

Below the Gold Standard

Mark Berry has reservations about the Aix 'Siegfried'

Siegfried. Ben Heppner (Siegfried), Burkhard Ulrich (Mime), Willard White (Wanderer), Dale Duesing (Alberich), Alfred Reiter (Fafner), Anna Larsson (Erda), Katarina Dalayman (Brünnhilde), Mojca Erdmann (Woodbird); Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Simon Rattle; Stéphane Braunschweig (director, designs and video), Thibault Van Craenenbroeck (costumes), Marion Hewlett (lighting). Festival d'Aix en Provence: Grand Théâtre de Provence, 7 July 2008

I was at something of a disadvantage in seeing this, the third instalment of the Aix *Ring*, without having seen the first two parts. (The dramas are being staged in turn year by year, repeated at the following season's Salzburg Easter Festival.) *Siegfried* is arguably the least well suited of the four dramas to viewing in isolation. There may also have been visual references I failed to pick up. However, I suspect that such references were few, given the minimalist quality of the staging. Knowing, for instance, that Brünnhilde was put to sleep on the chairs on which we subsequently discovered her was unsurprising but unilluminating.

Stéphane Braunschweig's designs provide a stylish frame for the action within, although little appears to be said about the natural and (un)social environment in which that action takes place. This need not be portrayed naturalistically, but the forest location is crucial to understanding. Siegfried's home should remind the musician of *Der Freischütz*, the German Romantic opera *par excellence*, and there are any number of broader cultural references which might fruitfully be played with here. As Simon Schama has observed, it is 'virtually impossible [...] to think of the Grimm tales without immediately conjuring up a forest'. It was in 1813, the year of Wagner's birth in Leipzig – and of that city's eponymous battle, in which Napoleon was roundly defeated – that the Brothers Grimm had begun to publish their collection of tales, poetry, proverbs, songs, and so forth, entitled *Altdeutsche Wälder* (Old German Forests). Moreover, the forest, writes Schama, is a world in which 'Roman rules do not apply'.¹ In the aftermath of the Wars of Liberation, one might justly have substituted French for Roman, echoing Caspar David Friedrich's celebrated painting of a French chasseur lost in the German forest. Wotan's spear of (Roman) law has made little headway in this fearful, uncivilised world. It is no coincidence that Fafner has settled in a forest cave in order to protect the Nibelung hoard, nor that the *Walküre* Brünnhilde has had Sieglinde hurry eastward to the forest, in order that she and her child might escape Wotan's wrath. It is certainly no coincidence that Siegfried is thereby born and raised in the forest, a lawless and fearless child of Nature, unaffected by Mime's attempts to 'civilise' him. Since Braunschweig, by his own testimony, wished to present a psychoanalytical fairytale, I should have expected him to pick up at least upon the aspect of the forest as a space of magic, menace and primitive redress, even if the political implications were largely to be eschewed. Not that I think they should be: a *Siegfried* which minimises the

¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1995), 107.

importance of a charismatic hero coming from nowhere to strike down Wotan's spear of law seems to me fundamentally flawed. It is no coincidence that the young Engels would describe himself as a 'first-class mythologist', and long for 'Siegfried's sons' to be shown those 'heroic deeds reserved for the nineteenth century'.² The video projection of fire works very well; something along such lines for the forest – and perhaps its inhabitants too? – might have made an important contribution on many interpretative levels.

But what else of Braunschweig's fairytale? If it declines to be political, is it convincingly psychoanalytical? The *Personenregie* on its own terms seems to work quite well. Yet, apart from presenting the drama as Brünnhilde's dream – we witness her asleep at the opening, to be awakened in more than one sense by Siegfried at the end – there is not much to go on. Mime's attempt to teach Siegfried fear with a toy dragon presumably falls into the psychoanalytical category, but it does not really seem integrated into the greater *Konzept*. Indeed, this does not seem properly thought through on its own terms. Notung's shattering of the spear could doubtless work in terms of an attack upon a father figure's authority, but some aspects of the drama – those involving Alberich, for example – would have been difficult to integrate. Whilst I appreciate that any one production must make choices, decide upon aspects to be emphasised and so forth, it seems to me that, on the whole, the more successful productions will highlight at least some of the tensions between various aspects of the drama, rather than press too single-mindedly upon one idea. Patrice Chéreau's *Ring* remains a gold standard in this regard, without any sacrifice to the principal line of his – or Pierre Boulez's – interpretation.

This brings me to the music. Simon Rattle's interpretation did not sound closely allied to Braunschweig's. Considered on its own terms, however, there was much to enjoy. The Berlin Philharmonic provided a richly upholstered, deluxe account of the score. I regret the loss of what was once its characteristic 'German' sound; for that, one must visit the Staatskapelle Berlin or indeed Wagner's own orchestra in Dresden. That said, the orchestra remains a virtuoso international ensemble. My only real cavil would have been the surprising harshness of the brass at some of the climaxes, especially at the end of the final act. The section's contribution elsewhere, however, was magnificent, not least during the strange preludes to the first two acts. The combination of Wagner tuba, bassoons and kettledrums at the very opening was never ugly but was certainly spooky, invoking a good deal of the atmosphere that the staging would lack. Rattle's daringly slow yet controlled speed here – perhaps contravening Wagner's marking, *Mässig bewegt* (moderately fast), yet if so, fruitfully – certainly contributed to the impression of *Freischütz*-meets-Schoenberg. The woodwind, not least in the Forest Murmurs, sounded truly delectable, whilst the warm, if less individual, strings rarely put a foot – or rather, finger – wrong. One would not necessarily expect a 'great' interpretation from a conductor tackling *Siegfried* for the first time. Rattle, however, has considerable experience in terms of *Parsifal* and *Tristan* and certainly knows his way around Mahler. He provided as good an account of the score as I can recall hearing since that of Bernard Haitink for the Royal Opera. There was a compelling sense of line for most of the work. Unsurprisingly for one expert in the music of Debussy, Rattle was

² Letter of 29 Oct. 1839 to Friedrich Graeber, *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, ed. D. Rjazanov and V. Adoratski (Berlin, 1927–32), I/ii, p. 9; 'Siegfrieds Heimat', *ibid.*, 90–95 (p. 95).

alert to the colouristic potential of the score, for instance in the balance between orchestral blend and characteristic solo quality in the first act Prelude as cited above, likewise for the unrelieved lugubriousness of that to the second act.

The undoubted star onstage was Burkhard Ulrich's Mime: perhaps the most complete portrayal I have heard, let alone seen. There was, as Wagner insisted, nothing of the caricature to him. His horizons were fatally limited but it was not difficult to imagine him as the master craftsman who had invented the Tarnhelm. He was mellifluous of line, expressing the tragedy of Mime's position and the wickedness of his will to power through the text and through musical inflection, but not through exaggerated screaming. Indeed, Mime often sounded stronger than Siegfried during the first act. Ben Heppner's first Siegfried appeared – understandably yet still disappointingly – to be saving himself for what was to come. His was certainly superior to the catastrophic assumptions of the role we must generally endure, but his vocal heft did not seem comparable to what it used to be: a worrying sign. If his tone only rarely sounded truly heroic, his stage presence was even less so. Suspension of disbelief goes only so far: one could not credit this Siegfried as the bringer of revolution or the German Apollo. Willard White proved an intermittently impressive Wanderer. Had I not recently been treated to John Tomlinson's towering portrayal at Covent Garden, I might have been more enthusiastic. White nevertheless paid considerable attention to word and line, although his diction was variable (and occasionally, as during his scene with Erda, just incorrect). He possessed a certain nobility, but the requisite impression of world-weary experience was not so apparent. Erda rarely disappoint, yet Anna Larsson's was outstanding in its imaginative attention to the score. Hers was a true contralto, of the kind one despairs of hearing nowadays. If her all-too-elegant costume somewhat detracted from a sense of the primeval, that was not her fault. Dale Duesing was a fine Alberich: ever alert to the possibilities of the text, malevolent yet once again never caricatured. I should like to hear him in the rest of the cycle. Alfred Reiter proved an excellent Fafner, stentorian in his possession and moving in his mortality. The Woodbird, Mojca Erdmann, was perfectly good, without making a great impression. Meanwhile, Katarina Dalayman sounded in good voice as Brünnhilde, despite her notoriously lengthy wait to appear onstage (bar her brief presence at the beginning, in this case). She evinced a brilliant yet flexible tone, which sadly overshadowed some of Heppner's contribution. Musically then, this was as good a *Siegfried* as one is likely to hear today; I am sure that Rattle's commendable understanding will deepen further.



Mime (Burkhard Ulrich) tries to prepare Siegfried (Ben Heppner) for terrors to come. Photo Elisabeth Carecchio