

### Taste Triumphs over Drama

Mark Berry reviews the final two instalments of the Guy Cassiers 'Ring'

*Siegfried*. Lance Ryan (Siegfried), Iréne Theorin (Brünnhilde), Terje Stensvold (The Wanderer), Johannes Martin Kränzle (Alberich), Peter Bronder (Mime), Anna Larsson (Erda), Mikhail Petrenko (Fafner), Rinnat Moriah (Woodbird)

*Götterdämmerung*. Andreas Schager (Siegfried), Iréne Theorin (Brünnhilde), Gerd Grochowski (Gunther), Anna Samuil (Gutrune, Third Norn), Mikhail Petrenko (Hagen), Waltraud Meier (Waltraute, Second Norn), Johannes Martin Kränzle (Alberich), Margarita Nekrasova (First Norn), Aga Mikolaj (Woglinde), Maria Gortsevskaya (Wellgunde), Anna Lapkovskaja (Floßhilde)

Staatsoperchor and Staatskapelle Berlin/Daniel Barenboim; Guy Cassiers (director, set designs), Enrico Bagnoli (set designs, lighting), Tim van Steenberg (costumes), Arjen Klerkx, Kurt D'Haeseleer (video), Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (choreography), Luc de Wit (choral choreography). Schiller Theater, Berlin, 18 and 21 April 2013

And so, the Berlin State Opera's *Ring* reached completion. Nothing has changed with respect to the bafflingly vacuous production served up by Guy Cassiers and his colleagues from the Antwerp Toneelhuis. It is not that ideas are banal or underdeveloped; rather, there seem to be no ideas at all, a truly extraordinary state of affairs with respect to Wagner of all dramatists. The production apparently aspires to the condition of something one might see or have seen at New York's Metropolitan Opera, whether Otto Schenk or the still worse Robert Lepage, albeit with 'refined' visual taste. Quite why anyone would think tasteful Wagner desirable is unclear. There are pretty stage effects, sometimes from video, sometimes not, but effects without cause they remain. Oddly, given the plentiful use of video, the dragon is conjured up by the Eastman Company – yes, the dancers are back – and some sheets. The production starts off rather well, viewed with disinterested aesthetic contemplation, only to degenerate into a vision more akin to a group laundry activity. There is doubtless some enjoyment to be derived from the lithe dancers, choreographed well enough in the abstract, but what any of it might have to say about the *Ring* is not even obscure. If Cassiers presents, as is claimed, a *Ring* for the 21st century, may God have mercy upon our culture-industry-eneebled souls. Politics, religion, any variety of thought, even any variety of drama, have been banished to the 19th and 20th centuries; it is enough to have one wish to embark upon a spot of time travel.

Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin came to the rescue. I have not heard a better conducted, better played *Siegfried*. The Berlin Philharmonic and Sir Simon Rattle may have offered breathtaking orchestral virtuosity in Aix-en-Provence, but there was something of virtuosity for its own sake in that case, partly, I think, because Rattle's reading failed to dig anything like so deep. This was Barenboim at his more than estimable best. The great paragraphs of Wagner's imagination unfolded with unforced, unexaggerated inevitability, not monumental in, say, the Knappertsbusch mode, but teeming with dramatic life born of the musico-dramatic material. Scenes, dialogues, phrases were sharply, colourfully characterised, playful yet steely Beethoven to the



Siegfried (Lance Ryan) surrounded by dancers. Image: Monika Rittershaus.

fore in the final scene of the first act, a grinding sense of *peripeteia* possessing us at the opening of the third. There was none of the reluctance one encounters from lesser conductors to let the orchestra speak as Greek chorus, no alleged ‘consideration’ for vocal fallibility. This was above all orchestral drama, as fully achieved in a Furtwänglerian sense as I have heard from Barenboim in Wagner.

Lance Ryan had his moments as Siegfried, especially during the second act. Up until the scene with Brünnhilde, I should have said that at least he did not tire – quite an achievement in itself – but alas, a pattern of too much shouting and not enough singing took its toll. Iréne Theorin’s Brünnhilde, by contrast, was highly variegated in tone, at times almost too much, having one strain to hear the words. A rather wooden Wanderer from Terje Stensvold, albeit with Norwegian vowels that harked back to the sagas, was shown up by Johannes Martin Kränzle’s vivid, detailed Alberich. Peter Bronder proved very much the singing actor as Mime, stronger in tone than one often hears, but sometimes edging too much, against Wagner’s urgings, toward caricature. Mikhail Petrenko’s voice seemed to have lost some of its darkness, but there could be few real complaints about his Fafner. Anna Larsson’s otherworldly depth of tone reminded us why she is very much the Erda *de nos jours*. Rinnat Moriah navigated the Woodbird’s lines with admirable ease. It remained, however, Barenboim’s and the Staatskapelle’s show.

*Götterdämmerung* for some reason acquired a third dramaturg, prior instalments having relied upon a mere brace. What any of them might have done, or rather what director Guy Cassiers might have listened to, is utterly beyond me. Yet again, we are simply faced with a few 'tasteful' costumes and effects, and in this case, far too much video. The Tarnhelm dancers return, offering, rather to my surprise, the staging's saving grace. Their menacing writhing around Brünnhilde during her shameful and shaming possession by Siegfried struck a note of rare, indeed unique, dramatic power. The appearance at some juncture – I cannot quite remember when – of sub-Damien Hirst creatures in formaldehyde offers slight variety, but no discernible point, and more than anything irritates in its acquiescence to the wearisome stylisation of the designs.

If not on quite such superlative form as in *Siegfried*, Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin nevertheless did Wagner's score proud, a more than promising augury for the Proms performances of the *Ring* as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Line and dramatic momentum were impressive, though tension sagged slightly – and surprisingly – at a somewhat anti-climactic conclusion to the second act. Maybe that was a matter of tiredness more than anything else. Barenboim's almost 'French' ear for colour – he knows that Wagner leads to Debussy as well as to Schoenberg, and indeed employs that ear in the music of the latter composer too – offered more than its fair share of textural revelation, the Staatskapelle's woodwind as euphonious here as in Mozart. Eberhard Friedrich's chorus acquitted itself very well throughout.

There was a great deal to praise in terms of singing too. Waltraud Meier as Second Norn must be the very definition of luxury casting. Stage animal that she is, she made something out of the non-production even here, let alone in her well-nigh definitive Waltraute (also one of the very few redeeming features of the dismal New York *Götterdämmerung*). Meier can have few peers, if any, and certainly no superiors, in her melding of text and music, in her instinctive yet searching theatrical communication. She offered a standing rebuke to the vacuity of the contribution from Cassiers. Irène Theorin continued to present a creditably variegated account of Brünnhilde's part. There was more of the lyrical, less of the heroic, than one often hears, though there remained plenty of the latter nonetheless. I wondered occasionally whether her choices with respect to scaling down, to containment, always made the best sense, but there was a great deal to admire here. Mikhail Petrenko's Hagen remains controversial. During the first act, I was less convinced; the relative lightness – this is definitely not the black-toned Hagen we have come to expect – veered on occasion towards the non-committal, though of course Cassiers did not help. However, menace asserted itself, psychotically so, ensuring that the darkness of Hagen's character duly struck a terror quite lacking in the staging. Gerd Grochowski offered more in the way of clear verbal projection than psychological depth, but again the fault for that may really have lain elsewhere. Anna Samuil's Guttrune, alas, seemed a victim of miscasting; there was little sense of character and her blowsy delivery, though reined in during the third act, was by any standards stylistically quite inappropriate. The trio of Rhinemaidens (Aga Mikolaj, Maria Gortsevskaya and Anna Lapkovskaja) was truly excellent, both in solo and ensemble terms.

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<sup>1</sup> I reviewed the outstanding Proms concert performances at some length on my blog: <http://boulezian.blogspot.com>.



Irène Theorin (Brünnhilde).

Image: Monika Rittershaus.

Andreas Schager's Siegfried I have left until last. Schager was a replacement for the advertised Ian Storey, Lance Ryan having taken the part in *Siegfried*, but not in *Götterdämmerung*. (Schager had also had to step in for Ryan in the previous cycle, when the Canadian tenor arrived late at the theatre, missing the first act.) I am not sure that I have heard so excellent an account of the role in the theatre; I have certainly heard none better. We can hark back to Melchior all we like, even to Windgassen, but we all know that such expectations are, for whatever reasons, entirely unrealistic. Schager's Siegfried was of the here and now, dramatically committed – certainly not something of which one could always accuse Melchior – and finely sung, without a hint of the dreadful barking, let alone shouting, that disfigures so many performances. There was no discernible tiring; indeed, a portrayal of youthful, naive enthusiasm did much of the work the staging ought to have been doing by itself, contrasting tellingly with the corruption of the Gibichung court. This is a production, then, that should be discarded as quickly as humanly possible; it remains just possible, however, that a star may have been born amongst this all-too-tastefully-designed 'heap of broken images'.