

DVDs

Uninvited Guests

Mark Berry finds that more is less in the Weimar 'Ring'

Siegfried. Johnny van Hal (Siegfried), Catherine Foster (Brünnhilde), Tomas Möwes (Wanderer), Nadine Weissmann (Erda), Frieder Aurich (Mime), Mario Hoff (Alberich), Hidekazu Tsumaya (Fafner), Heike Porstein (Woodbird), Lars Creuzburg (Donner), Steffen Bärtl (Froh), Erika Krämer (Grane), Johannes Martin (Hagen), Burkhard Wolf (Voice of the Norns), Supernumeraries of the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar (Siegfried as child, Hagen, Loge, Grane doubles, Forest Birds, Bear); Staatskapelle Weimar/Carl St Clair; Michael Schulz (stage director), Brooks Riley (television director), Dirk Becker (designs), Renée Listerdal (costumes), Wolfgang Willaschek (dramaturg); Arthaus DVD 101 357 (2 DVDs, 251 minutes; recorded live at the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, 2008)

Götterdämmerung. Norbert Schmittberg (Siegfried), Catherine Foster (Brünnhilde), Mario Hoff (Gunther), Renatus Mészár (Hagen), Tomas Möwes (Alberich), Marietta Zumbült (Gutrune), Christine Hansmann (First Norn/Valkyrie), Nadine Weissmann (Second Norn/Erda/Waltraute), Silona Michel (Third Norn/Valkyrie/Woglinde), Christiane Bassek (Valkyrie/Floßhilde), Susann Günther-Dissmeier (Valkyrie/Wellgunde), Kerstin Quandt (Valkyrie), Annegret Schodlok (Valkyrie), Elke Sobe (Valkyrie), Erika Krämer (Grane), Hidekazu Tsumaya (Fafner), Theatre Youth Club of the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar (Ravens), Opera Chorus of the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, Gentlemen of the Weimar Philharmonic Chorus, Supernumeraries of the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar; Staatskapelle Weimar/Carl St Clair; Michael Schulz (stage director), Brooks Riley (television director), Dirk Becker (designs), Renée Listerdal (costumes), Wolfgang Willaschek (dramaturg); Arthaus DVD 101 359 (2 DVDs, 277 minutes); recorded live at the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, 2008

A glance at the cast-lists for these two recordings attests to intensification of Michael Schulz's strange obsession with introducing extra characters into *der ring in weimar*.¹ Of the multifarious accusations hurled at the *Ring*, a paucity of characters is new to me. Before the music begins, we see the boy Hagen sitting under a table, playing with a sword and reading a book, presumably the story so far. There is also a male 'Voice of the Norns'. During the Prelude, Fafner appears and celebrates his hoard. At least – this is a rare thing – that is consonant with the music and might even help explain it to newcomers. Fafner is not strictly an 'extra', since he is scheduled to appear later, though we see him again before the second act anyway. There are other guest appearances: unidentified henchmen, whom the Wanderer brings with him to question Mime, characters who turn out, by process of elimination from the booklet cast list, to be Froh and Donner. Alberich and the boy Hagen also pop in at the end of the act, just as Siegfried's bear for no apparent reason gets up and leaves. Fafner, supposedly in his cave, peers through

¹ See review of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, 'Why Weimar?', *Wagner Journal*, iii/3 (2009), 96–9.



Brünnhilde (Catherine Foster) and the Gibichung women call for revenge on the treacherous Siegfried.
Photo Karl and Monika Forster

the window. Another boy – Siegfried looking at his later self? – appears and fights with Hagen. It is difficult to establish who forges Nothung; everyone has a go.

I have neither space nor inclination to catalogue all these ‘walk-ons’, but should mention a few more. The end of *Siegfried* has three ‘Grane doubles’ – the ‘real’ Grane remains an elderly woman – who walk to and fro, moving furniture and preparing for dinner. One has her/his/its hair done by Brünnhilde. All of the Valkyries traipse on for Waltraute’s visitation; all practise the one-eyed salute, presumably to Wotan, which characters seem to adopt when the bewildering stream of other ideas has momentarily run dry. Some teenagers, identified in the booklet as ‘ravens’, are brought on at various points, one of them being kissed by Siegfried, when the text would have the latter drink from Hagen’s draught.

Another continuing trait is the confusing, apparently arbitrary sharing of roles. It is common enough for substitutes to be used, whether through illness, diary clashes, or just to give someone else a chance, and even for different singers to be employed for different incarnations within the cycle. Here, however, when the cry of ‘all change’ is sounded at the end of each instalment, it seems that a dramatic point is being made.

Unless it be to dismiss Wotan, Alberich, Hagen et al. as being 'all the same', I cannot work out what it is – short of sharing the misery of Mario Hoff. The *Rheingold* Wotan, he returns in *Siegfried* as the lightest-toned Alberich I have heard, subsequently proving a startlingly inadequate Gunther. Tomas Möwes, who did earlier service as Alberich, is an unsteady Wanderer, who reverts to Alberich in *Götterdämmerung*. Straining towards competence, he never quite achieves it in either role.

Catherine Foster appears on all three occasions as Brünnhilde. Perhaps this is 'significant', perhaps not. Hers is one of the better performances: arguably too 'operatic' in *Siegfried* but, in general, intelligently sung and acted. Of the two Siegfrieds, I have heard worse than Johnny van Hal (not 'Hall', as the booklet has it). Yet, wearily accustomed as one becomes to distinctly mature and unheroic portrayals, this goes too far. He often shouts and appears straightforwardly moronic, quite devoid of charisma. Norbert Schmittberg has a shaky vocal start, though he always looks more credible onstage. He improves considerably, so as to make a creditable hero by the third act. There is, however, an unfortunate passage during the second act, when it is unclear whether Guttrune is covering her ears on account of being (rightly) troubled by his tuning. Rénatus Mészár has a reasonable stab at Hagen, especially considering the director's insistence on making him an abused child throughout. No one else, save an unpleasantly shrill Third Norn, makes much vocal impression either way, though Mime's housewife garb registers without amusement.

Carl St Clair's musical direction veers between the unremarkable and the life-sapping, while the orchestra is as ropy as I have heard in the *Ring*. 'Chugging' would be a generous description of the third act Prelude in *Siegfried*: no sign of a world-historical turning point here. The violins' intonational difficulties during Siegfried's first ascent of Brünnhilde's rock provide an extreme but not unusual example, while the sound, orchestral and choral, for the Vassals' Scene might be considered inadequate for a provincial performance of Donizetti.

Götterdämmerung seems little more than a children's game gone wrong. Has so little ever been at stake? Yet, at the end of the second act, this odd game suddenly and inexplicably incites Brünnhilde and Gunther, of all people, to have sex. There is no sign whatsoever here of Guttrune and Siegfried, while Guttrune's presence during the Funeral March makes a nonsense of the action to come. The Immolation Scene has no fire, but a spot of concluding rain to fall upon an exclusively female group of watchers – Wagner stipulates 'men and women' – who have wandered onstage too late to watch Brünnhilde and Siegfried walk away. Those extra characters one might have expected, the gods in Valhalla, are nowhere to be seen, nor is their fortress. Undistinguished, uninvolved, unnecessary.

