

RECORD REVIEW

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Andrew Manze

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Wagner**Der Ring des Nibelungen.****DG 073 4057** (eight discs, 14 hours 40 minutes).

Also available separately as detailed below. Subtitles in Chinese/English/French/German/Spanish. *Website* www.universalclassics.com. NTSC. 4:3. Region 0. PCM Stereo. DTS 5.1 Surround. *Stage Director* Patrice Chéreau. *Stage Designer* Richard Peduzzi. *Video Director* Brian Large. *DVD Producer* Harald Gericke. *Dates* Live performances at the Festspielhaus, Bayreuth in June and July 1980.

**Wagner****Das Rheingold.****Donald McIntyre** (bass-baritone) Wotan; **Hanna Schwarz** (mezzo) Fricka; **Heinz Zednik** (tenor) Loge; **Helmut Pampuch** (tenor) Mime;**Hermann Becht** (bass) Alberich; **Carmen Reppel** (soprano) Freia; **Siegfried Jerusalem** (tenor) Froh; **Martin Egel** (baritone) Donner;**Ortrun Wenkel** (contralto) Erda; **Matti Salminen** (bass) Fasolt; **Fritz Hübner** (bass) Fafner; **Norma Sharp** (soprano) Woglinde; **Ilse Gramatzki** (mezzo) Wellgunde; **Marga Schiml** (mezzo) Flosshilde; **Orchestra of the Bayreuth Festival Opera/Pierre Boulez.****DG 073 4058** (2 hours 23 minutes).**Wagner****Die Walküre.****Peter Hofmann** (tenor) Siegmund; **Jeannine Altmeyer** (soprano) Sieglinde; **Gwyneth Jones** (soprano) Brünnhilde; **Donald McIntyre** (bass-baritone) Wotan; **Hanna Schwarz** (mezzo) Fricka; **Matti Salminen** (bass) Hunding; **Carmen Reppel** (soprano) Gerhilde; **Katie Clarke** (soprano) Helmwige; **Karen Middleton** (soprano) Ortlinde; **Gabriele Schnaut** (mezzo) Waltraute; **Elisabeth Glauser** (mezzo) Rossweisse; **Marga Schiml** (mezzo) Siegrune; **Ilse Gramatzki** (mezzo) Grimgerde; **Gwendolyn Killebrew** (contralto) Schwertleite; **Orchestra of the Bayreuth Festival Opera/Pierre Boulez.****DG 073 4059** (two discs, 3 hours 35 minutes).**Wagner****Siegfried.****Manfred Jung** (tenor) Siegfried; **Donald McIntyre** (bass-baritone) Wanderer; **Gwyneth Jones** (soprano) Brünnhilde; **Heinz Zednik** (tenor) Mime; **Hermann Becht** (bass) Alberich; **Ortrun Wenkel** (contralto) Erda; **Fritz Hübner** (bass) Fafner; **Norma Sharp** (soprano) Woodbird; **Orchestra of the Bayreuth Festival Opera/Pierre Boulez.****DG 073 4062** (two discs, 3 hours 38 minutes).**Wagner****Götterdämmerung.****Gwyneth Jones** (soprano) Brünnhilde; **Manfred Jung** (tenor) Siegfried; **Fritz Hübner** (bass) Hagen; **Hermann Becht** (bass) Alberich; **Franz Mazura** (baritone) Gunther; **Jeannine Altmeyer** (soprano) Guttrune; **Gwendolyn Killebrew** (contralto) Waltraute; **Norma Sharp** (soprano) Woglinde; **Ilse Gramatzki** (mezzo) Wellgunde; **Marga Schiml** (mezzo) Flosshilde; **Ortrun Wenkel** (contralto) First Norn; **Gabriele Schnaut**(mezzo) Second Norn; **Katie Clarke** (soprano) Third Norn; **Chorus and Orchestra of the Bayreuth Festival Opera/Pierre Boulez.****DG 073 4065** (two discs, 4 hours 8 minutes). *Dates*

Live performances at the Festspielhaus, Bayreuth in 1979.

Wagner**The Making of Der Ring des Nibelungen.**

A documentary by John Ardoin, with narration by George Grizzard.

With Friedelind Wagner, Wolfgang Wagner, Brian Large, Gwyneth Jones, Donald McIntyre, Manfred Jung, Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez.

DG 073 4068 (56 minutes). *Film Producer* Peter Weinberg. *DVD Producer* Harald Gericke. *Dates* April 14th-21st, 1982.

At the age of 31, with limited operatic experience, Patrice Chéreau was invited to create Bayreuth's centennial *Ring*. In his own words, the *enfant terrible* of French theatre hoped 'to tell the story as simply as possible, with the point of view of Richard Wagner's time'. Both lauded and condemned at its 1976 première, the production was revived with various changes through 1980, when its final presentation was ecstatically received. *Götterdämmerung* was filmed in 1979, the rest in 1980, by a team headed by Brian Large, his generation's pre-eminent video director for opera. The production's telecast was the first of any complete *Ring*, with an international viewing public larger than the entire audience that had heard live performances of the work in its whole history. DG's release of the production on DVD is not a first (it was brought out on Philips in 2002 – see Mike Ashman's review in the January 2002 issue), but the individual operas are now available separately for the first time).

Shot in uninterrupted acts rather than separate brief takes, Large's filming is totally connected to the music and acutely responsive to nuances of character. Because the film was made without an audience, the cameras could function both in the auditorium and on the stage, to the work's enormous advantage. Large is merciless with close-ups, but many of the singers thrive on them (watch Hermann Becht, his face contorted with despair after Alberich's curse). Between Large and Chéreau, the cast was able to develop a degree of naturalistic acting rare for any opera telecast and surely unique in televised Wagner.

This *Ring*'s world is that of the Industrial Revolution, with Wotan and Alberich as representatives of power threatened. Workers under the latter are depicted in true proletariat terms (as indeed is Alberich himself when he first appears). Bringing the mythological elements forward into modern times can go only so far – one is hard put, for example, to find a place for Erda and the Norns in this context. Costumes give a mix of periods, not always aptly chosen. While assuring himself that Wagner had no wish for

directors to slavishly observe all his stage directions, Chéreau in fact stays closer to them than one might expect, making his lapses doubly infuriating.

Reviews repeatedly cited this *Ring*'s horrifying cruelty, its biting humour, and, above all, its overwhelming humanity. It is the latter quality, rather than the political undertones, that one relishes a quarter-century later, amply justifying the production's exalted stature in the 'post-Wieland' era.

Das Rheingold

The Rhinemaidens cavort in an enormous hydro-electric dam, spectacularly designed by Richard Peduzzi. The gods' realm is established with just a few columns, massive and impressive to behold. A bit of film is used between scenes, as if one is first descending into the depths of a nineteenth-century factory (Nibelheim!), then ascending via the same path for the last scene. In recalling traditional visual schemes, I longed only for a more imposing entrance for Erda and – yes, I admit it – a rainbow bridge.

One willingly accepts the mix of periods in the costumes: the Rhinemaidens as Victorian streetwalkers; Loge resembling a seedy, unkempt Franz Liszt; Donner and Froh seemingly at a costume ball, attired as eighteenth-century fops. I assume Fasolt and Fafner are carried on the shoulders of exceptionally strong supernumeraries. They look at least ten feet high and are terrifyingly effective.

From the start, with Alberich and the Rhinemaidens, Chéreau is obviously creating a more than usually physically active *Ring*. In scene 2 one questions his bringing Donner and Froh onstage so early (they're even conferring with Wotan during Fricka's harangue). Alberich's transformation to the 'Riesen-Wurm' works terrifically, although the toad is laughable – intentionally, no doubt. Once Alberich is dragged up to the gods' realm, Large brilliantly reinforces the staging: Alberich, one arm tied behind his back, towering over the dwarves as they bring the gold. In the finale, Loge sings 'They hasten to their end', but Wotan is literally *dragging* the other gods, whom Chéreau clearly views as reluctant to enter Valhalla. The final curtain is literally Loge's – he pulls it across the stage, looking smugly self-satisfied.

Initially Bayreuth's orchestral players reportedly felt stifled by Boulez's chamber-scale approach. Indeed, Boulez, even by 1980 treats *Rheingold*'s opening almost glibly, and one repeatedly misses essential gravity elsewhere. The gain, however, is that the emphasis on intimacy throughout this *Ring* creates genuine *conversations* (intelligibility, by the way, is extraordinarily high). Some listeners, of course, may miss the luxurious underpinning Solti's VPO could give to, say, *Rheingold*'s Erda.

Hermann Becht is the real linchpin here. He's physically much too big to play Alberich as a gnome, but clearly that is unimportant for Chéreau, and in the long run it shouldn't make any difference to the viewer either. Becht may not offer the frightening venom that made Gustav Neidlinger unique in this role, but Becht gives it unexpected human dimensions in all his scenes. He also totally avoids 'Bayreuth bark' – the man really *sings*, and magnificently. Matching him is Donald McIntyre's Wotan, shading his voice beautifully in a characterization by turns bluff and petulant. The giants are splendid: Matti Salminen (Fasolt), quite touching at the loss of Freia, and Fritz Hübner (Fafner), a fine warm-up for his forthcoming grand turn as Hagen.

Loge needs a fuller voice than that of Heinz Zednik. He treats Alberich viciously and in fact seems frequently unhinged; much of his movement is either hyperactive or simply silly. Hanna Schwarz's ravishing-looking Fricka makes surprisingly little impression. Helmut Pampuch's Mime is admirable, but the subsidiary gods all disappoint in voice and characterization. Here, as well as in *Götterdämmerung*, the clear-toned Rhinemaidens – flouncy rather than genuinely sexy – have their trios' alto line exceptionally well anchored by Marga Schiml's Flosshilde.

Die Walküre

As with *Rheingold*, Boulez's excessively brisk Prelude doesn't bode well, but that impression soon disappears: the less weighty approach works beautifully once the conductor and Peter Hofmann begin Siegmund's narrative. The orchestra's technical expertise continues impressively in Act 2 and there are wonderful details, especially in the second scene (including a surpassingly lovely reprise of the 'Spring' motif). Act 3's pacing is almost unfailingly riveting; the disappointments, alas, are the Valkyries' Ride and 'O hehrstes Wunder', the latter lacking any trace of the expansiveness the listener craves.

From the First Act one remembers not just the youthful Wälsungs but also Hunding, surrounded for his entire scene by black-clothed henchmen. Physical contact between Siegmund and Sieglinde happens much too early, and once they're alone they *really* can't keep their hands off each other. Consequently, the finale, with the couple going at it on the floor, has less impact than Chéreau obviously intended.

Brünnhilde is a gawky teenager, Fricka adept at using feminine wiles to achieve her wishes. Visually, Wotan's vulnerability is unforgettablely revealed (gazing sadly into a mirror, he removes his eyepatch before beginning the monologue). Consequently it is shocking to see him actually *strike* his daughter when she objects to his decision regarding Siegmund. While I prefer a more other-worldly *Todesverkündigung*, Chéreau's does work: Brünnhilde solemnly wrapping a white

shroud around Siegmund (he removes it upon learning that Sieglinde cannot join him in Valhalla). Chéreau surely earned Wagnerians' wrath by having Siegmund stabbed not only by Hunding (from the front) but also by Wotan (from the back). On the other hand, Siegmund's death in Wotan's arms, another departure from Wagner's stage directions, presents the most devastating moment of Chéreau's entire *Ring*. Little of Act 3's staging stands out, although, for a change, we do see the Valkyries actually dragging their dead heroes onstage. Their staging involves as much standing around as one finds in more 'standard' productions.

No Wälsungs have ever been more ideal visually than Hofmann and Jeannine Altmeyer. The latter offers sincerity but little specificity in Act 1, the singing dynamically limited and often below pitch. Matters improve later, with a convincing show of terror for the Second Act outbursts. Hofmann, a more detailed interpreter, gives great pleasure with his baritone timbre and fine *mezza voce* (what an extraordinarily *tender* Siegmund he is). The character's pride is captured as unerringly as his physical and emotional exhaustion.

To be blunt: Gwyneth Jones's idiosyncratic vocal production makes her difficult to watch on the small screen. After a precarious 'Hojotoho!' steadiness returns for Brünnhilde's dialogues with Wotan and Siegmund. Most distressing is Jones's wonted tendency to sing in individual notes rather than elegantly shaped phrases. Her dramatic performance in the complete cycle has received abundant critical praise (including from MVA), but I find it surprisingly generalized. She does have 'chemistry' with McIntyre, who keeps godly majesty and human feeling beautifully in balance. He demonstrates unflinching emotional honesty (especially the hurt when imagining his never seeing Brünnhilde again). Both the resignation and resolution of the farewell are soul-stirring.

Coloured by both immense dignity and awe-inspiring rage, Salminen's Hunding is a fully rounded character study, faultlessly sung with a marvellously oily timbre. Schwarz's Fricka quite lacks grandeur and vocal thrust but nicely avoids shrewishness, seeming noticeably pained by the encounter with Wotan. The Valkyries are satisfactory, with Gabriele Schnaut – then still a mezzo – outstanding as Waltraute.

Peduzzi has created a lush forest from which the Wälsungs can emerge in Act 2. Some other visual elements are questionable, especially the well in Hunding's living-room floor and the pendulum that dominates the first half of Act 2 (no doubt it's there just so Wotan can pull it to a stop on 'Das Ende'). I don't mind the nineteenth-century church-like ruin that substitutes for the Valkyries' rock.

The cycle's loveliest costume is Schwarz's white, off-the-shoulder Edwardian gown. On the other hand, Brünnhilde's severe grey attire would better suit a Salvation

Army matron. And would Hunding really fight Siegmund sporting the same elegant suit he wore in Act 1? Manfred Voss's lighting disappoints only in the lack of a genuinely spring-like effect for the final minutes of Act 1 and putting Wotan in near-darkness for 'Loge, hör'.

Siegfried

The First Act's formidable technical challenges, particularly the more scampering portions of the Siegfried-Mime exchanges, are finely executed by Boulez and the orchestra. The conductor manages spectacularly good balances, never an easy matter in this opera, particularly where Mime is concerned. One can live with the stubbornly earthbound lyrical episodes (the Forest Murmurs, for one) when so much of the rest is illuminated by crackling vitality and theatrical flair.

Zednik may occasionally seem enamoured of his own virtuosity, not without reason: in his Mime one savours a penetrating character tenor, superb interpretative ability and a physical characterization of stupefying agility and detail. I find his diabolical intentions too transparent in the final dialogue with Siegfried, but overall Mime's hatred, terror, cunning and exuberance are given memorable definition.

Alas, Manfred Jung's Siegfried is unworthy of such a partner. While not completely ineffectual, the singer does favour an all-purpose petulance. Where is this character's joy in simply being alive? With a middleweight voice of clear timbre but little individuality, Jung offers tireless but virtually uninflected singing. His acting improves as Siegfried awakens Brünnhilde, although the essential sunny, joyous strength is still missing.

McIntyre sets the seal on his portrayal, pouring out one steady, beautifully formed phrase after another, even in Act 3 where the going is toughest. He proves mesmerizing in the Mime-Wanderer dialogue, so often interminable in performance (note his depth of feeling when questioning Mime about the Wälsungs). This Wotan handles Alberich more benevolently than one might expect, while 'kühner Spross' is addressed to Siegfried with withering scorn.

Becht retains his dignity as Alberich and is vocally imposing, at times even refreshingly mellifluous. Hübner (Fafner) has the right cavernous *schwarzer Baß*, Norma Sharp (Woodbird) the necessary pristine timbre, but Ortrun Wenkel – handicapped by bad costuming, as in *Rheingold* – communicates nothing of Erda, vocally straining under pressure. Jones, blessedly wobble-free, proves remarkably convincing in the physical depiction of her ever-so-gradual awakening. Brünnhilde's new-found womanliness suits this soprano, with 'Ewig war ich' providing her most affecting singing in the cycle.

Chéreau's hand is most evident in the Mime/Wanderer and Wanderer/Alberich confrontations. The latter in particular

receives a much more human traversal than usual – the two characters seem almost brothers (as Chéreau says, ‘more alike now in character and purpose as well’). Was Chéreau the first to have Fafner, after being stabbed by Siegfried, emerge as a giant once again for his final words? I loved seeing Wotan silently observing Siegfried in the forest, then in turn, Siegfried briefly observed by Alberich after Mime’s death. But does Siegfried *really* need to hang Mime’s corpse on a tree limb?

Due mainly to Wenkel’s anonymous earth goddess, the Wotan/Erda scene fails to ignite. The Wanderer’s dialogue with Siegfried works better, with McIntyre relishing that brief moment when the Wanderer puts his hand on Siegfried’s shoulder and stops him in his tracks. Chéreau brings little imagination to the finale – and must we *again* have a soprano-tenor couple going at it as the curtain falls?

Peduzzi’s foundry for Mime fills the bill, but, as with *Walküre*, scenically the highlight is the Second Act forest, with a nicely spaced clearing and a pathway upstage, opening to the light at the end of the act. One wonders if costume designer Jacques Schmidt had Dickens’s Fagin in mind for Mime’s ratty, floor-length robe. In recent decades designers have invariably assumed that Brünnhilde would have donned a new gown before awakening – in this case, it’s the white number we’ll see all too much of later in *Götterdämmerung*.

One of the cycle’s most memorable props is a *real* bird in a cage for Act 2 (predictably, Siegfried frees it at the end). The dragon at first sight seems worthy of *The Lord of the Rings*, but one’s excitement degenerates into hilarity once humans start wheeling him around. Voss’s lighting is at its best in Act 3 – he’s an absolute master of fog, particularly in the transition between those two scenes.

Large’s camera is especially fine in Act 2, really drawing us into the forest – and to the figure of Alberich, who opens the act. Not until that point had I been so conscious of this truly being a movie. Large misses nothing; his emphases are always apposite (not once does he let us concentrate on any character at the wrong time – it’s as if he’s actually *conducting* the work). The shots of Siegfried, seen through the trees, are marvellous, as is that of the Wanderer with spear, alone in the fog.

Götterdämmerung

Through more than four hours of music, Boulez seldom loses his dramatic momentum. Even the Norns’ scene, so often lugubrious, boasts a welcome tension and variety of colour. Only occasionally is there a discernible decline in terms of the requisite atmosphere (Hagen’s Watch, for example). Where urgency and forward motion mean everything, all is well, as in the tricky Brünnhilde/Gunther/Hagen scene. Like his soprano, Boulez disappoints in the Immolation, which is simply efficient until ‘Fliegt heim, ihr

Raben’, which rises to the expected level of communicativeness. It isn’t the finale, however, that stays in my ‘mind’s ear’, but (predictably, given this particular conductor) the exhilarating Rhine Journey.

Jones initially appears almost girlish, but her responses in the scene with Waltraute effectively put across Brünnhilde’s resolve. She also convinces in the *tussle* with Siegfried/Gunther (climaxed by a fabulous scream). Her Immolation suffers from variable rhythm, a colourless low register and generalized interpretation. Previously, however, she has given of her best in Act 2: although ‘Siegfried kennt mich nicht’ passes by unnoticed, she seems consumed by her own dramatic involvement and untroubled by vocal difficulties. Surely that aura of a woman possessed is what Chéreau valued most in Jones.

Not unexpectedly, Jung’s Siegfried is more relaxed in both voice and characterization. Heroic he’s not – the man is just too damned *normal* – but his portrayal finally achieves some distinction, especially in his Siegfried-for-Gunther vocal disguise; the fearless oath on the spear; and a welcome sense of fun in Act 3. There the voice is at its most confident, lightening effectively for the narration and farewell.

Watch Franz Mazura’s Gunther as he questions Hagen in frustration (‘Why do you tell me about something that I can’t have?’). Forget the dry voice – this is a true singing actor at work. Altmeyer’s Guttrune is somewhat gauche, particularly when turning on the sex appeal. The big surprise is Hübner, sailing through Hagen’s music while scoring his dramatic points through hulking macho presence and concentrated intensity (for a change, he does look as if he could be Hagen’s son). Hagen’s murder of Siegfried is horrific to witness.

Gwendolyn Killebrew’s regal Waltraute offers an admirably restrained expressiveness, compensating for effortful top notes with fine richness below. Becht acts Alberich’s single scene in an appropriately burnt-out manner. Schnaut is the dominant Norn, performing with Mödl-like fervour. The chorus is satisfyingly full-bodied vocally and reasonably responsive to the drama until the end, which it enacts somewhat numbly.

Unlike in the previous operas, I can’t capitulate to the staging – much is simply wrong-headed. Consider Siegfried’s arrival at Gunther’s: within a few seconds he’s cuddling with Guttrune, making nonsense of the potion episode that immediately follows. Back on the Valkyries’ rock, one has not one but two episodes of wrestling over the ring: poor Brünnhilde gets a real workout, first with Waltraute (!) and then with Siegfried/Gunther – *c’est de trop*, Monsieur Chéreau! Siegfried throws himself on the ground, seemingly agonized, before his crucial final phrases of Act 1 – which he sings with Brünnhilde within earshot!

The Second Act offers only one memorable image: Gunther dragging in Brünnhilde, bent almost in half with her hair obscuring her face. Chéreau gives the Rhinemaidens no sensible alternative to the usual *faux* swimming (at one point they’re dragging themselves across the floor looking rather like snakes). The poignancy of Siegfried’s narration is reinforced when he picks up a dead bird from the ground as he recalls the Woodbird’s words. The curtain descends for the Funeral March with Siegfried’s body in front of it, the men and women of the chorus coming slowly onstage to pause in silent homage to him before turning and looking sadly at the audience.

No good solutions in the last scene: for example, the chorus’s presence onstage dilutes Guttrune’s apprehension in her monologue. Chéreau then sabotages the staging further by having Brünnhilde already onstage when dead Siegfried is brought in, hence destroying the majesty of the heroine’s entrance as Wagner envisaged it. The staging turns inane when Brünnhilde and Guttrune *both* scream and faint upon seeing Siegfried’s body. Thankfully, Brünnhilde simply ‘stands and delivers’ most of the Immolation. After the smoke clears, the cowering populous slowly rises, with a young girl attired in virginal white in the centre, and stares out at the audience. (Is this *really* the most effective ending Chéreau could manage, after four seasons to work on it?) Wisely, however, the lights wait more than 20 seconds before dimming on the final tableau.

Peduzzi gives us an attractive but minimal set for Siegfried’s arrival at the Gibichungs’ hall – barely more than a grey cyclorama, a chair and a couple of carefully placed columns. The Second Act and the final scene are more interesting: the façade of the Gibichungs’ hall, a little platform in front of it with a few steps, and upstage a rough-looking groundsheet resembling a desolate beach.

Schmidt’s basic black dresses, fright wigs and white make-up are a decent idea for the Norns. Brünnhilde’s white gown, however, with its train and over-long sleeves, inhibits Jones onstage and diminishes her physical stature. I can deal with Hagen in a suit, Gunther and even Siegfried in dinner jackets, but Guttrune’s slinky white satin number smacks of 1930s Hollywood, with the most hideous black marcelled wig imaginable. The chorus – some in suits, others in work clothes – looks just right. Voss’s lighting continues wonderfully (just look at the expert handling of the flames of the finale, and earlier when they are penetrated by Siegfried/Gunther).

The subtitles throughout the cycle are satisfactory, although they refer to innumerable visual details not present in Chéreau’s staging and can also be awkwardly phrased (‘She was my will’s creative womb’, Wotan explains to the Valkyries when

speaking of Brünnhilde). It seems the subtitler was frequently attempting his own version of Wagner's *Stabreim*. My favourite: 'You lie, loathsome loon!' (Siegfried to Mime).

The documentary

The hour-long documentary, dating from 1982 and not included in the Philips DVD release of this *Ring*, was scripted by the late John Ardoin. It gives helpful background on the *Ring* and Bayreuth, while also offering commentary from Chéreau, Boulez (he finds the idea of tradition in Wagner performance practice 'unbearable'), Large, Friedelind Wagner and several *Ring* artists. Besides many rehearsal sequences, there is a glimpse of Bayreuth's previous *Götterdämmerung* – Wolfgang Wagner's production, with Jones in noticeably fresher voice than for Boulez/Chéreau. Also included is tantalizingly brief footage of Karl Elmendorff (observed by Winifred Wagner and director Heinz Tietjen) conducting a Bayreuth rehearsal of *Götterdämmerung* with Frida Leider and Max Lorenz.

DG's brilliant recorded sound is hard to beat. The four operas' booklets include tracking numbers, synopses that basically correspond to the staging and a brief essay by Kenneth Chalmers pulling together information related to Bayreuth, Large and Chéreau. (I agree with MVA that biographies and a detailed production history would have been helpful.) Comments by Chéreau within the synopses prove not especially illuminating, but no matter – the production speaks for itself.

Roger Pines

Wagner *Siegfried*.

John Treleaven (tenor) Siegfried; **Falk Struckmann** (bass-baritone) Wanderer; **Deborah Polaski** (soprano) Brünnhilde; **Graham Clark** (tenor) Mime; **Günter von Kanan** (bass) Alberich; **Andrea Böinig** (contralto) Erda; **Eric Halfvarson** (bass) Fafner; **Cristina Obregon** (soprano) Woodbird; **Symphony Orchestra of the Gran Teatre del Liceu/Bertrand de Billy**.

Opus Arte OA0912D (three discs, 4 hours 16 minutes). Includes illustrated synopsis (9 minutes). Subtitles in Catalan/English/French/German/Italian/Spanish. Website www.opusarte.com. NTSC. 16:9 anamorphic. DVD 9. Region 0. LPCM Stereo. DTS Digital Surround. Stage Director Harry Kupfer. TV Producer Noemi Cuni. DVD Producer James Whitbourn. Dates Live performances at the Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona on June 18th and 26th, 2004.

This production of *Siegfried*, which was filmed at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in June 2004, continues to show Harry Kupfer's revised view of the *Ring*, actually quite heavily revised from its predecessor of the late 1980s in Bayreuth. This one originated in Berlin, under Daniel Barenboim's musical direction, and is conducted in Barcelona by Bertrand de Billy. He is not a great conductor, and

the orchestra of the theatre is not a great orchestra, as becomes ever more clear as the textures grow in richness and density. The Prelude to Act 3 of *Siegfried*, for instance, in which Wagner resumed work on the tetralogy after 12 years, and which immediately reveals his greatly increased mastery of symphonic development, tossing around motifs like Jove with his thunderbolts, emerges in this recording in rather weedy sound, the strings lacking in body and weight, the lower brass bellowing rather than surging, and there is insufficient attention to inner parts, so that the music sounds both simpler and much cruder than it is. And in the incredibly impressive dialogue that follows, with Wotan as Wanderer visiting Erda to see if she can tell him 'how to stop a rolling wheel', in other words what to do to prevent the consequences of several catastrophic decisions coming to pass, Wagner's rich orchestral commentary, when the singers are in full cry, goes for very little.

De Billy's sense of direction is not all it could be either: the pregnant preludes to each of the acts – it's a feature of *Siegfried* that all the preludes are quite long, or full of material relevant to what is about to be enacted – don't suggest as forcefully as they should that there is menace in every action in this work, that the point has been reached in the progression of the whole drama where anything that occurs is dreadfully fraught with implications for the whole future progress of the world represented here. I don't want to make too much of this, though. The conducting is not crass, the playing is ardent, and what we are witnessing on stage, combined with what we hear, at least doesn't lead us away from the deep significance of Wagner's drama, as many contemporary productions do (the two recent ones in London, for instance).

The chief problem now with casting *Siegfried* in particular, but really any of Wagner's mature masterworks, is the lack, more acute than ever, of heroic tenors. At present the most one can hope for is one who is tolerable, and John Treleaven, Siegfried here, is that, though he is not much more. Now in his mid-fifties, he seems to be being grudgingly admitted to the world's leading opera houses to sing major heavy roles. He still looks fairly good, is not overweight, and moves with ease if not grace. His voice is not beautiful, but he uses it quite intelligently, and never does anything ugly or vulgar. Yet it is a strain to believe in him as any kind of hero, and by the end of the evening one is longing for him to do something arresting or interesting.

He is surrounded by mainly very good artists, and his companion throughout Act 1 is Graham Clark at his most resourceful. Clark's Mime is not so much the cringing, terrified dwarf as the self-congratulatory, would-be winning figure who is amazed that people don't react to him as warmly as he feels

that they should. He is the brilliant half of a double act, the other half of which isn't up to that standard, or anything like it. Clark even makes some of his music sound lovely, and he never becomes tedious. He meets his equal in the Wanderer of Falk Struckmann, here giving his best performance, perhaps, in the whole cycle. He is genial, rakish, capable of immense outbursts, and lacking only in the fullness of voice that the greatest Wotans have had. But each of his major confrontations, above all the one with the imposing Erda of Andrea Böinig, entangled in her own wisdom, is masterly. It's with deep emotion that one sees him leave the stage, Oedipus-like, for the last time.

Deborah Polaski is of an age with Treleaven, and yet she is so consummate a singer and interpreter that she makes the final scene the climax of the work, as it too rarely is. Still looking fine, and moving athletically, she is capable of both a radiance and suffering which make her, for me, the most impressive Brünnhilde since Astrid Varnay retired almost 40 years ago. As with Varnay, there is strain in the upper register, yet her opening greetings to sun and light are marvellous because they express so much rapture. The only other female component in the work, the Woodbird, is shrill and indistinct, though what we see, amazingly, is a bird fluttering around and obeying Wagner's stage directions. This is revolution indeed.

The staging and production continue very much as before, royal blue the dominant colour, with green and red at appropriate moments. Mime's cave is decidedly hi-tech, with a vast rotating metal device that makes Siegfried's diligence in forging look wholly superfluous; nor is a sword what one would expect as the end-product of such a contemporary work-floor. The Second Act is far more satisfactorily evocative, and Fafner is huge quantities of steam followed by the great Eric Halfvarson with gigantic steel implements for arms. The Third Act includes a large grid, and takes place on two levels; mainly it works. The singers perform to one another rather than to the audience as they should. I was surprised to hear a fair amount of booing at the end. Though this is less distinguished than the two previous instalments of the *Ring*, it is compelling and thought-provoking, and of how many contemporary Wagner performances can you say that?

Michael Tanner

Weber *Oberon*.

Steve Davislim (tenor) Oberon; **Hillevi Martinpelto** (soprano) Reiza; **Jonas Kaufmann** (tenor) Huon; **William Dazeley** (baritone) Sherasmin; **Marina Comparato** (mezzo) Fatima; **Frances Bourne** (mezzo) Puck; **Katharine Fuge** (soprano) First Mermaid; **Charlotte Mobbs** (mezzo) Second Mermaid; **Roger Allam** (speaker) Narrator; **Monteverdi Choir**; **Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique/John Eliot Gardiner**.

New