

Back to Berlin

Mark Berry appraises three Wagner revivals at the Deutsche Oper

Tannhäuser. Stephen Gould (Tannhäuser), Nadja Michael (Venus/Elisabeth), Dietrich Henschel (Wolfram von Eschinbach), Reinhard Hagen (Herrmann, Landgrave of Thuringia), Clemens Bieber (Walther von der Vogelweide), Lenus Carlson (Biterolf), Jörg Schörner (Heinrich der Schreiber), Jörn Schümann (Reinmar von Zweter), Martina Welschenbach (Young Shepherd), Stefan Siedler (Tannhäuser double in the overture); Orchestra, Chorus and Supplementary Chorus of the Deutsche Oper (chorus master: William Spaulding)/Ulf Schirmer; Kirsten Harms (director), Bernd Damovsky (designs), Inga Timm (assistant costume designs), Silvana Schröder (choreography). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 12 February 2010

Lohengrin. Ben Heppner (Lohengrin), Ricarda Merbeth (Elsa), Eike Wilm Schulte (Friedrich von Telramund), Waltraud Meier (Ortrud), Kristinn Sigmundsson (King Henry the Fowler), Markus Brück (Herald), Gregory Warren, Thomas Blondelle, Nathan De'Shon Myers, Ben Wager (Brabantine Nobles), Rosemarie Arzt, Constance Gärtner, Brigitte Höcht, Antje Obenaus, Gabriele Goebbels, Christa Werron, Brigitte Bergmann, Martina Metzler (Bridesmaids); Orchestra, Chorus and Supplementary Chorus of the Deutsche Oper (chorus master: William Spaulding)/Michael Schönwandt; Götz Friedrich (director), Peter Sykora (designs), Gerlinde Pelkowski (revival director). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 13 February 2010

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. James Johnson (Hans Sachs), Klaus Florian Vogt (Walther von Stolzing), Michaela Kaune (Eva), Kristinn Sigmundsson (Veit Pogner), Paul Kaufmann (David), Ulrike Helzel (Magdalene), Thomas Blondelle (Kunz Vogelgesang), Simon Pauly (Konrad Nachtigal), Markus Brück (Sixtus Beckmesser), Stephen Bronk (Fritz Kothner), Jörg Schörner (Balthasar Zorn), Peter Maus (Ulrich Eisslinger), Burkhard Ulrich (Augustin Moser), Klaus Lang (Hermann Ortel), Jörn Schümann (Hans Schwarz), Hyung-Wook Lee (Hans Foltz), Krzysztof Szumanski (Nightwatchman); Orchestra, Chorus and Supplementary Chorus of the Deutsche Oper (chorus master: William Spaulding)/Donald Runnicles; Movement Chorus, Actors, Acrobats (choreography: Charlotte Butler and Carsten Meyer); Götz Friedrich (director), Peter Sykora (stage designs), Kirsten Dephoff and Peter Sykora (costumes), Gerlinde Pelkowski (revival director). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 14 February 2010

Some words seem destined to be abused. 'Academic' is one, 'operatic' another. The Berlin musical world has plenty of the operatic in both senses. Partly as a legacy of the city's division, it boasts three principal companies: the Staatsoper, the Deutsche Oper and the Komische Oper. The State, formerly the Court, Opera is the oldest relation, the house on Unter den Linden having opened in 1742 and the orchestra tracing itself back to c.1540. Since Daniel Barenboim's post-unification appointment in 1992, the house once presided over by Strauss, Furtwängler, Erich Kleiber and Karajan has regained its erstwhile international prominence, not least in terms of Wagner, symbolised by the cycle Barenboim and Harry Kupfer presented, on one occasion during a single festival. Close to the Linden house stands the Komische Oper (founded in 1905 as Berlin's answer to the Paris Opéra-Comique), once the haunt of Walter Felsenstein. It presents works in the vernacular, with a strong tendency towards *Regietheater*; alas, Wagner is rarely on the menu. Seven years later, in 1912, came the Deutsche Oper. A musical

standard-bearer for West Berlin, along with Karajan's Berlin Philharmonic, it welcomed Götz Friedrich, himself a Felsenstein pupil, as Intendant in 1981; though Friedrich died in 2000, a good few of his productions remain in the repertoire, including his *Ring*.

However, the 'operatic' in a debased, dare I say Italianate, sense has haunted Berlin. Money is a perennial problem for an artistic mecca which lacks a financial or industrial base, ever-particularist *Länder* proving reluctant to pay for the restoration they have thrust upon their once-again-capital city. Sir Simon Rattle played a game of cat and mouse with the city authorities, refusing to put his name to a new contract until better terms for his Philharmonic musicians were met. Christian Thielemann faced similar problems with the Deutsche Oper, compounded by differences with Udo Zimmermann, Friedrich's successor. Thielemann's ensuing departure – Dresden has latterly stolen a Wagnerian march by appointing him to the Semperoper – has led to a period in the musical doldrums, which it is hoped may be ended by the arrival of Donald Runnicles. The present Intendant, Kirsten Harms, will depart in 2011. Even Barenboim's house has had its fair share of tribulations, not least the dispute between music director and Intendant, Peter Mussbach, resolved to the former's satisfaction – and the latter's departure. Attempts to reduce costs by unifying at least some of the houses' administration, perhaps even their ballet corps, have met with much resistance. Stefan Herheim includes a satirical reference to the Berlin opera wars at the opening of his *Lohengrin* production for the Staatsoper. Yet, unlike in London, seats tend to be affordable. Berlin may be well advised to shun the siren voices of 'management'. A little chaos can be productively operatic in both senses.

For a house that built much of its reputation upon Wagner and associated repertoire, it makes sense for the Deutsche Oper to fight back with a Wagner festival. All the canonical dramas, save for *Parsifal*, have been included, plus a new production of *Rienzi*, a company premiere. I saw three performances: *Tannhäuser*, the first revival of Harms's production (2008), and two Friedrich survivals, *Lohengrin* and *Meistersinger*.

Tannhäuser confused. The work needs a degree of directorial assistance, whether in clarification, problematisation, or both. There seemed little unity beyond refusal to opt for the either/or principle, to which Harms drew attention in the programme. *Either* this was not pushed hard enough, *or* it was insufficient as a *Konzept*. So if Elisabeth is 'revealed' as Venus – a weak 'revelation', since the identity is creakingly apparent all along – then where does that leave *Tannhäuser*? If the choice between Wartburg and Venusberg were false, his fate may be considered tragic, yet it does not seem so here. Is he thereby redeemed? Perhaps; it is difficult to tell from the staging. Venus/Elisabeth seems to move centre stage, yet, though arguably rendering Elisabeth a more interesting character, does that merely evade the issue of the hero?

We simply move from one setting to another: sometimes with a certain medievalism, apparently unironised, sometimes not. Stage mechanics are displayed at the act openings, but it is difficult to discern any attempt thereby to frame, to deconstruct, or to alienate. I have no idea why the pilgrims of the first act appear in a medieval vision of hell, which seems impossible to relate to anything else. A good number of the heraldic costumes for the second act are copied from the Codex Manesse in Heidelberg University library – Walther von der Vogelweide is depicted in that manuscript himself,

I might add – yet, whilst the effect is undeniably colourful, I can discern no dramatic point beyond a further blurring of time and location.¹ Likewise, the reasoning behind airborne suspension and gradual, albeit interrupted assumption of suits of armour eludes me. The portrayal of the third-act Elisabeth as a Florence Nightingale character, tending the sick in modern hospital beds, refers to the deeds for which the historical figure was canonised, but any connection with the rest of the production, or indeed with the work, remains obscure. There is a case for highlighting a tension between the Middle Ages, Wagner's time and our own, but the decisions here seem arbitrary, lacking in dramatic tension. If a critique of Wagner's dramaturgy at this time is intended, that needs to be made clear, and it was not.

And why the Dresden version? Many Wagnerians, Thielemann included, trumpet its coherence, yet *Tannhäuser* remains problematical. Wagner famously said just before his death that he still owed the world a *Tannhäuser*.² (Imagine a 'Bayreuth' or 'Venice' version!) What Carl Dahlhaus identified as the work's 'abruptness [...], lack of mediation [...] [and] casualness of motivation' is more palpable in the Dresden score, since the later, *Tristan*-esque music permits Wagner's music to criticise its earlier self, a musical dramatisation akin to the Elisabeth–Venus conflict.³ I have heard it said that, were it all we had, we should be happy with the Dresden version; one might as well say the same of *Leonore*.

Friedrich's productions, though venerable (1990 and 1993), hold up much better: straightforward, coherent retellings of the story, attentive to music and words, possessed of a clear sense of what works in the theatre. Designs, especially in *Lohengrin*, may veer towards the old-fashioned, but there is no fetishism. Moreover, given how I shudder at the mere mention of Katharina Wagner's catastrophically (un-)directed Bayreuth *Meistersinger* – the ideas behind the production are a different matter entirely – it was a relief to see, even in the hands of a revival director, the work allowed to speak.

The *Meistersinger* production seems to me the more interesting of the two. Many readers will know it from DVD; this was my first viewing. Nuremberg is recognisably Nuremberg, though the costumes suggest the 19th century. A vision of old Nuremberg, and more briefly the devastation of its 20th-century successor, may be seen glimpsed during the opening Prelude, framing the production's terms of reference. We can never quite forget, especially when a Star of David is seen onstage with the Mastersingers' guild: same symbol, different meaning, what connections? During the earlier 19th century at least, the guilds were breaking down, but not broken. They had their defenders, from Hegel to Wagner, and they presented their own solutions to the 'social question', so the updating interacts well with the concerns of one always hostile to the division of labour. (Hans Sachs is shoemaker, poet *and* politician.) Moreover, the humour of Friedrich's staging registers clearly. I have never previously found the reappearance of the Nightwatchman amusing. Here, the haplessness of his arrival once the riot is over was just that. Beckmesser's Malvolio-like quality is emphasised throughout.

¹ I am grateful to Andreas Bücker for pointing out the Codex Manesse reference to me.

² *Cosima Wagner: Diaries*, tr. and ed. Geoffrey Skelton (London, 1978–80), 23 Jan. 1883.

³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, tr. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979), 26.

Another nice touch is Walther threatening physical violence when impertinently asked whether he is 'frei und ehrlich geboren'. Schopenhauer, however, barely registers.

Orchestra and chorus were on very good form throughout, the latter apparently revived by chorus master William Spaulding. I was especially taken by the strings' golden glow and sweetness: more Vienna than Berlin. In *Tannhäuser*, the purity of the woodwind, especially during the *faux* archaisms, conjured up a 19th-century world of 'early music', whilst the *Lohengrin* brass packed quite a punch, especially in the surround-sound effect of the third-act fanfares. Ulf Schirmer and Michael Schönwandt clearly delineated Wagner's musico-dramatic structures, though Runnicles sometimes had a tendency to drive *Meistersinger* too hard, resulting in a few too many disjunctures between stage and pit.

Tenors are nearly always the problem, but only once here. Ben Heppner was on poor form as Lohengrin, his closing 'Mein Lieber Schwan!' as wildly out of tune as its first-act counterpart. Even when making the notes, he was often unable to project his voice, at times crooning. Stephen Gould impressed as Tannhäuser, shaping his phrases and conserving his energy well. Klaus Florian Vogt's Walther took the laurels, though, with yet another fine display of his instrument's mixture of the lyrical and heroic. He was not matched by a likeable, but underpowered, Hans Sachs from James Johnson, though Markus Brück's Beckmesser was a joy, fully alive to the role's Shakespearean humour. Kristinn Sigmundsson fared better as King Henry than as a tired-sounding Pogner, whilst Eike Wilm Schulte presented a fine Telramund, vulnerable in character but not in voice. Dietrich Henschel's Wolfram brought commendable attention to the words, though too often his voice sounded dry.

Another outstanding performance was Waltraud Meier's Ortrud, in what was, astonishingly, the Staatsoper star's house debut. The *tessitura* fits her voice extremely well, and the dramatic demands brought out the best of her as an actress. The malevolence in Ortrud's character – Wagner wrote to Liszt of her 'appallingness' as a 'female politician' – is offset by a clear sense of conviction in the justice of her cause. 'That is why she is so fearfully impressive.'⁴ Ricarda Merbeth's Elsa had its moments. It lacked the 'traditional' pure beauty of tone of an artist such as Gundula Janowitz, yet, intonational difficulties aside, a more sexualised interpretation would doubtless have had its followers. Nadja Michael proved a variable Venus/Elisabeth, dramatic commitment very much in evidence, yet with too much wayward vocalism. The fly in the ointment, however, was Michaela Kaune's Eva, the radiant lyricism that should flow from this evocation of the Goethean *Ewig-Weibliche* nowhere to be heard. If only she could have exchanged roles with Ulrike Helzel, an artist new to me but a quite outstanding Magdalene. Here was beauty of tone, and a character in whom one could believe as an object of love for David, winningly portrayed by Paul Kaufmann. Perhaps here there may be two artists to offer hope for the Wagnerian future, whether in Berlin or beyond.



⁴ Letter of 30 Jan. 1852, in *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987), 248–9.