

Empty Gestures

Mark Berry yearns for more substance in the latest instalment of the Berlin/Milan 'Ring'

Die Walküre. René Pape (Wotan), Iréne Theorin (Brünnhilde), Simon O'Neill (Siegfried), Anja Kamppe (Sieglinde), Ekaterina Gubanova (Fricka), Mikhail Petrenko (Hunding), Danielle Halbwachs (Gerhilde), Carola Höhn (Ortlinde), Ivonne Fuchs (Waltraute), Anaik Morel (Schwertleite), Erika Wueschner (Helmwige), Leann Sandel-Pantaleo (Siegfrüne), Nicole Piccolomini (Grimgerde), Simone Schröder (Roßweiße), Guro Nagelhus Shia, Vebjorn Sundby (dancers). Staatskapelle Berlin/Daniel Barenboim; Guy Cassiers (director, set design), Enrico Bagnoli (set design, lighting), Tim van Steenberg (costumes), Arjen Klerkx, Kurt D'Haeseleer (video), Michael P. Steinberg, Detlef Giese (dramaturgy), Csilla Lakatos (choreography). Schillertheater, Berlin, 17 April 2011

Guy Cassiers's production of the *Ring* continues, in its second instalment, to baffle, but the nature of my bafflement is different from that in any other *Ring* I can recall. If ever there were a work overflowing with ideas – the overflowing and the conflict being part and parcel of the experience – it is surely the *Ring*. Yet the Belgian director, making his first foray into the opera house, seems to have none at all, let alone any sympathy with the strenuous intellectual and emotional demands presented by Wagner's score. I was highly critical of the Weimar *Ring*, released on DVD, but at least it tried to provide some conceptual framework, however confused.¹ The concern of the present production, already staged at La Scala, seems to be to present a pleasant backdrop for what otherwise might as well be a concert performance.² (Of course a staged performance never quite feels like that, since one tends to be more frustrated than one would in the concert hall, which possesses its own, symphonic virtues.) Lack is keenly felt here. The production is not 'traditional' in the sense of Otto Schenk's mindless, 'restorationist' production for the Metropolitan Opera; it merely seems empty, devoid of meaning, whether political or otherwise. Quite what two dramaturges, Michael P. Steinberg and Detlef Giese, did to earn their crust I cannot imagine. Taking the politics out is one thing, and the urge to be something other than a second-generation epigone of Joachim Herz or Patrice Chéreau is comprehensible, yet surely something then needs to be put in place of Wagner's revolutionary socialism.

Take the Ride of the Valkyries. I recall Deryck Cooke's wise retort to Eric Blom's jibe about 'the most tasteless piece of music ever written': namely, 'what could have been the use of a tasteful Ride of the Valkyries?'³ This seems to be it, or at least to approach it: a scenic backdrop of elegant black horses, not entirely dissimilar from what one might find emblazoned on a Baroque fountain. That is it. At a push, one might speculate whether a point were being made concerning representational culture,

¹ 'Why Weimar?', *The Wagner Journal*, iii/3 (2009), 96–9; 'Uninvited Guests', *ibid.*, iv/1 (2010), 70–72.

² Katherine Syer reviewed the Milan incarnation in 'New Perspectives on the *Ring*', *ibid.*, iv/3 (2009), 67–70. My review of the 30 October performance may be seen at <<http://boulezian.blogspot.com/2010/11/das-rheingold-staatsoper-unter-den.html>>.

³ Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's 'Ring'* (Oxford, 1979), 343.

a feudal order on the verge of being overthrown; however, there is no real suggestion of that being the case. A little later, we see 'tasteful' video projections of a male nude, credited as a dancer, almost Old Master-ish; I have no idea why. It seemed as though it were intended to do anything but *épater les bourgeois*. The Staatsoper has, after all, moved for the period of the Unter den Linden house's closure to the bürgerlich security of Charlottenburg's Schillertheater, but a few hundred yards from the Deutsche Oper. Whereas *Das Rheingold* had at least provided novelty, if questionable, in the form of dancers onstage, their brief filmed sublimation here suggested running out of already limited steam. Video projections of René Pape's (Wotan's) face occasionally surfaced during the first act, when Wälse was mentioned; otherwise, it was difficult to note any other feature to the production. Red poles descend from the ceiling during the third act: they are not unpleasant to look at, yet do not seem to signify anything. Tim van Steenberg's costumes tend to be expensive-looking but unflattering, Brünnhilde's taffeta-style bustle a case in point. Make of that, perhaps in West Berlin terms, what you will.

The 'elegant black horses' of the Ride of the Valkyries, with René Pape as Wotan, in Guy Cassiers's production. Photo Monika Rittershaus



The performance proved considerably superior. Daniel Barenboim led a warmly Romantic account, starkly contrasting with the startling *Neue Sachlichkeit* objectivism he had imparted to *Das Rheingold*. I assume contrast between the frigid world of the gods and the purely human love of the Volsungs to have been intended; that, at any rate, is how it came across, to the benefit of the present drama if not to that of the cycle's *Vorabend*. It may be of interest to note that Barenboim has insisted upon a semi-covered pit for the Schillertheater, in partial imitation of Bayreuth. I am not sure what good this does; it is difficult to tell whether the somewhat restrained – or constrained – result is a product of the less than sensational acoustic of the Staatsoper's temporary home or a matter of deliberate intent. What I can say is that Barenboim's reading proved full of momentary incident while maintaining the necessary longer line, an especially difficult task in the second and third acts. This seemed to me the best-conducted *Walküre* I had heard since Bernard Haitink's account with the Royal Opera at the Royal Albert Hall in 1998; no one I have heard live has managed the melos of the second act of this drama quite so flawlessly as Haitink, but Barenboim was far from disgraced by the comparison. The Staatskapelle Berlin's performance was not faultless – as it had arguably proved for the previous night's *Wozzeck*, also conducted by Barenboim – but a number of errors were more than compensated for by the rich and variegated tone that emanated from the pit.

The cast was generally strong. Simon O'Neill's Siegmund slightly disappointed, though O'Neill certainly did not lack power. His metallic timbre is not to my taste and his stage presence might best be described as old-fashioned gestural. (On the other hand, it was not clear that any of the singers received any assistance from the director.) Anja Kampe proved an increasingly spirited Sieglinde, improving in each act, her performance culminating in a radiant 'O höchstes Wunder!'. Mikhail Petrenko maintained the high standards I noted from him as Hunding in Aix – and Hagen there in *Götterdämmerung*, too.⁴ Most Hundings have been blacker of tone, yet Petrenko's malevolent stage presence and delivery of text are ample substitute for the accustomed sound. Ekaterina Gubanova presented an imperious, wounded Fricka: the woman within and the stern moralising presence without were placed in finely judged counterpoint. The excellence of her Lyubasha in Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride*, which had opened in London just three nights earlier, was admirably maintained. Iréne Theorin, Bayreuth's current Isolde, overcame the handicap of her strange costume to portray a Brünnhilde gaining in humanity throughout her two acts, Wagner's Feuerbachian conception of the 'purely human' being finely served. I have heard Valkyries more beautiful of tone, but Theorin presented no particular reason for complaint and displayed considerably more dramatic commitment than the production might have led one to expect.

René Pape's Wotan, however, proved somewhat frustrating. He had sung Wotan in the Scala *Rheingold* but, already booked to sing Boris in New York, had ceded to the excellent Hanno Müller-Brachmann for Berlin. Müller-Brachmann's Papageno-baritone was unlikely, however, to prove suitable for the *Walküre* Wotan, though perhaps

⁴ 'Berliners take the Palm in Provence', *The Wagner Journal*, iii/1 (2008), 91–6; 'Trivial Pursuits', *ibid.*, iii/3 (2008), 91–4.

the voice of a fabled Sarastro erred in the opposite direction, with the tessitura sometimes sounding awkward. There is a tendency to sound wan in higher notes, though there is ample – too ample? – richness in the true bass register. I heard Pape a few years ago as Don Giovanni, again in Berlin under Barenboim. Then he merely seemed miscast; that was less apparent on this occasion, though doubts remained. That said, Pape's beauty of tone certainly came very much to the fore at times; there was painful bitterness to be heard, too. A more serious concern was apparent straying of his attention, most persistently during his 'Farewell' scene, in which a good number of words were the victims of substitution. A great hope for the role, surely the summit for any pretender's career, has yet, it seems, to fulfil the promise in which many of Pape's admirers have long believed.

Under the terms of the co-production with La Scala, 'Siegfried' and 'Götterdämmerung' will be seen first in Berlin and subsequently in Milan. Those final two evenings will be staged during the Staatsoper's 2012–13 season, culminating in complete cycles scheduled for Holy Week and Eastertide of the composer's bicentenary.

