

Coming to Rest

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...and in the end, it all made sense. For the most part. The first two instalments of Stefan Herheim's new *Ring* cycle for the Deutsche Oper – *Das Rheingold*, which opened this past June, and *Die Walküre* which opened a year ago – were ingenious pieces of theatrical invention, delightful as standalone works of drama, yet brimming with images and ideas that seemed to pull its central concept in any number of directions at once; while watching the ideas accumulate during those first two evenings, one was often left wondering where Mr Herheim was going to go with them and how he might resolve them all within the framework of the operatic text he was duty-bound to follow. Although we still have to wait until next month for the belated première of *Siegfried*, Mr Herheim's *Götterdämmerung* – which opened the new season at the Deutsche Oper – brought his cycle to an immensely satisfying conclusion.

The final part of Mr Herheim's *Ring* confirmed what the first parts had suggested: his production was not merely a reimagining of the story so much as an attempt at a comprehensive critical overview of everything that Wagner's cycle has meant to different audiences over the century and a half since its first performances. Although directed with a light touch and filled with moments that seemed casual or irreverent, it remained keenly aware of the *Ring*'s complex legacy and the impossible expectations of its audience. It was, in short, about the baggage that this ever-popular and ever-controversial work has accumulated over the years – represented quite literally in its sets constructed of suitcases – and, by extension, the myriad dangers that any director will face in attempting to impose their own vision upon it. It is a staging which might have had Wieland Wagner, Patrice Chéreau or Götz Friedrich nodding in sympathy.

The first two parts of the cycle were concerned with the notion of the operatic text as an inviolable object, and the character of Wotan was presented as a director whose will to creative power is continually frustrated by the deterministic force of the score. The bound volumes containing music and text, which appeared so prominently in *Rheingold* and



Herheim, *Götterdämmerung* © 2021 by Bernd Uhlig

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Deutsche Oper Berlin. Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*. Stefan Herheim, director. Clay Hilley (Siegfried). Thomas Lehman (Gunther). Jürgen Linn (Alberich). Gidon Saks (Hagen). Nina Stemme (Brünnhilde). Aile Asszonyi (Gutrune, Third Norn). Okka von der Damerau (Waltraute). Anna Lapkovskaja (First Norn, Flosshilde). Karis Tucker (Second Norn, Wellgunde). Meechot Marrero (Woglinde). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor

Walküre, were replaced in *Götterdämmerung* by an equally intransigent force: the audience. The scenes in Gibich's hall were set in an onstage replica of the foyer of the Deutsche Oper – complete with giant cloud sculpture – and many of the characters seemed not only aware that there was an audience sitting out there in the darkness, but at certain points revealed themselves to be terrified of their silent judgement.



Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor. Stefan Herheim, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin. October 2021. © 2021 by Bernd Uhlig.

The stroke of genius in Mr Herheim's staging was in realising that, after the defeat and retirement of Wotan in the third act of *Siegfried*, it is Hagen who essentially takes over in the role of director: as Wotan does in *Walküre*, Hagen lays out the guidelines and positions the characters within a scene, then watches and hopes that the action will unfold according to his design. Yet by passing the directorial duties to Hagen, Mr Herheim was not transferring the central role from one character to another so much as stripping away the godly veneer from the figure of the director, revealing him to be both human and fallible. It is Hagen's impatience and his lust for power – the unattainable power over a canonical text to which some directors aspire – that proves to be the ultimate

cause of his madness and downfall; his final line before storming out was delivered as an admonition not to the Rhinemaidens nor even the audience, but to anyone rash enough to believe that they can scale the heights of Wagner's masterpiece with their own ideas intact.

The subtle irony in the staging is that its real director was able to achieve what the surrogate onstage director could not: if Wotan and Hagen were ultimately overwhelmed by the task of staging the *Ring*, Mr Herheim suffered no such crises; his vision of the story was focussed and confident, and the big ideas that underpinned the cycle remained subordinate to the pleasures of a well-told story. If anything, *Götterdämmerung* was less busy than its predecessors. The silent chorus of onlookers, who had played such a crucial role in the earlier operas, were absent from much of the first act, allowing the central characters to emerge in sharply rendered detail. If the evening was less reliant on stage magic and sleights of hand, Mr Herheim was still able to summon images of appropriate grandeur as well as seemingly simple ideas that challenged conventional readings of the text: the council-of-the-gods tableau elevated Waltraute's visit to Brünnhilde from pure character drama into a visual high-point of the first act, and his treatment of the Rhinemaiden scene made remarkable sense of their sudden change in tone when Siegfried summons them back.

Musically the evening was generally strong although not without its peculiarities. Perhaps the main point of contention was Hagen. As the effective centre of Mr Herheim's staging – more so even than Brünnhilde – Gidon Saks delivered a physical performance of unquestioned brilliance, that moved in a finely graded arc from excitable in the first act, to manic in the second, to completely unhinged in the third. Vocally, however, he seemed an odd fit for the part. Although his summoning of the vassals in the second act was spirited, there were far more moments when he seemed too light of tone or too wayward in his phrasing. It is difficult to say how much his line-readings were the result of Mr Herheim's intervention, but it often seemed that his dedication to realising the physical demands of the role came at the expense of carefully considered vocal line.

As in *Walküre*, Nina Stemme delivered a selfless Brünnhilde, confident enough to cede the stage to Siegfried or Waltraute, yet powerful and graceful enough to command the rapt attention of the audience in crucial scenes. It was a performance that gathered steadily in strength as the evening progressed; in the Prologue she sounded almost reticent – and, in a few passages, at odds with the orchestra – and in the Waltraute scene one occasionally became aware of the role’s taxing technical demands. By the second act, however, she was on thrilling form, wresting control of the stage from Hagen in the wedding scene confrontation; and her gripping performance of the final scene came remarkably close to flawless.



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As Siegfried, Clay Hilley gave the impression of being completely untroubled by the role’s demands. Although he proved himself capable of full-bodied room-filling notes, his performance was notable for its restraint, and his refusal to claim the full attention of the audience with his every utterance resulted in a nicely balanced first act. As with Ms Stemme, Mr Hilley’s performance seemed to grow more powerful as the evening progressed, and by the time of his excellent scene with the Rhinemaidens, one was sorry that his time on stage was drawing to an end.

The appearance of Waltraute, although brief, is a crucial turning point in the drama – it is the moment at which the end becomes inevitable – and Okka von der Damerau delivered a magnificent performance, infusing the scene with majesty and dread. Other smaller roles were also well cast: while the staging presented Gunther as meekly subservient to Hagen, Thomas Lehman had enough authority to convey the complexity of his shame and grief in the second and third acts; and Aile Asszonyi’s Gutrune, although slightly cold at first, warmed up with the arrival of Siegfried and was at her most affecting in the third act waiting anxiously for the hunting party’s return. Jürgen Linn delivered Alberich’s messages to Hagen with clarity and energy, and the trio of Rhinemaidens – two of whom doubled as Norns – were consistently charming.



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The ability of Sir Donald Runnicles to maintain evenly-paced drama while keeping the work’s mythic grandeur at the fore was apparent throughout the evening. There were a few surprises: the chorus of the vassals seemed unusually brisk, although the slight loss of vocal clarity was more than offset by a surplus of enthusiasm; and the extreme shifts in tempo between Alberich’s rapid-fire recaps and Hagen’s somnolent replies at the beginning of the second act gave the scene a pleasingly off-kiltre energy. Much of the evening, however, proceeded without drawing undue attention to itself, supporting and accentuating the action without overwhelming it.

The *Ring* is described as a ‘cycle’ in part because its four segments form a single iteration

of a story that is destined to repeat itself indefinitely; it is a story that begins from nothing and, in the end, returns to the same nothingness from which it emerged. Between those two bookends of nothing there is everything, a universe of ideas and emotions, lofty mythologies and messy human dramas; in the opening scene of Mr Herheim's *Rheingold*, a simple E-flat summoned that universe into being causing Wotan's troupe of wanderers to become enveloped in the magic of the story. In the final moments of *Götterdämmerung*, Mr Herheim left us with an image so unexpectedly perfect that we wonder how we didn't see it coming. It was (without wishing to give too much away) an image that brought the staging to rest in a definitive and satisfying manner while reminding us that every end contains the promise of a new beginning.