

WAGNER NOTES



Stephen Gould, 1962-2023, was a mainstay of the Bayreuth Festival in the heldentenor fach, from 2004-2022.

See “In Memoriam,” p.3.



WSNY Calendar

Nov. 8 (Wed.): *Global Wagner: From Bayreuth to the World*. A documentary screening. 6:30–9:30 pm, in person only; reservations required. (Runtime: 97 min.) Dolby 88 Screening Room, 1350 Avenue of the Americas (55th St.), New York, NY. wagnersocietyny.org/events

Dec. 10 (Sun.): *Tannhäuser* Seminar, highlighting the Met production. 12:00 noon–4:30 pm, in person and livestreamed. Bohemian National Hall, 321 East 73rd St. (between 1st and 2nd Ave.), 3rd floor, New York, NY. Reservations (member, non-member, VIP, student, and livestream). Speakers: Susan Brodie and John Muller; Met Cast Roundtable (confirmed: Elza van den Heever and Christian Gerhaher); Met Opera Orchestra Roundtable. Doors open at 11:30 am. Refreshments will be served; books for sale. wagnersocietyny.org/events



Left: Sept. 19: Recent Wagner Productions, with nine commentators. Pictured: David Shengold on Santa Fe Opera’s *Dutchman*.

Right: Oct. 18: David Chan, Met Opera Orchestra Concert Master and conductor of several ensembles. Both events were livestreamed.

Photos: Neil Friedman.



Opera News: The Nov. 2023 issue, just received, was its last. In the Sept. issue of *Wagner Notes*, we had conveyed our deep appreciation for *Opera News*’ consistent and invaluable service to the entire opera community since 1936. We also shared the comments of two great artists, Jamie Barton and Thomas Hampson, on this sad and shocking loss. Under the leadership of F. Paul Driscoll since 1998, it has given us many superb writers, features, and reviews, plus the essential Sat. afternoon Met Opera’s broadcast information. Thank you, *Opera News*. You will be deeply missed.

I am pleased that Nathalie Wagner, our esteemed editor, has included an obituary of Stephen Gould, who died in Sept. Stephen was an artist of the highest caliber, and the many tributes that have followed his death attest to the esteem in which he was held by his fellow artists. He was also a personal friend, and his loss is deeply felt.

We draw near to two exciting public events: a screening of the film *Global Wagner*, at the Dolby 88 Screening Room, on November 8, and our annual Seminar on *Tannhäuser*, at the National Bohemian Hall on December 10. Registrar Jillian Murray has been laboring to refresh and update our website, and

I encourage all members to visit and register for these and other future events. We also look forward to seeing each other at the Met during the 8-performance run of *Tannhäuser*, and the Society is pleased to note that the Met has extended a discount to our members.

We also hope that everyone will go to our website, www.WagnerSocietyNY.org, click "Membership," and sign up and support our work for another season. The membership renewal rate over the first five weeks of the membership campaign has been extraordinary. If you have yet to fill in your form, please do so today!

F. PETER PHILLIPS
PRESIDENT

About the Contributors

Bonnie Becker is Membership Chair of the Wagner Society of Washington DC. Introduced to Wagner through Hildegard Behrens' Brünnhilde at the Met, she has attended Ring performances in Seattle, Berlin, and Bayreuth.

Berthold Hoeckner is the Keough-Hesburgh Professor and Chair of the Department of Music at the University of Notre Dame. His most recent book, *Film, Music, Memory*, was published in 2019.

Richard Moukarzel was a student at the National Lebanese Conservatory, in performance and theoretical interests. His PhD thesis in music at the University of London was on "The Emancipated Wagner..." He has published in *The Wagner Journal*.

Joseph Parrish, bass-baritone, is a native of Baltimore, a graduate of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and The Juilliard School, and an artist diploma candidate in opera studies there. He performs widely in the New York area.

Andrew Rombakis is a member of the board of the Wagner Society of Northern California, a retired ophthalmologist, and a frequent Bayreuth attendee.

Stephen Wagley has been a member of the Society and occasional reviewer for *Wagner Notes* since 1986.

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In Memoriam



Stephen Gould as Siegfried, rehearsing for *Götterdämmerung*, Bayreuth, 2006. Photo: Eckehard Schulz/AP.

Stephen Gould (January 24, 1962, Roanoke, VA–September 19, 2023, Chesapeake, VA) will always be remembered in Bayreuth and by the entire Wagner world as an artist of the highest caliber in the heldentenor fach. He joined the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s program for young artists, as a baritone. Later, after performing roles in “The Phantom of the Opera” for several years, he took time off to develop his technique under John Fiorito, growing into the Wagner tenor repertoire. In 1999, he received a modest grant from the Wagner Society of New York toward an audition tour in Germany and was engaged in 2000 as Florestan in *Fidelio* in Linz, followed by other tenor roles, including his first Tannhäuser (and first Wagner role!) there in 2002. His Bayreuth engagements began with *Tannhäuser* in 2004 and continued, with interruptions, as both Siegfrieds (from 2006, with encouragement from Wolfgang Wagner) and Tristan (from 2015) through 2022, performing all three in 2022, in addition to Siegmund (2018) and Parsifal (2021 concert performance). Tributes have poured in from Katharina Wagner and from his artist colleagues. On Facebook: from Ekaterina Gubanova, Catherine Foster, Andreas Schager, and Lise Davidsen, who wrote: “a kind and thoughtful colleague and what an honest, powerful, and amazing singer...”

His career was largely in Germany and Austria, but

he sang his first staged *Tristan* in Tokyo in 2010. At the Met he sang only Erik in 2010 (six) and Siegfried in 2012 (*Götterdämmerung*: four, and *Siegfried*: one). He was awarded the title of Austrian Kammersänger in 2015. At the Vienna State Opera, he also sang Bacchus, Erik, Kaiser, Peter Grimes, and Otello. His recordings include Beethoven’s 9th, *Tannhäuser*, *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Tristan*, and *Frau ohne Schatten*.

This publication has reviewed his performances many times to highest praise (“one of the best Siegfrieds I have ever seen,” “the Tristan of our age,” “the reigning Tannhäuser”). WSNY hosted him for a reception and interview in May 2009 and again in November 2019 at which he noted the value of supporting young artists in the early stages of their careers. The Society presented a masterclass by him on Dec. 11, 2020. It is preserved on the free WSNY YouTube Channel: a tangible record of his kindness and support to three tenors pursuing the Wagner repertoire.

His book, “Performing Wagner: A Singer’s Perspective on the Great Wagner Roles,” will be published in 2024 by Toccata Press, in conjunction with the Wagner Society of New York. He shares his experiences and insights and also comments on working with directors and conductors, with a word on technique: yet another aspect of his legacy to the world.



Stephen Gould and Lise Davidsen, taking a break on the grounds of the Festspielhaus in 2022.



Coaching three young tenors in a masterclass on Dec. 11, 2020.
Photo: Neil Friedman.

Other Tributes

Katharina Wagner: “With him, the Bayreuth Festival and the entire opera world have lost an outstanding singer, actor, educator, friend, and esteemed colleague.” He first appeared there in 2004, singing nearly 100 performances through 2022. She noted his comment that Wagner was pure meditation for him, a mantra.

Maestro Donald Runnicles: “His portrayals of Siegfried, Tannhäuser, and Tristan were filled with a deeply human understanding of the suffering of these characters.” At Deutsche Oper Berlin, in addition to the great Wagner roles, he also did Canio in *Pagliacci*: a rare excursion in the Italian repertoire.

Rainer Fineske, RWVI President: “All of us...will keep a wonderful memory of him, not only as a person but as one of the most reliable heroic tenors of the last 20 years.”

Bayreuth Festival

2024 Festival: July 25 - August 27. 6 *Tristan* (new production, opening the season); 2 *Ring Cycles*; 6 *Tannhäuser*; 6 *Parsifal*; 2 *Holländer*. Please see the website for full schedule, order details, and additional news, including a wealth of historical information: www.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/

Rhein Briefs

Lise Davidsen, native of Norway and international soprano, will release a new album entitled “Christmas from Norway” on Decca Classics in Nov. 2023. It will include traditional Norwegian Christmas music and classic festive favorites. She will be accompanied by several Norwegian ensembles.

Donald Palumbo, Met Chorus Master since 2006, will step down from the position in June 2024. He will continue to work with the Met on select operas as well as teaching at The Juilliard School and Santa Fe Opera, and on special projects.

Regina Resnik, whose international career encompassed over 300 performances (including Bayreuth) in a repertoire of dozens of soprano, then mezzo-soprano roles, is the subject of an exhibit from her personal archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts through Feb. 10, 2024, on the occasion of her centennial.

Bryn Terfel, international Wagnerian bass-baritone, will give a recital at Carnegie Hall on Nov. 14, 2023.

Christian Thielemann has been named general music director of the Berlin Staatsoper unter den Linden and the Staatskapelle Berlin on a five-year contract beginning in Sept. 2024, succeeding Daniel Barenboim, who held that position from 1992 to January 2023.

Comprehensive listings of U.S. and international performances of Ring and non-Ring operas through 2024: were given in the Sept. issue. Following are updates to this list:

- Feb. 29, March 4, 9, 11, 13, 16, 2024. *Holländer*. Royal Opera House. Cond.: H. Nánási; dir.: T. Albery.
- March 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, April 7, 10, 2024. *Lohengrin*. Opera national du Rhin (Strasbourg). Cond.: A. Shokhakov; dir.: F. Siaud.

A Renunciation of What? – Barrie Kosky's *Rheingold*

K. Konradi, N. O'Sullivan, M. Monreal, C. Purves, C. Maltman, M. Prudenskaya, K. Howarth, I. Sim, S. Howard, R. Dixon, K. Smoriginas, S. Panikkar, B. Ryan, W. Lehmkuhl, F. Campbell, R. Knox-Peebles. Royal Opera House. Cond.: A. Pappano; dir.: B. Kosky. Performance of Sept. 14, 2023.

This autumn, the Royal Opera House launched an ambitious *Ring Cycle*, their first in many years, with the *Götterdämmerung* endgame scheduled for 2027. Antonio Pappano and Barrie Kosky gave an exemplary kick-off to this promising endeavour, opening the 2023-2024 London musical season (which is to be Pappano's final one as music director of the ROH) with a thought-provoking and superbly cast *Rheingold*. Kosky's production, like many others, dives headfirst into the ecological subtext and socio-political critique inherent to Wagner's magnum opus, as poignantly illustrated by Rufus Didwizsus's apocalyptic scenography. However, and most interestingly, what sets this staging apart from many an ideology-laden reading of the *Ring* is the fact that it manages to do so without the slightest hint of didacticism. In fact, this production owes most of its ethical shock-value to the sheer visceral appeal of its staging and acting, forcing us to confront our society's greatest fears.

This *Rheingold* virtually unfolds as a three-hour-long mourning of the World-Ash (read 'ash' literally, judging by the charred tree trunk that occupies the entire stage, one of the many visual puns that punctuate this remarkably witty staging). The river Rhine as such is nowhere to be found and the scorched trunk gives neither shelter nor water, in the manner of T.S. Eliot's 'dead tree'. For Kosky's visual world indeed conjures up the poignant image of a waste land, ruined by exploitation and haunted by the weeping gestures of a ubiquitous and precociously despoiled Erda, the latter appearing naked and weary before the Prelude even begins. In fact, this archaic and haunting mother-figure (acted by the movingly vulnerable Rose Knox-Peebles) constitutes the focal point of the entire drama. She never leaves the stage, often lurking in the background, helplessly lamenting the disasters she witnesses, or donning a maid's uniform as she serves the gods' Elysian polo party (no doubt an effort to



Wotan (Christopher Maltman) and Loge (Sean Panikkar).
Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

make Wagner's cosmic tragedy more relatable to the stalls patrons of Covent Garden). However, when she does speak (or rather, sing), it is through the glorious offstage voice of Wiebke Lehmkuhl, whose disarming softness sublimates the earth-goddess' embrace of Wotan in chthonic forgetfulness – even forgiveness.

Nevertheless, the brutal reality of humanity's original sin (which is, after all, the tetralogy's central concern) is by no means impeded by the surprising tenderness of such moments. In the third scene, Kosky portrays Alberich's Nibelheim as a steampunk inferno populated by mutant child labourers. It is worth noting that Brenton Ryan's rather sexy-looking Mime offered a refreshing departure from stereotypical representations of this character, with a vigorous and full-bodied tenor vocality instead of the threadbare falsetto Untermensch – a welcome reminder of Wagner's proletarian sympathies in the midst of this scene's dubious racial subtext. In the meantime, the stage is dominated by the chilling figure of Erda writhing in pain as a slimy Rhine gold is being milked out of her by steel pumps, which testifies to the potential of Wagner's symbolism for perpetual reinvention. This industrial hellscape admirably – or rather, nauseatingly – captures the sheer horror of human exploitation, orchestrated by a tech-savvy Alberich.

Much can be said about Kosky's unconventional characterisation of the eponymous Nibelung, brilliantly incarnated by Christopher Purves: this Alberich is one that does everything but renounces love – or lust, which amounts to the same thing if one is to judge by the libidinous rage that, far from being limited to the opening scene, pervades the entire drama. In fact, Alberich's sensuality is exacerbated to the extreme, culminating in a bout of coprophagic greed that has him indulge in bucketloads of Rhine gold slime, which further hints to the sexual and exploitative character of Erda's milking. Better still: in his transformation scene, the Nibelung dons his steel BDSM muzzle as a rather kinky approximation of a Tarnhelm and turns first into an exhibitionistic Wurm (read: naked as a worm), then into a fetishist display of severed body parts. This hypersexualised Alberich is only castrated when Wotan steals the ring, cutting off his rival's 'finger' as it protrudes from his lower body. Thus, Wotan inherits the (cock-)ring of the Nibelung, as well as its curse: it is now his turn to embark on a series of sexist and violent deeds (against Freia and, later, Erda, in all likelihood). This poignant reversal of the *Ring's* erotic narrative puts forth a rather reasonable critique of a socio-economic oppression that by no means excludes sexual objectification and exploitation. In this dystopian *Rheingold*, as in the world we currently inhabit, capitalistic greed and pornographic violence must go hand in hand.

The production boasts a cast and a musical direction brimming with surprises (some of which were delightful, others less so), starting with Sean Panikkar's ROH debut. His captivating Loge was bursting with razor-sharp vocal accuracy, pristine diction, and wit, albeit impeded by histrionics that often verged on irritating gesticulation. Nevertheless, this image of a nouveau riche, sadistic, canapé-munching Loge was a serendipitous finding, and I would be interested in hearing Panikkar in other Wagnerian roles. On the other hand, this performance featured a rather heterogeneous pantheon, with Christopher Maltman's powerful yet nuanced Wotan counterbalancing – or eclipsing – the coy mezzo of Marina Prudenskaia as Fricka. As for Maestro Pappano's musical direction, it was

characterised by a somewhat matter-of-fact, perfunctory leitmotivic cueing (a Boulezian reminiscence?), as well as by an often breathless sense of tempo and battuta, not always doing justice to the consummate Wagnerian 'art of transition'. This was not helped by the occasional instrumental glitches in the leitmotivic matrix, such as the solo trumpet's failure to enter on the sword motif in the finale (the moment of Wotan's 'mighty idea'). Nevertheless, Pappano's relatively cerebral reading of Wagner's score had the merit of being brisk and transparent, even though it contrasted with the utterly visceral intensity of the staging.

Incidentally, for all its originality and freshness, this production's finale seems to have come dangerously close to that of Richard Jones' *Rheingold*, staged for the 2022 season of the English National Opera. Indeed, Kosky chose to accompany the gods' entrance into Valhalla with the same shower of multicoloured confetti that so effectively evoked a kaleidoscopic, pixelated rainbow bridge at the ENO last year. Even though the sudden burst of color came as a surprise in the midst of this dark and pessimistic landscape, one remembers that the gods' false triumph in the *Rheingold* finale is amongst Wagner's most ironic moments, contrasting with their fallible and cynical behavior throughout the entire opera. This was a particularly brilliant dramatization of the bitter dissonance between the garish aural-visual apotheosis of Valhalla on the one hand, and the Rhine maidens' ominous offstage cries on the other. Nevertheless, this unexpected golden shower seemed all the more contradictory in regard to the otherwise gloomy and pessimistic visual atmosphere of Kosky's scenography for the ROH, as opposed to the rather camp and garish palette of the ENO staging. Could this be seen as a tongue-in-cheek rapprochement with last year's ENO *Rheingold*, an eerie touching point between the two vying London Rings of the decade? One would need to wait for the rest of the tetralogy to unfold over the next four years. Nevertheless, and at the risk of contradicting Erda's prophecy, one can see that a bright day dawns for this production. I shall be eagerly awaiting the next installments of Kosky's *Ring*.

RICHARD MOUKARZEL

Parsifal: Live at the Bayreuth Festival

A. Schager, G. Zeppenfeld, E. Gubanova, D. Welton, J. Shanahan, T. Kehrer. Cond.: P. Heras-Casado; dir.: J. Scheib. Performance of Aug. 23, 2023.

I reviewed the online streaming of the premiere of the new Bayreuth production of *Parsifal* in the September issue of *Wagner Notes*. I attended the live performance of August 23, and so will offer an update to my earlier review. Many of the problems I had pointed out were even more distracting in the house: redundant doubles of characters, cameramen, and video projections among them. Worse, I didn't have a full view of the stage. In the farthest seat to the right in row 18, I realized that sight lines are *not* perfect from every seat in the Festspielhaus, at least with Mimi Lien's sets. I could not see stage left (at the far right), where Gurnemanz (Georg Zeppenfeld) and the Kundry double (a silent actress) were fondling each other at the beginning of Act I. At the beginning of Act III, an usher directed me to an empty seat, and I could then see the edge of a ruined machine, but nothing to the right of it.

At the beginning of Act I, I saw a video cameraman—perhaps more than one—on stage, filming various performers. The resulting projections on the cyclorama behind the set helped a bit to explain what was going on between Gurnemanz and the Kundry double, but from where I was sitting the close-ups of their heads looked washed out and indistinct. I am no more convinced of the effectiveness of projected video than when I saw it on streaming or in productions of other operas (for example, in *Dead Man Walking* at the Metropolitan Opera this season, Christopher Ash's oversized projections of Joyce DiDonato as Sister Helen Prejean and Ryan McKinny as Joseph De Rocher diverted my attention from the singers on stage). Stage directors should not depend on projections to make clear what's going on. And they shouldn't have camera crews breaking the fourth wall in doing so. The point of live performance on stage is live performance.

The big news of this production was augmented reality glasses, which were available to only 330 of the 1,930 audience members. I did not have the special

glasses, but there is a full report on them by Andrew Rombakis in the following review.

Pablo Heras-Casado conducted an attentive and detailed interpretation, with unhurried tempos. He maintained careful balances, though the orchestra covered Zeppenfeld a bit in the first act. The best singers were Ekaterina Gubanova and Zeppenfeld. As Kundry, Gubanova had a fine sense of the shape of the long melodic lines in Act II; she occasionally sounded metallic on top notes, but she handled the drop at "Lache" well. Her acting was convincing but a bit reserved. Zeppenfeld projected deeply felt emotion, though at the beginning of Act I he seemed and sounded distant, perhaps the effect of his being just on the edge of my range of vision and hearing. Derek Welton's Amfortas was well sung, without pushing or straining.

Andreas Schager, as Parsifal, kept his large and robust voice under control for most of the performance. He is not a subtle singer in a role that calls for some subtlety. He occasionally shouted but was capable of calmer and almost introspective singing in Act II, though with some vibrato. His acting was convincing, especially his miming of the Grail rite at the end of Act I and assuming the leadership of the Grail fellowship at the end of Act III. (He was more unrestrained and exuberant as Siegfried in the *Ring* in the same week.)

As for the staging, I noticed little that I didn't see in the streaming; it was fairly traditional except for the doubles. Some things were clearer: I realized that the dressing of Amfortas's wound took place behind a stele because there was a camera (or a cameraman) inside the stele that made a closeup possible on the back of the set, but this could have taken place at the front of the stage in full view of the audience. In an effective touch, an acrobat Parsifal rappelled down the wall at the back of the stage when entering Klingsor's realm in Act II, but at the end of the act there seemed little sense in having an acrobat

Klingsor scramble down the wall after Klingsor (Jordan Shanahan) had collapsed on the front of the stage.

At the end, Parsifal dropped the Grail—an elongated ceramic or stone object—on the stage, shattering it, signaling to the knights that a new era was begin-

ning. As he and Kundry stepped into the pool at the center of the set, the Kundry double walked across the stage and embraced Gurnemanz.

Doubles. Cameramen on stage. Pointless video projections. Augmented reality. A new era indeed.

STEPHEN WAGLEY

Augmented Reality Glasses for *Parsifal*

As a retired ophthalmologist, I was especially curious about the enhanced visual experience that the AR glasses promised to offer. They cannot fit over most standard glasses, so separate lenses must be placed in the AR frames to approximate one's optical correction. The lenses are only spherical, not cylindrical, meaning that they cannot correct for significant astigmatism. The best candidates are those who see well at a distance without glasses, or those who wear contact lenses.

Attendees were requested to visit the box office in advance of the performance to get fitted with the AR glasses, not only to make sure that the added lenses would be satisfactory, but also to make any adjustments to how the frames would sit on the user's face. After this preliminary fitting, the glasses were waiting for us at our seats, pre-fitted with the lenses appropriate to each patron. In order to get the full visual effect, one had to sit in the rear of the theater, which meant the front row of the loge, balcony, or gallery areas (only 330 of the 1930 total seats). The glasses were hot and heavy, and they became an additional physical challenge to endure along with the Bayreuth heat. Many of my seat mates ended up taking them off. It is expected that they will be offered again in 2024.

The field of vision was constricted, almost tunnel vision. However the augmented reality experience extended indefinitely throughout the theater, no matter where one turned to look. The ceiling, floor, and walls of the theater became non-existent, and immersed in augmented reality. The only "reality" that was visible was the stage itself. (The Bayreuth theater is probably one of the few in the world where such AR glasses can be used, since the orchestra is



An example of AR visuals. Photo: Bayreuth Festival/Joshua Higgason.

adequately hidden to prevent it from causing a visual distraction to the augmentation.)

The AR visuals were sometimes interesting, but frequently repetitive and somewhat of a distraction from the stage action and the singing. The highlight for me was the flower maidens scene, when the whole theater became filled with flowers no matter where I looked. When Klingsor threw his spear at Parsifal, it appeared to be coming right at me in 3D, and I almost found myself ducking to avoid it. Other times there were rotating tree branches, human skulls, animations of walking human figures, and slithering snakes that were visually interesting but did not add to the stage action, and in fact became a bit annoying after a while. If given the choice again, I would go without the AR glasses.

ANDREW ROMBAKIS

Bayreuth: A Stipendiate's Perspective

Bayreuth changed my life. Prior to 2022, I had some knowledge of Richard Wagner and the Bayreuth Festival, and I was aware of Wagner's influence on tonality and harmonic structure. However, his gargantuan reputation was intimidating and, because of that, I was not enthusiastic about learning his music. It was not until 2022, when I was an Apprentice Artist in the chorus of *Tristan und Isolde* with the Santa Fe Opera, that I had an opportunity to be immersed in the music, and even then, only because I had a vested interest.

Then, in 2023, I was WSNY's recipient of the Bayreuth Stipendiate (Aug. 12–18), an annual scholarship program that gives participants the opportunity to experience three operas, attend lectures on his music, and connect with other young singers, as well as instrumentalists, directors, coaches, conductors, costume designers, and scholars.

The performances I attended were dynamic, varied, and superb musically. The Festspielhaus is rife with pageantry and symbolism. Each evening's performance may begin on the lawn with refreshments, conversations, and, for me, much needed German practice. Opera goers are called in by a brass octet playing the evening's leitmotives. The opera house's "democratic seating" means no aisles or bad sightlines. The rows of wooden seats rake upwards, step by step, ensuring a good view for each attendee. The orchestra and conductor are completely covered and pitted well below the stage, enabling the audience to focus entirely on the drama and music onstage.

The Bayreuth Festival reinvigorated my love for opera. Seeing three varied and contrasting shows made for diverse musical and dramatic experiences, all of which ranked eleven out of ten. The Festspielhaus acoustics are legendary, having been engineered for optimal audible amplitude. I was astounded by the scope of dynamics and wide range of musical expression, coupled with the technical and musical excellence displayed night after night.

Two of my favorite singers were tenor Siyabonga Maqungo and bass Georg Zeppenfeld. I saw Mr.



Joseph Parrish in front of the Festspielhaus.

Maqungo in the roles of Vogelweide in *Tannhäuser* and Erster Gralsritter in *Parsifal*. I reveled in his sweet tenor voice and excellent technical command: a very fine singer. Mr. Zeppenfeld is a regular at Bayreuth, evidenced in his portrayals of Daland in *Der Fliegende Holländer* and Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*. I deeply appreciated his phrasing and musicality; each phrase was a masterclass. His musicality was enhanced by the orchestra, with its command over this repertoire. The overture of *Dutchman* burned through the house like wildfire. The orchestra's dynamic range was also evident in Markus Eiche's performance of Wolfram's intimate aria, "O du, mein holder Abendstern" from *Tannhäuser*. The performances ignited a new sense of responsibility and dedication to my own musicianship. This musical awakening is only attainable at the Bayreuth Festival, due to its specific history: it stands alone in its musicianship, inventiveness, and faithfulness to Wagner's legacy.

Wagner was a complicated man with a checkered history. His compositions do not erase his personality, beliefs, and the person who he chose to be. Nevertheless, from this complex individual came a gift for composing music and writing stories that continue to touch hearts and transform lives. My experience as a Stipendiate recipient was rich with learning, culturally enriching experiences, and fabulous performances. I am a better artist as a result.

JOSEPH PARRISH

Virginia Opera's *Siegfried*

A. Anderson, A. Loutision, A. R. Tagert, K. Albertson, J. Jeremiah, R. Lugo, C. Nolan, M. Peña. Virginia Opera and Virginia Symphony Orchestra. Cond.: A. Turner; dir.: J. Schamberger. Performance of Oct. 7, 2023.

Virginia Opera presented the third piece of its planned four-year production of the *Ring Cycle*, with creative projections replacing regular stage sets and an amazing performance by 23 members of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra doing the work originally scored for 100. As the Official Opera Company of the Commonwealth of Virginia, VO regularly performs in three venues: George Mason Center for the Performing Arts in Fairfax (Oct. 7–8), with the first two performances in Norfolk and the final two in Richmond.

Artistic Director Adam Turner had set as one of his goals that this *Siegfried* would invite new people to fall in love with Wagner's music. He used the adaptation by Jonathan Dove and Graham Vick which trims about half an hour off the usual length. Director Joachim Schamberger and scenic designer Court Watson created imaginative computer projections for the background scenery. These combined efforts found the sweet spot of being a bit less daunting for newcomers without disappointing traditionalists.

Prior to seeing this production, one might not have recommended *Siegfried* as a young person's introduction to opera. Many directors nowadays try to outdo each other in demythologizing the *Ring*; e.g., the latest Bayreuth iteration interjected cosmetic surgery and child trafficking into the imagery. But Virginia Opera's high tech electronic projections enhanced the fantasy elements of the story: lush green forests, glistening white mountain peaks, an active waterfall, and a graceful dove fluttering through it all brought a beauty often missing in recent stagings. Add a dragon, magic sword, super-hero, murder, and youth triumphant—what's for a Millennial not to love?

The character of Siegfried is actually hard to love, as he is an uncivilized, narcissistic teenager, ungrateful to Mime who has raised him since infancy. A skilled actor must mature those adolescent character flaws into noble, heroic passion. Cooper Nolan as Siegfried had the height and shoulders of a superhero, but his

movements on stage were stilted. Contributing to this mismatch was a lack of heft in his voice until his discovery of Brünnhilde ("This is no man!") unleashed a Siegfried worthy of our expectations. Alexandra Loutision as Brünnhilde awakened to greet the sun, inspiring Nolan's Siegfried with dramatic energy to match hers, which she delivered with full, rich tone.

There's a robot in the first act. This would not be a distraction for newcomers, but opera goers with a few *Siegfrieds* under their belt could not help but wonder. Eventually, beguiling tones from the oboe, clarinet, and flute reveal that the robot is really the Woodbird, charmingly sung by Alicia Russell Tagert. A modern mind could regard the robot/Woodbird as an avatar for Wotan leading Siegfried to find Brünnhilde.

Alberich was effectively sung and acted by Joshua Jeremiah. A surprise was the interpretation of the long-suffering Mime. As sung by Matthew Peña, Mime displayed the expected victimhood and revengeful scheming, but his efforts to trick Siegfried into getting the gold for him bordered on slapstick. Fafner, a fearsome dragon, guards the gold, so when Ricardo Lugo in an ordinary orange jumpsuit emerged from Fafner's cave, it was disappointing that the flexibility and possibilities of the projections had not been used to make a more exciting monster.

In Act III, Wotan, King of the Gods (Kyle Albertson), has summoned Erda, Goddess of the Earth (Alissa Anderson), to ask her how events he had set in motion will end. Bass-baritone Albertson and mezzo-soprano Anderson, a married couple with few opportunities for interacting opera roles, brought an intimacy and maturity, vocally and dramatically, to this emotional scene which foretells the fate of the gods.

Götterdämmerung is promised in 2024 as part of Virginia Opera's 25th anniversary season. The Wagner Society of Washington DC is a financial supporter of Virginia Opera's project to present the entire *Ring*.

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Der fliegende Holländer at Lyric Opera of Chicago

T. Konieczny, T. Wilson, R. Watson, M. Kares, R. Capozzo, M. Watson. Lyric Opera of Chicago. Cond.: E. Mazzola; dir.: C. Alden. Performance of Oct. 1, 2023.

Amid the persistence of ethnic and religious conflicts around the world, Wagner's legacy of virulent antisemitism remains a vexing problem. Today no stage director can afford to ignore the composer's chilling fantasy of a world without Jews, even as he took pains to wrap his idea into tropes of redemption. Wagner's main dramatic oeuvre is tellingly bookended by two figures embodying the troublesome legend of the Wandering Jew: the Flying Dutchman and Kundry. Both die with a sense of deliverance from their predicament—a predicament that, in hindsight, has become perniciously portentous.

The new-to-Chicago production of *The Flying Dutchman* at the Lyric Opera attempts to grapple with Wagner's ominous dream of a sublimated Jewish salvation. Director Christopher Alden is known for stagings with a critical edge, yet he tends to stay clear of the unruly regime of Regietheater. I recall his 2009 production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Chicago Opera Theater in which the senescent titular ruler confronted an unruly group of underage teenage

subjects. Alden brilliantly captured the growing pains of the pubescent revolutionary generation on a stage where the white light of Enlightenment cast through the opening of a slanted museum wall crosses the red carpet of bloody tyranny.

Alden's *Dutchman* is equally legible. The single stage design looks like a large industrial hall slanted to the right, offering a glimpse into a subterranean machine room that later reveals the Dutchman's trapped crew in red light. A steam engine drive wheel looks ahead to the *Ring's* parable of the industrial revolution and modern economy, set off by Wotan's mortgage crisis. George Bernard Shaw showed long ago how the young Wagner embraced communist hopes. Accordingly, Alden stages the mechanized assembly-line-like movements of the women in the Act II spinning chorus: these are the labor conditions and the life Senta tries to escape. Within the washed-out palette of the production, her red wig stands out in solidarity with the Dutchman's undead sailors—quite the revolutionary woman Wagner envisioned.



Dutchman (Tomasz Konieczny). Photo: Todd Rosenberg.

Possibly feeling post-pandemic financial pressures, the Lyric forwent the now common opening-credits-like staging—say, of a ship weathering a storm, as one might have expected for Wagner’s blockbuster overture. Instead, it is paired with a giant woodcut of the Dutchman which appears to merge Edward Munch’s painting “The Scream” with a portrait of Egon Schiele, both eyes covered with both hands. Senta’s fixation on his picture may be meant to parallel our obsession with images in the digital age. Indeed, for next-generation operagoers, the Dutchman’s enigmatic portrait must have appeared as a parody of a profile photo on a dating app—not Tinder, but its rival Bumble, where the woman makes the first move.

As Senta does. In one of the production’s most powerful moments, she opens the door behind the portrait to reveal the Dutchman’s statuesque figure holding a small picture (of her?) and she snatches the picture from his hands to unfreeze him for their rapturous duet. Not surprisingly, the production gains traction in the second act, where Wagner began to shake off the shackles of the number opera, also allowing the recently appointed musical director of the Lyric, Enrique Mazzola, to pick up the pace. Today’s audiences have been naturalized into dramatic music through the hyper-differentiated web of

leitmotifs in soundtracks for the *Ring*-inspired *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* franchises. By comparison, the two main musical ideas for Wagner’s first romantic opera come across as primitive. That said, the interplay of the powerful Dutchman theme and Senta’s salvation theme also sports a compelling primal simplicity.

This comes through with the extraordinary main leads. While the secondary characters—the Steersman (Ryan Capozzo), Senta’s father Daland (Mika Kares), her nurse Mary (Melody Wilson), and her former love interest Erik (Robert Watson)—are cast capably, Tomasz Konieczny (Dutchman) and Tamara Wilson (Senta) carry the drama. Their duets are gripping vocal duels and their solos, gut-wrenching or heart-rending reckonings. Similarly formidable are the choruses, living up to Wagner’s efforts to emulate the Meyerbeerian showiness of grand opera. In a strikingly self-conscious gambit, Alden holds up a shrewdly Brechtian mirror in Act III: taunting the Dutchman’s ghostly crew to join them, Daland’s sailors and local girls look out from the stage to us, a 3D-Cineplex acculturated audience. If opera remains a costly spectacle, it survives by catering powerfully to our emotions.

Yet Alden’s denouement is not just thrilling, but also deeply unsettling. His Senta does not jump off the cliff to join the Dutchman for the feel-good salvation Wagner envisioned. Instead, Erik finishes his throwback-ish final duet with Senta by taking a rifle to shoot her like a defector. When she holds up the Dutchman’s portrait in defense and defiance, his graven image is destroyed before the bullets hit her heart. What is more: united with the Dutchman in death by a double murder of sorts, Senta also becomes Jewish. This is the production’s perhaps most provocative idea about the eternal-sailor-become-wandering-Jew: taking off his oilskin, the Dutchman reveals a striped uniform akin to those worn by prisoners in Nazi death camps. And when Senta later slips on that coat over her wedding dress, we realize that their shared fate was not just predetermined but also portentous.

BERTHOLD HOECKNER