

Time Out of Mind

JESSE SIMON

Whatever you were expecting, this probably wasn't it. Dmitri Tcherniakov's productions for the Staatsoper Berlin over the past decade have made a point of pushing operatic texts outside their comfort zones in ways that open up new avenues of meaning while retaining the emotional essence of the original; yet if his forays into the Russian repertoire – Rimsky-Korsakov's *Die Zarenbraut* and the unforgettable 'operaholics anonymous' version of Prokofiev's *Die Verlobung im Kloster* – were sustained feats of bewilderment and delight, it is Wagner that has pushed him to create his darkest, most revelatory stagings. His magnificent *Parsifal* cut straight to the uncomfortable misogyny that makes the work so problematic, and even his somewhat less-involving *Tristan und Isolde* approached the work from such an unexpected angle that it was impossible not to emerge with an enriched understanding.

It was thankfully only a matter of time before Mr Tcherniakov and the Staatsoper joined forces for the *Ring*. On the strength of the *Vorabend*, the production – which is (unusually) being premiered as a complete cycle rather than being rolled out over one or two seasons – looks set to be baffling and enlightening in equal measure. As in his previous Wagner productions, Mr Tcherniakov's *Rheingold* – which opened the Staatsoper Unter den Linden's 2022/23 season – denied us virtually all the familiar pleasures of the opera while giving us many things we didn't know we wanted. Between the staging, an unusually strong ensemble cast and the casually monumental conducting of Christian Thielemann (who took over from Daniel Barenboim fairly late in the process), the evening was a constant buzz of invention.

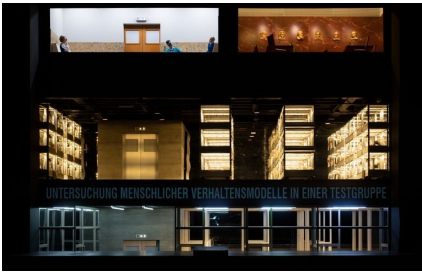
It was always safe to assume that Mr Tcherniakov's *Rheingold* wasn't going to involve gods, giants or dwarves in any conventional sense, but there cannot have been many of us who had 'modernist Eastern European research institute from the 1970s' on our Ring bingo-cards. One of Mr Tcherniakov's strengths is his ability to conjure spaces that seem uncannily real and wholly fictional; his feel for surfaces, materials and lighting make one wonder if he isn't secretly an architect drawn to theatre by the lack of epic narrative in

Tcherniakov, Das Rheingold
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**Berlin, domingo,
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Unter den Linden. Wagner: Das Rheingold. Dmitri Tcherniakov, director. Michael Volle (Wotan), Lauri Vasar (Donner), Siyabonga Maqungo (Froh), Rolando Villazón (Loge), Claudia Mahnke (Fricka), Vida Miknevičiūtė (Freia), Anna Kissjudit (Erda), Johannes Martin Kränzle (Alberich), Stephan Rügamer (Mime), Mika Kares (Fasolt), Peter Rose (Fafner), Evelin Novak (Woglinde), Natalia Skrycka (Wellgunde), and Anna Lapkovskaja (Flosshilde). Staatskapelle Berlin. Christian Thielemann, conductor



Wagner: Das Rheingold. Christian

Thielemann, conductor. Dmitri

Tcherniakov, director. Berlin, Staatsoper

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most modern buildings. For his research institute – which, one suspects, will provide the self-contained world for the remainder of the cycle – he offered an endless parade of meeting rooms, lecture theatres, waiting areas and scientific research facilities, some done up in warm light-wood panelling, others in red marble or cool greys, but all with the same spotless, slightly antiseptic quality that anchored them in a world not quite our own.

Despite the meticulous realism of the sets – and the reassuring but ultimately misleading presence of a floorplan projected onto the curtain before the opera began – there were early hints that life in the hermetic interior of the institute was not bound by the normal rules of space and time. The different

rooms scrolled by from right to left – never the other direction, although there were some digressions up and down – but they recurred inconsistently; after a while it became apparent that they had been laid out along a temporal rather than geographic axis. The lack of a firm spatial anchor plus the recurrence of key background events – could the three ladies smoking and chatting in the waiting area near the lift be the Norns? – conspired to destabilise the setting and infuse the staging with a near continuous sense of disorientation.

It is difficult to discuss the story – such as it is – without giving away some of the staging’s most delightful surprises. Broadly speaking, Wotan, the director of an institute known as E.S.C.H.E. – an acronym as yet unexplained, but with clear echoes of a certain tree in Norse mythology – is attempting to renege on his deal with the two gangsters responsible for the building’s construction; to complicate matters, Alberich – the subject of a sensory deprivation experiment that goes very wrong when he is pushed over the edge by the taunting of three lab assistants – has escaped from his scientific confinement and set up his own autonomous institute in the basement. As is often the case in Mr Tcherniakov’s stagings, the libretto and stage action exist in parallel but at a slight remove from one another; yet Mr Tcherniakov is such a skilled storyteller that it is easy to get caught up in the narrative world he creates, even when it is related only obliquely to Wagner’s. Beneath the visual and narrative liberties there is a rigorous logic that binds it all together, and the great strength of the staging is that it reveals just enough of that logic to keep us guessing.

The ingenuity of the action was matched by a cast of strong voices, of which Michael Volle’s Wotan was an obvious high-point: he was very obviously the man (or god) in charge, although the lofty serenity of his introductory scene and the assurance in his early dealings with Fricka and the giants were soon clouded by irritation, fear and doubt. If Mr Volle was often the most physically commanding figure on stage, he was able to illustrate the subtle erosion of Wotan’s confidence through voice alone. Mika Kares provided the evening with an engaging Fasolt, slightly more lumpen than the character is often played – it was the Fafner of Peter Rose who appeared the more cunning of the pair – but with an elegant phrasing



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Thielemann, conductor. Dmitri

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that often bordered on nobility.

den Linden.

Claudia Mahnke had a strong opening scene as Fricka, making a subtle pivot from placation to reprimand, but revealing the true depths of her bitterness only in brief flashes; although she had few other scenes of comparable weight, her skilful sparring with Wotan held great promise for the second act of *Die Walküre*. Freia was given an unusually compelling performance from Vida Miknevičiūtė who stepped in at the last moment (she is also scheduled to sing Sieglinde); the palpable terror in her second appearances made it all too clear what would happen if she was allowed to fall into the hands of the giants. And Anna Kissjudit was a captivating Erda, whose haunting admonitions cut through the pettiness of the negotiations and offered a clear glimpse of the larger catastrophes to come.



Wagner: Das Rheingold. Christian Thielemann, conductor. Dmitri Tcherniakov, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2022. © 2022 by Monika Rittershaus / Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

Rolando Villazón was the evening's most contentious casting choice, and his Loge was greeted with scattered disapproval from a handful of audience members; yet he offered a bold, nervy, occasionally manic performance rooted equally in vocal inflection and emphatic physical expression. A few wayward moments notwithstanding, Mr Villazón came closer than many to capturing the mercurial essence of the unpredictable fire-spirit. Nor was he alone in giving a performance that placed a high premium on nuanced line-readings: Johannes Martin Kränzle, although often more conventionally lyrical, brought a similarly high level of vocal expression to Alberich; while his delivery remained thoroughly idiomatic, his lines had a rough syllabic vigour that provided an elegant illustration of the character's delusional megalomania. When Mr Villazón, Mr Kränzle and the understated but similarly expressive Mime of Stephan Rügamer came together in the third scene, it was something close to a master-class in vocal acting.

Christian Thielemann provided the evening with the sturdiest of musical foundations, never indulging itself in whims of tempo or overstatement but bringing the magical details of Wagner's score almost effortlessly to life. He was emphatic in all the right places – the entry of the giants or the journeys to and from Nibelheim – but the even the most obvious moments were always framed in the context of the larger drama. Many of the scenes were taken at a comparably broad pace, but rather than slowing the action down, the stately tempi afforded the singers ample space to construct performances that brought maximum clarity to the dramatic complexities of the libretto. It is rare to hear a performance of *Rheingold* in which the narrative flow remains so consistent and unforced over the course of its two-and-a-half uninterrupted hours.

Whatever else the evening may have been, it was not *Das Rheingold* for beginners. Yet if Mr Tcherniakov's distant riffs on themes provided by Wagner presupposed a high degree of familiarity with the story and mythology of the Ring, the staging cohered remarkably well as a parallel work of standalone drama; and much like Wotan after his brief, cryptic encounter with Erda, it left us wanting to know more. For this reason we can be thankful

that the Staatsoper made the decision to premiere the work as a complete cycle. Over the next several days it will be fascinating to discover how Mr Tcherniakov pursues his vision; whatever happens, it probably won't be anything close to what we might expect.

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