

Live Performances

Easter Offerings

Mark Berry reports on a pair of contrasting productions in Berlin

Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg. Peter Seiffert (Tannhäuser), Ann Petersen (Elisabeth), Marina Prudenskaya (Venus), Peter Mattei (Wolfram von Eschinbach), René Pape (Hermann, Landgrave of Thuringia), Peter Soon (Walther von der Vogelweide), Tobias Schabel (Biterolf), Jürgen Sacher (Heinrich der Schreiber), Jan Martiník (Reinmar von Zweter), Sónia Grané (Young Shepherd), Julia Mencke, Konstanze Löwe, Hannah Wighardt, Anna Charin (Four Pages); Staatsoperchor Berlin and Staatskapelle Berlin/Daniel Barenboim; Sasha Waltz (director, choreography, designs), Pia Maier-Schreier (designs), Bernd Skodzig (costumes), David Finn (lighting). Schiller Theater, Berlin, 12 April 2014

Parsifal. Stefan Vinke (Parsifal), Evelyn Herlitzius (Kundry), Hans-Peter König (Gurnemanz), Bo Skovhus (Amfortas), Bastiaan Everink (Klingsor), Tobias Kehrer (Titurel), Burkhard Ulrich (First Grail Knight), Andrew Harris (Second Grail Knight), Siobhan Stagg (First Esquire), Christine Sidak (Second Esquire), Paul Kaufmann (Third Esquire), Alvaro Zambrano (Fourth Esquire), Siobhan Stagg, Martina Welschenbach, Katarina Bradić, Elena Tsallagova, Christina Sidak, Dana Beth Miller (Flowermaidens), Dana Beth Miller (A Voice from Above); Chorus, Men of the Extra Chorus, and Children's Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper, Berlin/Axel Kober; Philipp Stölzl (director), Mara Kurotschka (co-director), Conrad Moritz Reinhardt, Philipp Stölzl (set designs), Kathi Maurer (costumes), Günther Kittler (video), Ulrich Niepel (lighting). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 21 April 2014

Upon the premiere of the Berlin State Opera's new *Tannhäuser*, Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin fulfilled even this writer's heightened expectations, playing and conducting matching their peerless Proms *Ring* last summer. If proof were needed that Barenboim has passed from excellence to greatness, drawing upon years of experience both as pianist and conductor, as well as inspiration from musicians of his youth such as Furtwängler and Klemperer, it was here in abundance. Barenboim's ability to have the music 'speak for itself' should not be taken to imply 'neutrality', whatever that might be. There was no 'interventionism' for its own sake, but the Wagnerian melos, even in what we might consider the intermediate stage of 'Romantic opera', sang, developed, brought forth musical drama, founded as it was on the surest of harmonic understanding, the surest grasp of poem, music and staging (such as it was), and above all, that Furtwänglerian long-distance hearing (*Fernhören*) of which Barenboim at his best is now as distinguished an exponent as any living conductor. A Beethovenian impulse towards forging the strongest and, crucially, most dynamic unity in diversity in no sense precluded definition of 'character' with respect to 'numbers', to the old operatic forms, which retain a strong presence within the greater whole of the through-composed act, indeed which help determine and 'form' that greater whole. Yet a balance, or perhaps better dialectic, needs striking between apparently compet-



Tannhäuser (Peter Seiffert) prostrates himself at the feet of Elisabeth (Ann Petersen) in Sacha Waltz's production. Photo Bernd Uhlig

ing demands, a dialectic revealing itself in the specificity of performance. Estimable though Barenboim's own recording remains, this performance indubitably exceeded that achievement too. There is now an urgent need for new recordings of Barenboim's Wagner; this *Tannhäuser* and of course that Proms *Ring* would be good places to start.

The Staatskapelle Berlin would offer reason enough on its own. All those necessary, apparently competing yet, in reality, mutually generative, qualities that combine to make a great Wagner performance were present: weight and transparency, golden and dark, rich tone, luxury and bite, sharpness of detail and the longer line. The ravishing tenderness and eroticism, grandeur and precision of the Overture and Bacchanale – we heard the familiar conflation of 'Dresden' and 'Paris' – offered a masterclass in Wagner playing to any orchestra. Sasha Waltz's staging enabled the magnificent horn section truly to take its place in the sun, marching across the stage as hunting-party in the first act. Onstage and offstage, the Staatskapelle's brass excelled, quite the equal of glori-

ous strings and woodwind. Neither players nor conductor mistook drama for brash crudity; drama emerged from within rather than being applied from without. Choral singing impressed throughout, partaking in the virtues of the orchestral performance.

An excellent cast also helped make this the finest *Tannhäuser* I have heard. Bar a brief instance of a *cappella* flatness in the first act, and a few tired passages in the second, Peter Seiffert's *Tannhäuser* offered much. He may not be the most dramatically perceptive of singers, nor indeed the most accomplished of actors, but he can sing the role, a rare accomplishment in itself. Moreover, there was intimacy as well as vocal heft. Some might have cavilled over Ann Petersen's vibrato, but the notes were focused; this was a vibrato that enhanced rather than obscured. She shared Seiffert's blending of intimacy and heft, more often than not quite seamlessly, presenting a plausible human, womanly Elisabeth, no virginal cipher. Peter Mattei's Wolfram offered Lieder-like marriage of words and music, likewise a beauty of tone that could not help but move one to tears. René Pape's vocal beauty was likewise a thing of wonder. Marina Prudenskaya's Venus was as imbued with dramatic ferocity as with timbral richness.

Alas, Sasha Waltz's production failed to match the musical performances. Insofar as there is a concept, it seems to be to present some sort of dialogue between opera house and opera, the designs for the Song Contest mirroring, subtly rather than gaudily, aspects of the Schiller Theater: for instance, the seats and the colour of the wood. Unfortunately, little is done with an idea of not inconsiderable metatheatrical promise. Elisabeth looks every inch the 1950s beauty in her second act gown, but again that is hardly enough in itself. Costumes and designs are stylish; there is undeniable transformation of visual as well as musical mood for the third act, David Finn's lighting as important as Waltz's surprisingly convincing, seemingly heartfelt *Personenregie* during *Tannhäuser*'s mourning for Elisabeth. Ultimately, this remains, however, more a work-in-progress than a finished article. Dancers, undeniably erotic in the Bacchanale – though it is difficult to suppress a smile as Seiffert's less than lithe *Tannhäuser* awkwardly slides down to join them – work hard throughout. There is little respite for them; nor is there for us, Waltz seemingly determined to have them do something all of the time, whether the drama demands, suggests, or even permits it. A production that posited a problematical (yet fruitful?) relationship between opera and ballet might well have a great deal to say. This, however, was not it; opera won out, though not without loss.

Philipp Stölzl's Deutsche Oper production of *Parsifal* replaced Götz Friedrich's offering from 1998 last season; I was able, in a feat of Wagnerian dedication unusual even for me, to see it revived just three days after Leipzig's Good Friday staging of the *Bühnenweihfestspiel*. The opening might have made still stronger an impression on Good Friday: a depiction of what might be considered the work's foundational myth, the crucifixion, as the first-act Prelude offered musical and philosophical explanation as to why it might have been necessary – or, alternatively, why, in Michael Tanner's analysis, following that of Robert Raphael, it might be necessary to stop Christ ascending the cross.¹ In a sense, Stölzl concurs with that analysis; in a sense he does not. It might be necessary, but in the sorry consequences

¹ Michael Tanner, 'The Total Work of Art', *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (Cambridge, 1979), 215–16; Robert Raphael, *Richard Wagner* (New York, 1969), 110.

laid out, there is no chance of accomplishing such a need, whether symbolised by Parsifal or otherwise. What we see is one of the most accomplished and indeed extreme stagings I have yet witnessed from a school which, doubtless partially but not entirely unreasonably, understands Monsalvat as a religious community that has gone horribly, in this case irredeemably, wrong. In this Hell-on-Earth – is Hell not where Christ Himself sojourned before rising on Easter morning? – of religious fanaticism, lascivious, Opus Dei-tinged relish is taken in self-chastisement prior to continual re-enactment of deicide. Unable to look beyond the *tableaux vivants* which just about keep the community alive, its members represent kitsch, yes, but deadly kitsch. Carl Dahlhaus's observation regarding the action's characterisation by 'inclination towards ritual and tableau' reveals, perhaps obsessively but certainly with conviction, a darker side indeed.²

Stölzl's creation is not merely anti-Christian: more anti-religious, perhaps with respect both to organised religion and to transcendence. The Flowermaidens are initially more geological than blooming, seemingly hewn from the rock of Klingsor's Tora Bora-like lair, before their brief moment of colour. Likewise, Kundry's burqa-clad appearance – interestingly, quite unsensationalised – makes its point before her unveiling. All the while, the second-act proceedings, perhaps an orientalist 'other' to the sick ritualism of Monsalvat, are haunted by the sacrifice of a comely knight who has, perhaps tired of his moribund community, repeated Amfortas's temptation and fall. Even when the would-be crusader Parsifal is acclaimed, resurrection never comes. At the moment of what would be healing, Amfortas impales himself upon the proffered spear: a way out, perhaps, but not that envisaged either by the Church or by Wagner. Perhaps Stölzl heeds John Deathridge's warning of resolution in 'high-minded kitsch'.³ It is not how we should always wish to experience the work, and the redemption of redemption, above all in music, achieved by Stefan Herheim is unavailable in a staging that pursues one concept single-mindedly rather than having them dialectically interact as Wagner himself did. There is room for both.

Axel Kober led the fine Deutsche Oper Orchestra, which put not a foot wrong, in an honest, sensitive account, which, if it neither scaled the Boulezian dramatic heights nor plumbed the Gattian religious depths, told Wagner's musical story well. Stefan Vinke proved untiring in the title role, though there were times when his vocal stridency proved a little too much. If the Knights had compared his tone with the warmth and humanity of Hans-Peter König's Gurnemanz, they might have decided to enthrone the latter instead. Evelyn Herlitzius offered a duly committed performance as Kundry; her vocal wildness might have benefited from taming earlier in the second act, for there were undeniable passages of questionable intonation, but her wounded-animal reaction to Parsifal's rejection offered a great musico-dramatic experience. As Amfortas, Bo Skovhus's detailed attention to music, words, gesture and their interaction was highly to be commended. Moreover, Tobias Kehrer made more of a mark than many as a deep-voiced Titirel. Knights, Esquires and Flowermaidens were of a consistently high standard, a credit to the company as a whole, likewise the truly excellent singing from William Spaulding's chorus, its movement blocked with equal excellence. This was a *Parsifal* demanding both to be seen and to be heard.

² Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, tr. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979), 150.

³ John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2008), 169.