

## *A Family Madness*

JESSE SIMON

The second evening of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden's new *Ring* cycle – or the first evening proper, to follow Wagner's own numbering – cemented director Dmitri Tcherniakov's pre-eminence as the master of expectation-defying left turns. After establishing the mythological world of the E.S.C.H.E. research institute in *Das Rheingold*, Mr Tcherniakov used *Die Walküre* to reposition himself, adding a few new elements and expanding the rich complexity of his vision while adhering to his own secret logic with absolute rigour. As in the previous evening, not everything that happened on stage had its own strict analogue in Wagner's text – and vice versa – but with electric performances from Vida Miknevičiūtė and Michael Volle, plus a steady stream of subtle magnificence from Christian Thielemann and the Staatskapelle, the guessing-game of the staging was complemented and often elevated by musical performances of the highest calibre.

For *Die Walküre*, Mr Tcherniakov did not offer the same tour de force of visual brilliance that had been such a prominent feature of *Das Rheingold* ... nor did he need to. If *Rheingold* is a purely mythological spectacular, *Walküre* marks the beginning of the cycle's shift in the direction of human drama, and in place of continuous set changes, Mr Tcherniakov devoted his energies to extended scenes examining the passions and madneses that drive the characters. But while the action was still nominally set within the same narrative universe as the previous evening – Hunding's dwelling was an artificial house observed through a large one-way mirror in Wotan's office, and parts of acts two and three revisited locations from *Rheingold* – the scenes were rarely straightforward in their approach.

It was not simply that the staging dispensed with such crucial elements as the magic fire or the fight between Hunding and Siegmund – at this point it would have been far more surprising if Wotan carried a spear and Brünnhilde had shown up in a winged helmet – but even within the internal logic of Mr Tcherniakov's world, nearly every new element seemed to come from left field. If you'd asked a hundred members of the audience during

Tcherniakov, Die Walküre  
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Unter den Linden. Wagner: Die Walküre.  
Dmitri Tcherniakov, director. Robert  
Watson (Siegmond), Vida Miknevičiūtė  
(Sieglinde), Mika Kares (Hunding),  
Michael Volle (Wotan), Anja Kampe  
(Brünnhilde), Claudia Mahnke (Fricka),  
Clara Nadeshdin (Gerhilde), Christiane  
Kohl (Helmwige), Michal Doron  
(Waltraute), Alexandra Ionis (Schwertleite),  
Anna Samuil (Ortlinde), Natalia Skrycka  
(Siegrune), Anna Lapkovskaja  
(Gringerde), and Karis Tucker  
(Rossweisse). Staatskapelle Berlin.  
Christian Thielemann, conductor



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

the second interval what the Valkyries were going to look like, probably not one of them would have answered ‘trainee police officers’ (if that is indeed what they were supposed to be). Yet more often than not, it was the upending of expectation that gave the staging much of its energy.

Even the action that did appear on stage tended to raise more questions than it answered. A news-report during the prelude informed us that Siegmund had escaped in transit to or from an asylum, and when he arrives at Hunding’s house – which is an observation room in the institute – and tells his tale to Sieglinde, the staging implies we are listening not to a story of survival but the ravings of a madman. Yet Siegmund’s arrival seems to awaken a dormant madness in Sieglinde and the two attempt to flee. The implication that madness is hereditary makes one wonder if it also exists in Wotan and if it will appear in Brünnhilde and Siegfried. But did Wotan accidentally bring madness into the world with the failed experiment on Alberich? And if so, are his experiments with Siegmund and Sieglinde an attempt to find a cure for the malady he unwittingly unleashed? Or is he merely a sinister behavioural psychologist conducting his research on human guinea-pigs? These are the sorts of questions that seemed essential at the end of the first two instalments of the Ring, but may well be rendered irrelevant by the end of *Siegfried*.

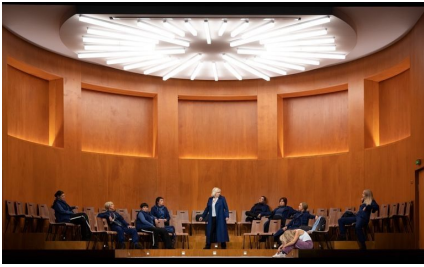
If it sounds as though the chief pleasure in this production is that of untangling a logic puzzle, it should be said that the puzzle would not be so compelling were Mr Tcherniakov not so skilled at creating highly distilled dramatic scenes, full of suggestion, ambiguity and mood. In this task he was assisted by a cast of singers for whom acting is inseparable from vocal technique. If Michael Volle had been an exceptionally strong member of the *Rheingold* ensemble, his *Walküre* Wotan was in a class by itself. His usual combination of considered phrasing, commanding tone and engaging presence allowed him to make easy work of his second act scene with Brünnhilde: the nearly twenty minutes of background exposition that dominates the scene (and can weigh down even the best production) have rarely sounded so essential.

It was not merely the slow and ominous opening of Mr Volle’s second act narration, nor even his impassioned longing for ‘das Ende’ that made the scene so compelling, but rather the way in which dramatic peaks and interstitial explanations were woven into a perfectly paced whole; and as great as the scene had been, it was only Mr Volle’s second best appearance of the evening. From the moment he arrived on stage in the third act, it became apparent he had saved the best for last: the initial confrontation with Brünnhilde was saturated with the intensity of his rage, but by the end of the act the anger had softened enough to allow for a farewell of disarming sensitivity.



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

If no performance could match Mr Volle in intensity, Vida Miknevičiūtė's Sieglinde came remarkably close. Her voice – strident but never shrill and delivered to the auditorium with a force that seemed almost effortless – was impressive, but her performance was elevated most consistently by the breadth of her dynamic and emotional range. Between the rapt narration of the stranger's arrival at her wedding, the hushed description of seeing her reflection in the stream and her ecstatic naming of Siegmund – perhaps the most thrilling moment of the first act, supported by an equally exultant orchestra – she had little trouble establishing herself as the dominant force of the first act. If the madness in her initial second act appearance seemed marginally less focussed, her fearful anticipation of the battle between Siegmund and Hunding and her manic vacillation between the desire for death and life in the third act provided the evening with its most emotionally immediate moments.



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

Anja Kampe's Brünnhilde had a spirited opening scene in the second act, and an excellent solo interlude that conveyed the extent to which doubt and confusion had entered into her previously untroubled life; but, like Mr Volle, she had clearly saved her finest singing for the third act, and her assured reason in the face of Wotan's volatile anger set up the dynamic for a compelling confrontation. Mika Kares followed his excellent Fasolt from the previous evening with an elegantly menacing Hunding, and Claudia Mahnke's Fricka – more direct and less forgiving than the evening before – was strong enough to provide Wotan with a formidable opponent. Only Robert Watson's Siegmund seemed to struggle: his phrasing was full of subtle turns, especially in the quietest moments – the scene with Sieglinde before Hunding's arrival

was nicely crafted – but his nuanced delivery was too often overshadowed by the power of those around him.

As in *Rheingold*, Christian Thielemann drew little attention to his interpretive decisions but ensured that each scene was never less than perfectly shaped. The moderate, singer-friendly tempi adopted throughout the evening did nothing to diminish the immensity of the dramatic peaks – the joyful union of Siegmund and Sieglinde, the final ten minutes of the second act and the entirety of the Valkyrie scene generated a fearsome excitement – while his unindulgent realisation of orchestral detail yielded captivating results in Brünnhilde's appearance to Siegmund and the melancholy calm of Wotan's farewell. As far as Mr Tcherniakov was willing to take *Die Walküre* beyond the scope of Wagner's intention, Mr Thielemann kept the evening firmly grounded in the familiar emotional landscape of the score.