if limited figure, his subsequent ridiculousness not intrinsic but brought on by hubris. Kupfer brings an interesting ambiguity to Kothner: insisting upon the *Tabulatur*, but visibly on the side – in terms of stage placement as well as inclination – of Pogner and Sachs during the Trial Song. He watches and listens, even if he does not quite understand. This is characteristic of a laudable characterisation and differentiation granted to the various Mastersingers. Their corporate identity does not preclude individual personality, a fine example of this being Peter Menzel's keenly observed Augustin Moser. Moreover, their reactions develop. The sense of fear is palpable when Walther begins to sing: uncomprehending and threatened, but only later vicious, encouraged by Beckmesser's marking. Choral contributions were good, though not at the outstanding level I have heard before in this house.

Burkhard Fritz sang well enough as Walther, with an appropriately baritonish Heldentenor, but there was something too generalised about his enthusiasm and boisterousness, which did not always tie in with the events portrayed. He was a little too much the spoilt child when things did not go his way; Stolzing is a Junker, not a young Siegfried. His costumes, however, justly marked him as an outsider, the latest in Wagner's long line of flawed charismatic heroes. As his intended, Dorothea Röschmann often sang beautifully, but also struggled at times. It is difficult to surmise her intention at the climax of the Quintet, when suddenly she forced her voice to stand out from the blend of the others, so as to conclude with a cadence more suited to Puccini than to Wagner. To put it mildly, the effect jarred. Katharina Kammerloher, as Magdalene, shone at her first appearance. Kupfer should receive some of the credit for this portrayal as far more than the usual crone: this was a girl with a sense of fun, visibly – and audibly – attracted to David. It is a pity that her subsequent appearances were more anonymous. There was no such problem with Florian Hoffmann's wonderful David, who both looked and sounded the boyish part. He was bright within appropriate limits, ardent without cloying, and evinced a quicksilver attention to the text.

A guiding principle of the production is conflict between old and new – and the shades of grey in between. Boulez once remarked, concerning the only Wagner music drama he has never conducted:

The Romantics rediscovered the Gothic style. At the end of the nineteenth century there were Gothic churches in profusion. This was the most striking example of stylistic reference. On the other hand, although in *The Mastersingers* there is no end of references to the Minnesänger and to the forms of sixteenth- and – even more so – fifteenth-century music, Wagner's music actually has nothing to do with the historical truth about the town of Nuremberg. This is why I feel really ill at ease when people try to depict the historical town on the stage when it is absent from the music.²

Kupfer does not go so far as to present a *Meistersinger ohne Nürnberg*. Indeed, Nuremberg, replete with Cranach, stained glass and banners (including King David and his harp), is present throughout, although never with quite such exuberant delight as, say, in Graham Vick's Breughel-esque production for Covent Garden. What we have instead, which perhaps better serves Boulez's general point than the absence he himself advocated of the historical town, is a staired centrepiece. It serves, subtly altered in different guises, as the Katharinenkirche – subsequently, of course, Katharinenruine – as the balcony of Act II, as a staircase to Sachs's workshop, and so forth. The shape of this centrepiece suggested to me a ruined tower, perhaps even Berlin's own celebrated image of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, and thereby seemed to allude to the devastation of the 'German catastrophe'. This may have been my imagination rather than Kupfer's intention; it does not really matter. A sense of the modern city is superimposed, by virtue of the skyscraper backdrop to the second act and first part of the third. It cleverly suggests, rather like an affectionate Adorno – if that can be imagined – the tension between Wagner's thoroughgoing adoption of modern technical and technological means and his harking back to a pre-modern age of guilds, corporations, an age prior to excessive division of labour. Sachs, it will be recalled, is both poet and shoemaker. The utopian quality of this lost age, if it ever existed, is gently suggested by the joy of the *Festwiese* scene and its processions, giant figure of Death, flamethrowers, acrobats and all.

This, however, cuts both ways, for a utopia cannot exist. Kupfer does not travel very far down the deconstructionist route, but the presentation is finely nuanced. There is a nice touch to the inability of Sachs to find someone on whom to bestow the *Festwiese* garland, following Walther's refusal. Eventually, he places it on the floor. A sentimental path would have been to give it to Beckmesser, but this would have been to rehabilitate him unduly. Instead, and with considerable poignancy, the defeated town clerk walks over to it and looks at what might have been, excluded from the general rejoicing without being ostracised. Indeed, during Walther's singing of the Prize Song, Beckmesser occasionally displays grudging approval, taking note and even nodding, without the banal prospect of a wholesale conversion. It was a pity that the musical performances did not always match the production; had they done so, this could truly have been a *Meistersinger* to cherish.



² Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, tr. Robert Wangermée (London, 1976), p. 32. Translation slightly modified.