

Exclusive Review: The Ring in San Francisco

This review is reproduced from the August 2018 issue of *Wagner Notes*, the bimonthly publication of the Wagner Society of New York, which covers international reviews, Society events, and information on Wagner worldwide, and is included with membership.

Principals: I. Theorin, D. Brenna, G. Grimsley, J. Barton, F. Struckmann, D. Cangelosi, B. Jovanovich, K. Mattila, A. Silvestrelli, R. Aceto, S. Margita, R. Miller, B. Mulligan, J. Adams, S. Tappan, R. Tatum, L. McNeese, M. Citro, S. Cambidge, N. Birkland, L. Krumm, R. Rapier. San Francisco Opera Orchestra; D. Runnicles, cond.; F. Zambello, director; L. Feldman, assoc. director; M. Yeargan, designer; C. Zuber, costumes; M. McCullough, lighting; J. Hartley, S. Katy Tucker, projections; L. Pech, dance master; D. Maier, fight director; San Francisco Opera Chorus, I. Robertson, chorus master. Performances of June 26, 27, 29, 30, July 1, 2018.



Die Walküre, Act III: Valkyries watching Sieglinde (Karita Mattila) accept Siegmund's sword from Brunnhilde (Irène Theorin).

Exuberant enthusiasm characterized both the performance and the audience reaction to the third cycle of Francesca Zambello production of the Ring at the San Francisco Opera. The Orchestra under conductor Donald Runnicles filled the venerable War Memorial Opera House with an ocean of music and the audience responded with a tidal wave of applause. During intermission several people told me that they were so enthralled by the beauty of the orchestral sound that they could only concentrate on the music. His interpretation of the score was at times so exuberant that the orchestra overwhelmed the singers. Pacing was brisk throughout, and sometimes rushed, as in Siegfried's Rhine Journey, but always compelling.

On stage an excellent ensemble of singing actors gave life to Zambello's concept of the Ring as a human/feminist drama set in the contemporary United States. This was the third outing

for the complete Zambello Ring (San Francisco Opera 2011, Washington National Opera 2016) and it remains one of the most thought-provoking and effective of all contemporary Ring productions. It is also one of the most accessible, as Zambello turns mythic characters into modern people with modern problems whose story unfolds through grand music.

For example, Wotan (Greer Grimsley) was a CEO/Master of the Universe but he could not avoid being ensnared by the vocal virtuosity of his slippery lawyer Loge (Stefan Margita), nor could he resist the large and persuasive voices of his wife Fricka (Jamie Barton), or lover Erda (Ronnita Miller).

The familiar story achieved new shades of meaning through skillful acting and staging. This was especially true of the two giants: except for their great height and metal hands, they not only looked human, but displayed painfully human emotions. In *Das Rheingold*, when Fasolt (Andrea Silvestrelli) sang about love, he was wooing Freia (Julie Adams), and she reciprocated by later showing her reluctance to leave him to go back to the loveless family of gods. In *Götterdämmerung*, Silvestrelli was a horny Hagen who clumsily pawed his half-sister Guttrune. Was Hagen just an evil man hungry for sex, or was he actually looking for love and a way to escape his father Alberich's baleful influence? In *Das Rheingold*, while Fasolt sang of love, Fafner (Raymond Aceto) looked at him with the predatory gaze of a poisonous snake preparing to strike. Fafner soon found an excuse for murder in the dispute over the treasure. In *Siegfried*, he defeated Fafner appeared in his giant/human form to sing a tender death scene that sounded like an acknowledgment that he had wasted both life and treasure and was now passing his tainted legacy on to Siegfried. Aceto faced an additional vocal and acting challenge when he took on Hunding in *Die Walküre*, a reprehensible character who exemplified the need for the #MeToo movement.

The Ring is huge but it is made up of many telling details that great artists may utilize, with small words leading to serious consequences. A few of the highlights: In the first scene of *Das Rheingold* in order to steal the gold, Alberich (Falk Struckmann) renounces love with a curse: "So verfluch ich die Liebe!" In this phrase the word Liebe consists of only two syllables sung to two musical notes but Struckmann managed to endow it with a universe of meaning, for indeed love, or the lack thereof, was the primary motivation for all that followed.

In *Die Walküre*, the father-son relationship between Wotan and Siegmund could be summed up in two words and some heavy breathing. In Act I Siegmund (Brandon Jovanovich) sang "Wälse, Wälse" as a powerful invocation to an absent father who quickly responded with a

sword and a lover leading to a glorious duet with Sieglinde (Karita Mattila). In Act II, Wotan (Greer Grimsley) sank into deep despair after he was forced to agree not to protect his son. He punctuated his anguished cry of “das Ende, das Ende!” with the heavy breathing of a dying man. This breath of death was later heard from Siegmund as he died in the arms of his father Wotan.

At the end of Act II of *Siegfried*, Siegfried (Daniel Brenna) told the Forest Bird, “ich bin so allein” and sang this simple phrase with such depth of feeling that it illuminated another key concept: loneliness and separation. Siegfried was destined to die with only the memory of Brünnhilde as a farewell song.

By the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde (Irène Theorin) was also alone. She had lost everything, including her parents, sisters, and two husbands. She was left with only the magic of her glorious voice to redeem the world through the healing power of music. As the final notes faded, a young girl in a white dress came to the front of the stage and planted a tree, a sign of hope for a new beginning.

Ellen Scaruffi

Ellen Scaruffi, Ph.D., a Society member, is a veteran of several Zambello Ring cycles.



Die Walküre, Act I: Sieglinde (Karita Mattila) embracing Siegmund (Brandon Jovanovich).



Siegfried, Act III: Wanderer (Greer Grimsley) challenged by Siegfried (Daniel Brenna).

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