

# WAGNER NOTES



Sieglinde (Nadja Stefanoff)  
and Siegmund (Peter Wedd),  
*Die Walküre*, Act II, La  
Monnaie; directed by  
Romeo Castellucci.  
Photo: ©Monika Rittershaus.  
See review on page 3.



## WSNY Calendar (see also WSNY website: Upcoming Events)

**March 7** (Thurs.), 6:30 pm. Prof. Larry Wolff: “Art & Social Transformation.” National Opera Center, 330 7th Ave., New York. In person and livestreamed.

**April 27, 30, May 3, 5m.** *Die Walküre*. Atlanta Opera. Cond.: A. Fagan; dir.: T. Zvulun. See Atlanta Opera website for 20% discount –<http://www.AtlantaOpera.org> and discount code WAGNER20. See WSNY website for details and special events on April 27.

**May 15** (Wed.), 6:30 pm. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng. “Wagner from a Queer Perspective.” National Opera Center, 330 7th Ave., New York. In person and livestreamed.

## WSNY YouTube Channel

Now available! Two presentations from the Dec. 10th *Tannhäuser* Seminar are on our free WSNY YouTube Channel!

- 1) Met Cast Roundtable: Elza van den Heever, Ekaterina Gubanova, Georg Zeppenfeld, Christian Gerhaher, David Shengold (moderator).
- 2) Met Orchestra Musicians Roundtable: Wen Qian, Hannah Cope, Anton Rist, Anne Scharer, David Shengold (moderator).

Available via WSNY website: [wagnersocietyny.org/resources/videos/](http://wagnersocietyny.org/resources/videos/)  
or YouTube Channel: [www.youtube.com/@WSNY1/videos](http://www.youtube.com/@WSNY1/videos)

## U.S. Performances and Concerts in 2024 (please check websites)

- **Just announced: Tanglewood concert: July 20**, 8:00 pm. *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, in concert. Boston Symphony at Tanglewood. Cond.: A. Nelsons. C. Goerke (Brünnhilde), M. Weinius (Siegfried).
- **Opera Colorado:** Feb. 24, 27, Mar. 1, 3. *Holländer*. Cond.: A. Pioto; dir.: K. S. Belcher.
- **Baltimore Symphony:** Mar. 1, 2 (two locations). Cond.: J. Conlon; soloist: C. Goerke. Schubert Symphony No. 8 and *Götterdämmerung* excerpts.
- **Apr. 27, 30, May 3, 5m.** *Die Walküre*. Atlanta Opera. See WSNY calendar info.
- **April 24 and May 3.** Carnegie Hall concerts including Wagner excerpts.
- **Aug. 16-24.** *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*. Brattleboro, VT. With festival events. [info@tundiproductions.org](mailto:info@tundiproductions.org)
- **Sept. 27, 29, Oct. 5, 7, 12, 13.** *Götterdämmerung*. Virginia Opera (3 locations). Cond.: A. Turner; dir.: J. Schamberger.
- **Oct. 13, 15, 17, 20.** One *Ring Cycle*, in concert. Dallas Opera. Cond.: F. Luisi. Individual operas: *Rheingold*: May 1 & 4; *Walküre*: May 2 & 5; *Siegfried*: Oct. 5; *Götterdämmerung*: Oct. 8. See website: [dallasymphony.org/ring-cycle](http://dallasymphony.org/ring-cycle)
- **Oct. 19, 23, 27, Nov. 1, 5.** *Tristan*. San Francisco Opera. Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: P. Curran. (S. O'Neill, A. Kampe.)

I take special pleasure in spending time with experts in a field (like Wagner) in which I am a committed amateur. So I enjoyed tremendously the presentations of Barry Millington online in January, and John Muller in-person at the December Seminar. For the same reason I look forward to the return of our dear friend Hans Vaget on Wagner's relationship with the "New World," and our first presentation from NYU's Larry Wolff on the symbiotic relationship between Wagner's vision of art and his yearning for societal advancement.

Our Singers' Committee has a new leader, Cori Ellison, and a "deep bench" of committed and expert volunteers. The Committee has posted our audition procedure for our singers' grants, culminating in a final trial at Merkin Hall on May 21. The vocal recital that we hoped would happen in May – much like the organ recital that we hoped would happen in

April – has had to be postponed to early next season.

We are informed by our British publishers that Stephen Gould's and my book *Performing Wagner* is now at the printer and pre-publication copies should be available to Society members in April. Please look out for a special program on this fascinating publication.

I add a personal note: Avid opera-goer that I am, this year it is turning out that I will attend three Rings: Zurich in May, Longborough in July, and Bayreuth in August. Additionally, my work travel will present the opportunity to see two Parsifals in a week – one in Vienna and one in Budapest. My long-suffering wife sat me down to ask why I do this sort of thing – after all, I know how the stories end, right? I would be grateful to receive suggestions of what I should reply.

F. PETER PHILLIPS  
PRESIDENT

## About the Contributors

**David Hughes**, WSNY's representative to the RWVI, has traveled to several continents for Wagner performances.

**Ako Imamura**, travels extensively in Europe for Wagner and other performances.

**Ira Lieberman** has a PhD in Musicology and has taught music at two universities. He was a violinist in the Met Opera Orchestra for 36 years, the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra for 20 years, and is a founding and current member of the New York Pops.

**David Shengold**, a critic and lecturer, regularly writes for *Opera*, *Opéra Magazine*, *Opernwelt*, and *Classical Voice North America*, and pens program essays for many opera companies and festivals.

**Simon Williams** is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Theater and Dance, University of California at Santa Barbara. He lectures widely on theater and opera and was the Society's Bayreuth lecturer from 1998 to 2000.

**Correction:** The Director of *Holländer* at Pittsburgh Opera (Nov. 2023 issue) is Sam (not Sal) Helfrich.

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## Die Walküre at La Monnaie, Brussels

I. Brimberg, N. Stefanoff, M. Lemieux, P. Wedd, G. Bretz, A. Jerkunica. Cond.: Alain Altinoglu; dir.: Romeo Castellucci. Performance of Feb 11, 2024.

Brussels' Théâtre de la Monnaie, Belgium's leading opera house, boasts a distinguished history, with world premieres by (among many others) Massenet, Chabrier, d'Indy, Chausson, Honegger, Prokofiev and John Adams. Its medium sized auditorium (seating 1150) has played host to much Wagner over the years. And Belgium has produced some major Wagnerian interpreters, including Heldentenor Ernest Van Dyck, mezzo Rita Gorr and bass-baritone José van Dam. The theater's standards and prestige declined somewhat after World War II's depredations but have recovered in recent decades. Chief conductors Sylvain Cambreling and Antonio Pappano upped the orchestral game; since I last visited in 2015, Alain Altinoglu (appointed Music Director the next year) has manifestly improved the instrumental ensemble and morale.

The company is building a *Ring Cycle*, in consecutive order, with Altinoglu at the helm and direction by Romeo Castellucci. The gifted if controversial Italian director began his operatic career with a 2011 *Parsifal* on this very stage; his other best-known essay into Wagner's canon was a 2017 Munich *Tannhäuser*. Castellucci is an auteur, handling direction, sets, costumes and lights. His work, as that of a film director like Andrei Tarkovsky, draws its aesthetic material from many sources not necessarily easily grasped by the general public; he's also given to self-referentiality, making allusion to his own work and his personal mythologies. For example, I was told that some of the imagery connected with Fricka as Protectress of Marriage derives from artwork in the town hall of Paris' 10th arrondissement. If one objects to the kind of staging whose full meaning can only be extracted via program notes and critical intervention, this might not be a *Ring* for you. Yet the action of *Die Walküre* proved "legible" enough, and much had a stark beauty: black, gray, and white predominated. The director's symbolism, not always fully perceptible under mostly dim lighting, pro-



Valkyries dragging naked male corpses (fallen heroes), Act III.  
Photo: ©Monika Rittershaus.

duced some stunning imagery, with an accent on the story's sanguinary, savage aspect.

On February 11, Altinoglu's tempi and dynamic levels were often restrained, suiting both the intriguing but dreamlike, at times almost ritualistic Castellucci *Regie* of, and the capacities of, an able but not traditionally heroic cast. The playing was consistently admirable, with expertly blended string tone and (rare enough in Wagner) beautifully controlled horns. The oboes and bassoons also shone. For all the smeared blood it engendered, the Sieglinde/Siegmund romance took on a credible sexiness achieved but rarely in this piece. Neither former mezzo Nadja Stefanoff nor British character tenor Peter Wedd (a Janáček specialist, most of whose previous Wagnerian work has been in small theaters like Krefeld and Lübeck) fielded especially imposing voices, and occasionally got covered by the orchestra, the tenor notably in the *Todesverkündigung*. But Wedd, particularly, is a convincing actor. The lonely siblings' mutual fascination—not as glamorous Nordic icons à la Jeaninne Altmeyer and Peter Hofmann for Chéreau

but as two reasonably attractive, sensitive people, like Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard in “Brief Encounter”—proved quite moving.

The animal world figures large in Castellucci's work. A roaming black dog scarily embodied Hunding's posse (and, with its handlers, got the first curtain call). Ante Jerkunica, an uneven Fasolt in *Das Rheingold*, which premiered in October, made Hunding dramatically riveting, though his sizeable voice rather lacks legato: a Josef Greindl rather than a Georg Zeppenfeld. “Live” doves dominated the Fricka scene; the goddess appeared to strangle three of them (puppets, surely). Canada's livewire but strident-topped contralto Marie-Nicole Lemieux, who was also in *Rheingold*, might fare better as the Siegfried Erda. Extras paraded black horses around in Act III's background, with the Valkyries dragging on completely naked male “hero” corpses, among the few

objects that Castellucci lit brightly. Near-naked bodies had filled *Das Rheingold* as well, almost as a design element. Katie Lowe's fine Helmwigie led a fine group of Valkyries.

Sweden's Ingela Brimberg, if not especially individual of timbre, was a graceful, practiced, and moving Brünnhilde throughout. But the big takeaway was Gábor Bretz in his impressive role debut run as Wotan. Rather outgunned on the video of *Rheingold I* had watched, here he wielded a striking, resonant bass-baritone with considerable dynamic pliability, used with style, especially in the towering Act III farewell. Let's hope Bretz retains his lighter repertory for a while, but this assumption marked a very promising development. To be in a city where a *Ring* is being forged has a special excitement. The Brussels audience fêted Altinoglu and his forces warmly.

DAVID SHENGOLD

## International Scene.

**For Bayreuth Festival:** see [www.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/](http://www.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/) The two 2024 Ring Cycles will be conducted by Simone Young, replacing Philippe Jordan, who had to cancel.

### Ring Cycles in 2024:

- March 18-April 1. Two *Ring Cycles*. Staatsoper Berlin. Cond.: P. Jordan; dir.: D. Tcherniakov. Presenting the entire canon.
- March 28-April 1; May 25-30. Two *Ring Cycles*. Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, Cond.: M. Güttler; dir.: H. Hörnigk.
- May 3-9, May 18-26. Zurich Opera: two *Ring Cycles*. Cond.: G. Nosedá; dir.: A. Homoki. NOTE: The second cycle – May 18, 20, 24, 26 – will be livestreamed to this website: <https://www.opernhaus.ch/en/2324/ring-fuer-alle/> and will be available free of charge as video-on-demand for a month afterwards.
- May 11-20; May 21-26; May 28-June 2. Three *Ring Cycles*. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: D. Runnicles; dir.: S. Herheim. Presenting the entire canon.
- June 15-20. One *Ring Cycle*. Sofia, Bulgaria. Part of its June 13-23 Wagner Festival. Cond.: C. Trinks; dir.: P. Kartaloff. Also premiering *Lohengrin* (see page 6) and touring *Die Walküre*, to Füssen.
- June 16-22; June 25-30; July 4-9. Three *Ring Cycles*. Longborough Festival Opera. Cond.: A. Negus; dir.: A. Lane.
- June 20-23. One *Ring Cycle*. Budapest, Palace of the Arts. Cond.: A. Fischer; dir.: H. Schörghofer. Centerpiece of Wagner Days: June 14-29, with other events.
- 2024-2025: dates TBA. Two *Ring Cycles*. Regents Opera. Cond.: B. Woodward; dir.: C. Staunton.

### Single Ring Operas (some are part of upcoming Ring cycles)

- March 1 & 2: *Götterdämmerung* Excerpts. Baltimore Symphony. ( 2 locations.) Cond.: J. Conlon; C. Goerke.
- April 6, 14, 19, May 5, 19, 29. *Das Rheingold*. Theater Erfurt. Cond. A. Prior; dir.: J. Weber.
- April 26. *Die Walküre*. Rotterdam Philharmonisch Orkest. Concert. Cond.: Y. Nézet-Séguin.
- May 5, 9, 24, 30, June 2. *Götterdämmerung*. Staatsoper-Stuttgart. Various.
- May 7, June 5, 10. *Das Rheingold*. Staatsoper-Stuttgart. Various.
- June 27, 2024. *Die Walküre*, Act I, concert. Gran Teatre del Liceu. Cond.: J. Pons.
- Oct. 28-Nov. 10. *Das Rheingold*. Teatro alla Scala, Milan. Cond.: C. Thielemann; dir.: D. McVicar. 2025: *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*; Two *Ring Cycles* in Feb. and March, 2026.

## Parsifal at Houston Grand Opera

R. Thomas, E. Pankratova, K. Youn, R. McKinny, A. Silvestrelli, A. Courville. Cond.: E. S. Kim; dir.: J. Caird. Performance of Jan. 21, 2024.

Houston Grand Opera mounted Wagner's challenging but rewarding Bühnenweihfestspiel for the first time in 33 seasons and came up aces. Visually and in terms of stage action, John Caird's extremely well-thought out production certainly did not adhere strictly to Wagner's written stage directions--but it largely worked on its own rather cinematic terms and never strayed into the excesses of boo-courting High Church Regietheater. A combination of futuristic and traditional elements, the set, a usefully versatile Wieland Wagner-style raked disc, and unusually colorful costumes by Johan Engels served well enough.

These performances marked a highly promising role debut in the title role by Russell Thomas, who sang throughout in a well-supported, always audible, and distinctly baritone tenor – a far cry from the choirboy-on-steroids sound of a Klaus Florian Vogt, closer to the example of Ramón Vinay or James King. Thomas phrased scrupulously and displayed clear diction. For two acts, one wanted more dynamic variety: the first real piano tone he produced was in Act II's final line, to Kundry: “Du weisst, wo du mich wiederfinden kannst!” But in Act III, Thomas's dynamic palette widened, making his singing more convincing. He cut a dignified figure and generated some sympathy, but seemed not to spark much off his colleagues. This is already a fine Wagnerian assumption that will only grow in interpretive stature. Kwangchul Youn, new to Houston, offered a superbly vocalized and dramatically focused Gurnemanz, mellow and confidently uttered: the key to any Parsifal performance, especially in Act I. Having hit the gym for his superb turn in the Met's *Dead Man Walking*, Ryan McKinny looked improbably fit and mobile for the agonized Amfortas. He's an excellent actor, well versed in this part's requirements after three acclaimed Bayreuth summers, and sang very capably. Soprano Elena Pankratova, set for her Met bow as Turandot this Spring, is surely the outstanding



Parsifal (Russell Thomas) surrounded by Flower Maidens, Act II. Photo: Robert Kusel.

Kundry of the moment. Her plush, impactful instrument betrayed no strain at any moment in the wide-ranging role, and like Youn she fielded a wide range of dynamics bound by legato phrasing. Her German has improved in precision since 2018 and she proved an affecting (and effective) presence throughout the drama, in which Caird made her both witness and equal protagonist to Parsifal.

This is not the first time the opera's final scene has portrayed more than canonical redemption: Graham Vick's 1997 Bastille staging had the same inclusive impulse, with not just Amfortas but the Flower Maidens and even Klingsor benefiting from the Holy Spear's healing presence. Caird went beyond this to show Kundry (not Parsifal) wielding the Spear to undo the curse of Amfortas' wound. In a slightly Hollywood pair-everyone-off touch, the two cuddle at the end as if to suggest an imminent wedding in Monsalvat. Meanwhile, we see Gurnemanz mourning his mentor Titurel, and the titular hero, duly crowned king, holding court with the choristers (boys and girls) in the large outstretched golden hand that previously held the gilded Aztec mummy-like Titurel. The flying dancer/swan made his reappearance from Act I: the most credible enactment of Parsifal's role as a primi-

tive, impulse-guided hunter I've seen in any of my 14 staged *Parsifal* performances. Act III's final tableau was in fact quite moving, as was the orchestral playing at this sublimely evocative moment. Conductor Eun Sun Kim made a far stronger impression here than in her Met work to date: the orchestral pacing and sheen held one's ears throughout, and choral balance was very adeptly handled.

The debatable choices in Caird's blocking were threefold. Act I's deployment of the children choristers for the kind of heart-tugging cute tableaux more apt for Act II of *La Bohème* grated; black-clad Furies pulled Kundry off to her Act I slumbers abduction-style in full view of her protector Gurnemanz, who didn't lift a finger to help her; and – as in many productions – Parsifal's interception of Klingsor's thrown

spear was clumsily handled, not least in requiring the enormously tall Andrea Silvestrelli to steal focus in re-entering his platform lair at stage center. His height, intensity and sheer volume proved his chief assets as Klingsor. The actual singing was – beyond the demands of a non-bel canto part, which can however be handsomely sung (as in my experience by Walter Berry, Eric Owens, and Derek Welton) – excruciating, frequently harsh, and pushing sharp. Silvestrelli has many fans among casting directors, but to my ears has been catastrophic in roles from Sarastro to King Philippe. I wished his role had been exchanged with that of the healthy, propulsive-voiced André Courville, a relatively youthful-sounding Tituel. But all in all, HGO's *Parsifal* proved very compelling.

DAVID SHENGOLD

### International Scene: Non-Ring Operas, 2024. For your travels: Europe and other continents

- Feb. 29, March 4, 9, 11, 13, 16. *Holländer*. Royal Opera House. Cond.: H. Nánási; dir. T. Albery.
- March 3, 8. *Parsifal*. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: D. Runnicles; dir.: P. Stölzl. Entire Wagner canon in 2024.
- March 10-April 10. *Lohengrin*. Opéra National du Rhin. Cond.: A. Shokhakimov; dir. F. Siaud.
- March 13, 16, 21, 24, 28. *Tristan*. Opéra de Lille. Cond.: C. Meister; dir.: T. Rodrigues.
- March 24 - May 18. *Parsifal*. Theater Ulm: Cond.: F. Bender; dir.: K. Metzger.
- March 28, April 13, 15, 17, 23. *Parsifal*. Vienna State Opera. Cond.: A. Soddy; dir.: K. Serebrennikov.
- March 29, 31. *Parsifal*. Hungarian State Opera. Cond.: B. Kocsár; dir.: A. Almási-Toth.
- March 29, April 7. *Parsifal*. Deutsche Oper am Rhein. Cond.: A. Kober; dir.: M. Thalheimer.
- March 31, April 6, 14, 28, May 5, 9, 20. *Parsifal*. Staatstheater Nürnberg. Cond.: R. Boer; dir. D. Hermann.
- March 31, April 4, 7, 10, July 9, 23. *Parsifal*. Bayerische Staatsoper. Cond. C. Trinks; dir.: P. Audi. See 2024 Opera Festival.
- March 31, April 13, 21, May 12, 30, June 9. *Tannhäuser*. Karlsruhe. Cond.: G. Fritzsck; dir.: V. Nemirova.
- April 24, 28, May 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 25. *Die Meistersinger*. Teatro Real (Madrid): Cond.: P. Heras-Casado; dir.: L. Pelly.
- April 29, May 2, 5, 8, 11. *Lohengrin*. Vienna State Opera. Cond.: C. Thielemann; dir.: J. Wieler.
- April 28, May 1, 5, 11, 20, 30. *Tannhäuser*. Oper Frankfurt. Cond.: T. Guggeis; dir.: M. Wild.
- May 5, 12, 15, 19, July 21, 23, 25, 28. *Tannhäuser*. Bayerische Staatsoper. Cond.: S. Weigle; dir.: R. Castellucci.
- May 15-26. *Holländer*. Regio di Torino. Cond.: N. Stutzmann; dir.: W. Decker.
- May 18, 26, 30, June 5, 8. *Tristan*. Royal Danish Opera. Cond.: P. Carignani; dir.: S. A. Jupither.
- May 19, 23, 26, 30. *Die Meistersinger*. Vienna State Opera. Cond.: P. Jordan; dir.: K. Warner.
- May 31. *Lohengrin*. Wiesbaden. Cond.: M. Güttler; dir.: H. Hörnigk.
- June 13, 23. *Lohengrin*. Sofia, Bulgaria. Cond.: C. Trinks; dir.: P. Kartaloff.
- June 14, 21, 24, 27. *Lohengrin*. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: A. Soddy; dir.: C. Bieito.
- June 15, 19, 26. *Tannhäuser*. Wiesbaden. Cond.: M. Güttler; dir.: H. Hörnigk.
- June 16, 21, 23, 29, July 3, 6. *Holländer*. Deutsche Oper am Rhein. Cond.: A. Kober; dir.: V. Barkhatov.
- June 30, July 3, 13. *Tristan*. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: J. Valcuh; dir.: G. Vick.
- July 5, 12, 15, 18. *Lohengrin*. Savonlinna Opera Festival.: Cond.: S. Zlias. (*Lohengrin*: M. Spyres.)
- Aug. 10. *Tristan*, in concert. Auckland, NZ. Cond.: G. Bellincampi.
- After Aug. 1. *Lohengrin*. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: J. Conlon; dir.: K. Holten.
- Aug. 2-25. *Tristan*: Glyndebourne. Cond.: R. Ticciati; dir: N. Lehnhoff.
- Oct. 28, Nov. 2, 12. *Holländer*. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Cond.: I. Repusic; dir.: C. Spuck.
- Nov. 17, 20, 23, 27, 30. *Holländer*. Teatro Municipal, Santiago, Chile. Cond.: A. Pérez; dir.: N. Lombardero.

**Thank you for any additions or corrections to these 2024 listings. Send to the Editor: wagnerring@aol.com**

## Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Lise Davidsen

Bach: Fuga (Riccercata) a 6 voci from Musical Offering, BWV 1079 (1747; orch. Anton Webern); Wagner: *Wesendonck Lieder*; Mahler: Symphony No. 5. Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Cond.: Y. Nézet-Séguin; L. Davidsen, soprano. Performance of Feb. 1, 2024.

How Mahler would have loved the Met Orchestra! It played with such presence, such enormous expressivity, clarity and strength that all the extremes Mahler inserted into his hard-won Fifth Symphony came across brilliantly.

Mahler, like Mozart, frequently wrote marches. But whereas Mozart's were purely musical, as a means of generating material for musical development, Mahler's marches might be said to express his preoccupation with death, as it does at the beginning of this and his other symphonies. The trumpet fanfare preceding it was authoritatively played by David Kraus. Conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, signaling his approach to the symphony, took both fanfare and march extremely slowly, caressing the music rather than moving with a sense of forward motion. This deliberation inspired extremely attentive playing by the orchestra. The conviction and virtuosity were completely convincing, characterized by both love and wit. Contrasts were sharply portrayed: tenderness and depth of string tone, especially in the Adagietto, alternated with savage outbursts from winds and percussion throughout. It was a pleasure to watch the strings scurrying in rapid passages while caressing the slower ones (special kudo to the cellos) and to hear the marvelous solo playing especially by French horn Brad Gemeinhart in the Scherzo. The audience erupted following the heroic close of the symphony.

When Webern "arranged" Bach's fugue by applying his color-splattering technique, called Klangfarbenmelodie, he broke Bach's melodies into groups of notes of contrasting timbres. This technique, far from clarifying Bach's intricate intentions, obscured them. Leopold Stokowski may have inflated Bach to a grandiose level, but his orchestrations enhanced the profile of Bach's counterpoint. Webern's "cubistic" rendering, on the other hand, gives the music a kaleidoscope of colors but makes it impossible to distinguish one Bach line from another. A nice trick for Webern; not so good for Bach.



Lise Davidsen and Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Photo: Chris Lee.

Whereas Mahler, the symphonist, set texts throughout his life, Wagner, the mature opera composer, set only one set of poems, written by his muse Mathilde Wesendonck. It is reflective of the hopeless situation between them and is indicative of his thinking about love and death, soon to surface in the opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Here is the final verse of the last song, "Träume" (Dreams):

"So that they grow, so that they bloom,  
and, dreaming, pour out their fragrance,  
Gently fading on your breast,  
And sink into their grave."

The musical setting is recognizable because it appears in *Tristan* as a love-duet in the second act. The despair of Tristan's fatal wound that opens the opera's third act is the basis for the third song, "Im Treibhaus" (In the Hothouse).

Lise Davidsen is a stunning exemplar for this intense cycle. She sang with subtle differences in timbre in delicate sections and with power and conviction in more forceful passages. She navigated the extremes of these emotional verses with empathy and a beautiful stream of sound that persuaded with every phrase. Her encore, "Dich Teure Halle," with its sumptuous orchestral accompaniment and climactic high B, roused the audience to a standing ovation.

IRA LIEBERMAN

## Der Ring des Nibelungen in Brisbane

L. Lindstrom, A. Cole, D. Humble, L. Keegan, M. Kovalevska, M. Hong, C. Lazarenko, S. Vinke, D. Sumegi, W. Fyfe, R. La Spina, A. Silvestrelli, A. Conrad, D. Parkin, D. Bassett, A. Sefton, H. Francis. Queensland Symphony Ring Cycle Orchestra. Cond.: P. Auguin; dir.: C. Shi-Zheng. Performances of December 1-7 and December 8-14, 2023.

Opera Australia's new *Ring Cycle*, originally planned for 2020 but delayed for three years by the pandemic, opened December 1, 2023, in the Queensland Lyric Theatre in Brisbane, Australia, to great expectations. The production, designed by Chinese-American Director Chen Shi-Zheng, uses fully digital LED panels for the sets, augmented by one or two physical set pieces that change from scene to scene. The Director's concept, from his program note that "...ancient mythology is equivalent to modern science fiction," incorporates the *Ring Cycle's* motifs and objects in a staging that transcends time, place, and cultures.

*Das Rheingold* opens with a coral formation from the Great Barrier Reef, onstage, containing a visible chunk of gold that the Rhine Maidens fail to prevent Alberich from stealing. Digital images of waves and currents cause the entire stage to appear underwater, and there are three Rhine Maiden doubles/aerialists who "dive" and "swim" around the coral, choreographed so that only three of the six are seen at any given time. As the opera progresses, objects described in the libretto appear amid different cultural references – Wotan carries a spear, but arrives on stage seated with Fricka on a Chinese Day Bed flanked by Fu Dogs, and Alberich has a gold ring on his finger and a tarnhelm on his head, but as a serpent he is a large bunraku puppet maneuvered by three traditional puppet masters. As the opera ends, the Gods follow different colored light rays toward Valhalla, depicted as a multiverse represented by pixels on a computer screen. During their ascent, the Gods are joined by a troupe performing a pastiche of various Asian dances, which I found incongruous and distracting.

Eastern and Western elements are combined as the *Cycle* continues. Siegmund pulls Nothung from an oversize bonsai tree; an armored Brünnhilde arrives accompanied by Grane, another large bunraku puppet of a flying horse. Brünnhilde slumbers on a large, elevated scholar's rock encircled by a metallic dragon



Wotan (Daniel Sumegi) with Donner (Alexander Sefton) in front of Valhalla (a computer screen). Photo: Wallis Media.

with gas jets that ignite in a circle of fire after Wotan summons Loge; a red bolt is seen on one of the digital panels. Fafner, as the dragon (sung offstage by Andrea Silvestrelli), is projected on panels as a gigantic coiled beast, and then a pair of enormous eyes; after being slain by Siegfried, a large bag dripping blood is lowered onto the stage. Gibichung Hall is depicted as a medieval Nordic fortress, with blowing snow, and singers costumed in furs and heavy clothing. This provides a backdrop for the visually impressive conclusion, in which Brünnhilde moves atop Siegfried's funeral pyre as flames are displayed on the panels for the conflagration, followed by waves and water currents creating the appearance that everything is underwater. As Brünnhilde sinks into the submerged funeral pyre, a Rhine Maiden aerialist "swims" down and retrieves the gold ring from her outstretched hand.

The staging sometimes veers toward spectacle, such as with the use of a large phoenix, lowered onto the stage, for the collective entrance of the eight Valkyries at the beginning of Act III of *Die Walküre*. The spectacle is heightened when spear-carrying members of the dance troupe return, as if to imply that the Valkyries need assistance.

The singers were consistently good, and often excellent, throughout the *Cycle*. Some performed multiple



roles – Andrea Silvestrelli (both Fafner roles, Hunding, and Hagen); Deborah Humble (Fricka and both Waltraute roles); and Mariana Hong (Freia and Helmwig). Daniel Sumegi’s delivery as Wotan was consistently strong, and more emotionally expressive during his Abschied scene with Brünnhilde. Warwick Fyfe, who sang his breakout Alberich role in Opera Australia’s prior *Ring Cycles* in Melbourne, used both vocal and acting skills to great effect as the evil dwarf. Andreas Conrad sang a duplicitous Mime, and Hubert Francis impressed as the manipulative Loge who outsmarts Alberich. Liane Keegan, costumed in a dress with Asian symbols and an overcoat of dreadlocks, vocally personified mysterious and ancient wisdom. Celeste Lazarenko sang the Forest Bird offstage, as a costumed aerialist “flew” around the stage.

American soprano Lise Lindstrom sang Brünnhilde in *Cycles 1 and 2* (Anna-Louise Cole in *Cycle 3*) with a strong voice and commanding stage presence. She delivered a forceful final monologue, with shades of regret for what might have been. Her Siegfried was sung by German heldentenor Stefan Vinke, one of the world’s leading interpreters of the role. His vocal performance was consistently strong and moving.

The most memorable singers were Australians Cole and Rosario La Spina as the Wälung siblings. Cole’s vocal range expressed Sieglinde’s discovery, joy, then devastation. La Spina’s Siegmund delivered thrilling cries of *Wälse! Wälse!* and an impassioned announcement scene with Brünnhilde.



Wotan (Daniel Sumegi) crossing spears with Brünnhilde (Lise Lindstrom). Photo: Wallis Media.

Maestro Philippe Auguin led the 124-piece Queensland Symphony *Ring Cycle* Orchestra, comprised of musicians from the Queensland Symphony Orchestra supplemented by instrumentalists from Australia and Europe. His reading of the score was straightforward, often powerful, such as in “The Ride of the Valkyries,” but at times tentative, such as in the opening music for *Die Walküre*. The orchestra’s volume was sufficiently monitored so the singers could always be heard.

The events in this production were presented according to the libretto, albeit with different cultural references and use of 21st century technology. I enjoyed experiencing it twice and will plan to return if Opera Australia revives it.

DAVID HUGHES

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## Das Rheingold with the LA Philharmonic

*Das Rheingold*. R. Bryce-Davis, J. Faselt, T. Mumford, B. Banks, R. S. Green, S. O'Neill, M. Robinson, J. Schmeckenbecher. Cond.: G. Dudamel; dir.: A. Arvelo. LA Philharmonic at Walt Disney Hall. Performance of Jan. 21, 2024.

Any suggestion that Wagner's music dramas can only be completely appreciated when heard in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus was dispelled by the enthralling performance of *Das Rheingold* at Walt Disney Hall. There was no sunken orchestra pit; rather, the LA Philharmonic occupied the entire orchestral space, which was framed by a relatively narrow stage in the back and a narrower walkway between the orchestra and the audience for the singers. From the start it was clear that the orchestra would be the center of attention, and it was, magnificently so. Under Gustavo Dudamel's leadership, the LA Phil has become one of the world's most versatile orchestras, but until recently not so much for Wagner. As of this production, however, the LA Phil becomes an orchestra to be reckoned with in all things Wagnerian. On the one hand, each player seems to have virtuosic skills, so at particularly colorful moments in the score and when themes and leitmotives need emphasis, they play with the precision, clarity, and committed energy of soloists. The result was a reading of Wagner that was flexible, surprisingly light and airy, which told the story lucidly, and reawakened one's awareness of the extraordinary inventiveness of Wagner's narrative compositional techniques. On the other hand, when required, the LA Phil, which must have comprised over a hundred instrumentalists, including six harps and four Wagner tubas, rose to some of the most thunderous climaxes I have ever heard in Wagner.

The orchestra did not, however, swamp the performance. *Das Rheingold* was still very much a music drama. Although the configuration of Disney Hall does not facilitate complex theatrical staging, it was resourcefully used. Frank Gehry, the architect of the entire building, provided the scenic background, composed simply of five large gauze screens – three of towering height in the center and two large square ones on each side. Onto these were projected alluringly colored images, suggestive more than graphic, of nat-



Wotan (Ryan Speedo Green) and Gustavo Dudamel (conductor).  
Photo: Timothy Norris/LA Philharmonic.

ural elements. The singers performed on a multi-level stage that was reminiscent of Appia and Wieland Wagner. No attempt was made to represent the action literally; the Venezuelan film director Alberto Arvelo, Rodrigo Prieto's creative lighting, and Cindy Figueroa's eclectic costumes sustained, unusually for today, a quasi-heroic environment in which symbolic meanings were suggested by the formalized gestures of the singers and by abstract shapes – the glowing blocks of the Rhinegold were especially effective. High points of the action – memorably Wotan's hailing of Valhalla, Loge's solo on the persistence of human love, and Erda's warning – were played on the walkway between the orchestra and the audience.

It was also an evening of great singing. Ryan Speedo Green continued his impressive ascent into the top tier of American bass-baritones with his first Wotan. He clearly has the capacity to master the most challenging role in the repertoire for his Fach. His voice is dark, full, and wide, but focused in a manner that augments its power and punch. It was an unusual treat to hear a Heldentenor as Loge: Simon O'Neill gave remarkable heft to the role. His tone throughout was ironic yet marked by moments of unexpected poignancy, and it was clear that his willingness gave him greater power than Wotan. The intensity of bitterness in Jochen Schmeckenbecher's Alberich fully

convinced us that the surly dwarf might have the potential ultimately to overcome all his tormentors. Barry Banks was an agile Mime, whose staccato singing caught well the deep anxieties of the character, while his scurrying around the stage suggested that he was the most venomous of individuals. But perhaps the finest of the male singers was Morris Robinson as Fasolt, whose demands of the gods were uttered with truly threatening sonority.

Musically and dramatically, one of the highlights of the performance was Tamara Mumford's Erda. She was not the wizened old woman that Erda often is, but was young, suggestive of the world at its fruitful beginning. Standing alone on the walkway, she mesmerized us with the beauty of her tone. Raehann Bryce-Davis brought sharp and vital characterization to Fricka, though she was sorely hindered by an inappropriate costume, as was Jessica Faselt as a somewhat

staid Freia. As the Rhine Maidens, Ann Toomey, Alexandria Shiner, and Taylor Raven were dressed in elaborate costumes suggesting Victorian carnival; they sang sweetly and fluidly. Peixin Chen, John Matthew Myers, and Kyle Albertson as Fafner, Froh, and Donner respectively made the most of the small roles Wagner had written for them.

Mention should also be made of the surtitles by Cori Ellison. She came up with the most colorful and imaginative insults that could even give Shakespeare a run for his money!

One can but hope this tremendous *Rheingold* is just the first production in a cycle to be completed later. Faint rumors suggest that it might be. If it is, this *Rheingold* will provide an ideal introduction to the themes, the dynamics, and the dialectic of the great music dramas to come.

SIMON WILLIAMS

## **Tristan und Isolde at Semperoper Dresden**

C. Nylund, T. A. Baumgartner, K. F. Vogt, L. Anderson, A. Glaser, M. Gantner, S. Wartig, G. Zeppenfeld. Dresden State Opera, Dresden Staatskapelle. Cond.: C. Thielemann; dir.: M. A. Marelli. Performances of Jan. 21, 25, 28, and Feb. 3, 2024.

**G**erman tenor Klaus Florian Vogt made a sensational role debut as Tristan in Dresden on January 21, 2024, in a simple and evocative production by Marco Arturo Marelli that had premiered in 1995. Vogt was joined by the radiant Isolde of Camilla Nylund and the authoritative King Marke of Georg Zeppenfeld. Maestro Christian Thielemann conducted the Dresden Staatskapelle with sensitivity and artistry. In the curtain calls, the conductor and soloists were repeatedly called back after every performance.

The staging is minimal, sparse, and abstract, harking back to Wieland Wagner's Bayreuth productions of the 1950's and 1960's. Act I takes place aboard the ship heading for Cornwall; the ocean is minimally indicated with an angulating oval, while tall columns open and close to allow the performers entry and exit. The only prop is a bench. Their fateful sharing of the love potion takes place as they drink from a large flat vessel on the bench. Act II staging is equally simple, but there is a stunning tilting and raising of the floor

during the love duet, so that Tristan and Isolde are almost lifted into space above. Their denouement brings them down to earth, where Marke and others confront them with harsh reality. Lighting throughout is effective in creating the dream world of Tristan and Isolde in the night's deep blue tint, while the day's mundane world is indicated in white light. Costumes are inspired by Japanese Samurai kimonos, especially for the men, in neutral shades of blue, purple, green and gray. Act III has steeply raked steps where the mortally wounded Tristan lies and then rises to sing his long scene of delusions and death. Isolde cradles Tristan in her arms, high up in the back of the stage to deliver her Liebestod, before sinking lower with her arms outstretched. The production does not interfere with the superb music making; in fact, it enhances our appreciation.

Vogt has had avid followers as well as detractors during his 20-year singing career of specializing in Wagnerian roles, notably Lohengrin and Walther von Stolzing. In recent years, he has taken on more

substantial Wagner roles, starting with *Tannhäuser* in 2017. Over the last year he added both Siegfrieds (in the Zurich *Ring*) to his repertoire, and now Tristan, which was eagerly anticipated. And he did not disappoint. He sang with lyricism, beauty, and power, every word and phrase articulated with clarity and emotion. There was no barking, shouting, reaching for high notes, and he remained fresh in the challenging Act III. With no discernible plot, this opera could be a slog with endless singing of night and day, death and love. Here in Dresden, time seemed to stop. Vogt developed the character of Tristan from a stiff and austere soldier to a romantic hero who chooses death to escape the conflict between his worldly duties and private emotions. He sang Tristan's torment in Act III as a joyful anticipation of release. His interpretation evolved in front of my eyes, as I attended all four performances. One of the most moving moments came towards the end of Act II in the third performance. Tristan, exposed by Melot, whispers to himself "Der öde Tag zum letztenmal (Barren day for the last time)." Vogt extended the syllable "mal" softly to indicate Tristan's utter resignation and detachment from life.

This second act was the pinnacle of the many *Tristan* performances I have experienced. Instead of dramatic waves of romantic melodies, Thielemann emphasized the intimacy and chamber-like quality of the love duet. He gradually increased the volume as the lovers became more passionate, but his conducting was never frenzied or rushed.

Nylund first took on the role of Isolde in Zurich last year. This reprisal shows her in incandescent and beautiful voice, with complete mastery of the mad scene in the first act. Nylund and Vogt have sung together often, and their trust in one another was clear as they listened to and sang in synch with each other. Their clear German diction and definitive characterization showed the two almost in a mirror image of one another. In the first act Tristan is strict and cold, while Isolde is full of fury. They converge in the second act, swept up in their romantic ardor. In the last act, Tristan is mad with fever and delusion, while Isolde appears as the figure of transcendence, almost devoid of earthly emotion. Nylund's *Liebestod* was sung with



Tristan (Klaus Florian Vogt) and Isolde (Camilla Nylund).  
Photo: ©Semperoper Dresden/Ludwig Olah.

calmness and warmth, taking us with her to a higher plane of existence.

Tanja Ariane Baumgartener was a late replacement for Christa Mayer as Brangäne. Once she became comfortable with the demands of the role, she was a perfect companion to Nylund's Isolde, both in voice and acting. Her light mezzo floated from afar during her warnings to the lovers in Act II. The veteran Martin Gantner was a powerful and sympathetic Kurwenal. Attilio Glaser, with his bright and dynamic tenor, doubled as sailor and shepherd, and Sebastian Wartig was a menacing Melot. Georg Zeppenfeld as King Marke sang with nobility and dignity and with the crystal-clear diction that is his signature.

Under Thielemann, each performance differed slightly in tempi and emphasis. The strings showed remarkable intricacy as well as depth and lushness, the woodwinds were sinuous and dramatic, and the brass were restrained but glorious. He was always respectful and supportive of the singers, sometimes lowering the volume to a mere whisper. He capped each performance with a plaintive woodwind note seemingly stretching into eternity before bringing everything down, leaving the audience entranced. Opera does not get any better than this.

AKO IMAMURA