

Götterdämmerung

Colin Mackerras

Site: Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía Valencia

Musical director: Zubin Mehta

Production: La Fura dels Baus, Carlus Padrissa

Siegfried: Lance Ryan

Brünnhilde: Jennifer Wilson

Hagen: Matti Salminen

Gunther: Ralf Lukas

Gutrune: Elisabete Matos

Waltraute: Catherine Wyn-Rogers

Alberich: Franz-Josef Kapellmann

Orchestra: Orquestra de la Comunitat
Valenciana

Chorus: Cor de la Generalitat Valenciana

Valencia is on the Mediterranean coast of southern Spain and hosts a Mediterranean Festival, of which this performance was a part. The Municipal government has recently taken the arts very seriously, a policy that has yielded several major buildings of significance for the arts, the most important being the Queen Sophia Palace of the Arts. It is a spectacular building with some similarities to the Sydney Opera House in its aquatic setting,

its two “wings”, its white colour and its modern and distinctive architecture.

The inside of the opera house is wonderful. It is very light in colour and atmosphere. It is large but not overpowering. The acoustics are excellent. One of the features that attracted me especially was the words of the opera behind each seat, so that the person behind that could read them, the same as the famous “Met titles” of New York’s Metropolitan Opera House. For the titles in Valencia, one could choose a range of languages, including Catalan, German, English and Japanese, and of course Spanish. The programme had the synopsis in English, but was otherwise in Spanish and Catalan. Of course it is perfectly natural to use the local language(s) in such cases.

Götterdämmerung is the last and, for me, the greatest of the operas of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. It is the one that provides the dénouement of the whole gigantic drama. Musically it is the most intricate in texture, richest in orchestration and variety and the one that in general shows the *Ring*’s leitmotifs at their most skilful and inspired. Peter Bassett,

our tour leader, pointed out that the Prologue and the three acts in some ways mirror the whole *Ring des Niebelungen* itself, for Wagner describes *Das Rheingold* as the prologue of his masterwork with three large operas to follow, and *Götterdämmerung* has a prologue and three acts. One of the most striking features of *Götterdämmerung* is the rather different textures of the three acts. In particular, Act II is very dark and even violent in its music in a way that does not apply elsewhere. The opening scene of Act II, with Hagen and his father Alberich discussing their plans to get hold of the ring and with it total power is among the darkest music I know, with low brass instruments dominating and occasional high wind to contrast flashes of light. And to me it was a stroke of genius to include two dawn scenes, one in the prologue, with its exciting and bright climactic, even joyful, music dominated by the most important hero and heroine of *The Ring*, and the one at the beginning of Act II, with its menacing and gloomy atmosphere featuring the two main villains.

In musical terms the performance ranged from very good to stunning. Zubin Mehta has a great deal of experience and showed wonderful energy in his conducting, especially in Acts II and III, and the orchestra was surprisingly good under his direction. Siegfried's Funeral March was played with extraordinary power, even for music that is noted for its strong impact. The vassals in Act II made a splendidly strong and resilient chorus. They were well together and got the semi-humorous but also slightly sinister atmosphere very competently.

Among the main singers, the best one was the Finnish bass Matti Salminen as Hagen. Born in 1945, he has been around a long time now, and his top notes may not be quite as reliable as they once were. But he still deserves his nickname of "Mighty Matti". He has a wonderful voice and commanding presence, a factor to which his tallness contributes well. Though I wasn't always so impressed with the costumes he wore, there can be no doubt about his ability to portray the menacing and evil figure that is Hagen. He sang Hagen's Watch

in Act I and Hagen's Call to the Vassals in Act II splendidly.

Most of the other singers were unfamiliar to me. However, in general they were really excellent. I begin with the Brünnhilde of the American soprano Jennifer Wilson. There are a couple of things one can criticize: she is overweight and lacking in beauty. Her voice is hardly the beautiful and radiant instrument of people like Birgit Nilssen, let alone Flagstad. But she was always in command of the music. Her singing displayed light and shade. She was a reasonably good actor. Her singing was reliable, sensitive and powerful. When Brünnhilde flies into a rage in Act II, she maintained the power without sounding raucous. She did the final Immolation scene just splendidly and one got from her rendition a real sense of the fulfilment that is so crucial to the part. A final note: her high C at the end of the Love Duet in the Prologue was not only immensely powerful but extended and even quite nice to listen to.

The Canadian tenor Lance Ryan was our Siegfried. I would say that he looked the part,

other than the rather strange costumes he wore in some places. He had a strong and humane voice and never threatened to give out in this extremely demanding role. He sang Siegfried's Narrative in Act III very well indeed. He hanged on for many seconds to the high C just after the Rhinemaidens disappear towards the beginning of Act III, and the note was powerful and sounded good. This is in contrast to most tenors who merely slide onto it, to slide off again immediately.

The less important parts like Gunther, Gutrune, the Rhinemaidens, the Norns and Alberich were all quite creditable, although not marvellous. I saw Ralf Lukas in this role in Bayreuth and his performance was good both in Valencia and Bayreuth. He has quite a nice voice, but he didn't really portray the weak character of Gunther particularly well, either vocally or in his acting. Gutrune wore red costumes and behaved like a modern girl seeking an independent life, which I believe was rather out of character for this very touching part. The Alberich looked suitably demonic and ugly, but after all he does not have much to do in *Götterdämmerung*.

For me the least satisfactory aspect of the performance was the sets, the costumes and those aspects we associate with production. They were just too trendy and twenty-first century for me. During most of the opera there was more or less continuous movement and images on and behind the stage, so much that it became very distracting. In contrast to some performances I have seen at Bayreuth (such as Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Parsifal* and Katarina Wagner's *Meistersinger*), which were more or less totally contrary to Wagner's intentions, there were some very good moments in this *Götterdämmerung*. The realistic impression of fire in several places, the human portrayal of ravens, who floated above the stage in the final scene, and the large dolphins and other marine life that swam around the Rhine in the first scene of Act III were all reasonably effective. I quite liked the portrayal of the Norns in the Prologue, suspended above the stage and looking like the seers they are meant to be. In Waltraute's Narrative, we saw an image of a Rhinemaiden at the point where Waltraute begs Brünnhilde to give up the ring. It was unnecessary, but it

was quite attractive and in tune with the text. Grane was represented by a kind of machine designed to look vaguely like a horse and I thought that worked pretty well. The most effective part was Siegfried's Funeral March when Siegfried's body was carried right out into the audience. I also concede that in the first half of the Immolation Scene, the stage was rather bare. Even when she orders logs to be piled up, nobody on stage took any notice.

But I'm afraid the sets and costumes showed far more weaknesses than strengths. When I asked members of our group what was the worst feature of the production, most of them answered unhesitatingly the cluttered, unnecessary and distracting images that, apart from the first half of the Immolation Scene, were always a dominant presence. I give just a few examples of what I regard as weaknesses.

In Act I, when Siegfried arrives at the Hall of the Gibichungen, he changes into a modern suit and tie, and, after Hagen gives him the drink that makes him forget Brünnhilde, proceeds to lie on Gutrune, as if making love to her. In one place, where Siegfried

contradicts Brünnhilde's account of what had happened on the rock, he was actually hung upside down, which must have been extremely uncomfortable and made it difficult for him to sing. The sacrifices to the gods, such as the goat offered to Donner, had also featured real people hung upside down like dead animals, and it is possible that the symbolism was Siegfried as a sacrificial lamb to Brünnhilde. If that was the case it seemed pretty tasteless to me.

The first scene of Act II was quite light, the sets showed a modern city that seemed to represent the military industrial complex, while in places Hagen's and other costumes featured large Euro and Yen signs , suggesting this represented an attack on modern capitalism. Alberich was suspended above the stage in a way that struck me as rather meaningless. One could justify the representation of the military industrial complex on the grounds that Wagner intended the idea of the *Ring* cycle as an attack on capitalism. However, my counterargument is that he had begun to withdraw from such an absolute position by the time he wrote

Götterdämmerung and that the sets in this scene completely miss the symbolism of the dark music. I found the big city that dominates the scene both unnecessary and a distraction.

In summary, the performance of this magnificent opera, which has as good a claim as any to the title of the greatest opera ever written, was very mixed. It was in general excellent musically. But its production was basically flawed, with some brilliant moments but too many unnecessary distractions for real effect. A bit less tasteless expenditure on unnecessary distractions and a bit more attention to Wagner's intentions would have improved it greatly.