

# The New Criterion

Dispatch October 10, 2016 02:40 pm

## A new Ring is born!

by Paul du Quenoy



*Eric Owens as Wotan in Das Rheingold. Photo: Stefany Phillips*

“Forget calm,” announces the marquee outside Chicago’s Civic Opera House, “this is opera.” With his exciting new production of *Das Rheingold*, the British director David Pountney kicks off Lyric Opera of Chicago’s sixty-second season with the first installment of an ambitious new *Ring des Nibelungen*, Richard Wagner’s four-evening masterpiece recounting the creation and destruction of the world. This is the first time Lyric has ever opened its season with a Wagner opera, and Chicago’s new *Ring*, to be delivered in complete cycles in 2020, keeps the company in pace with America’s other leading houses in New York, San Francisco, Washington, and Houston, all of which have introduced elaborate new productions of Wagner’s tetralogy in the past decade (San Francisco and Washington, it should be noted, share a now completed production by Francesca Zambello; Chicago’s new production is shared with Madrid’s Teatro Real).

In an age when it is de rigueur for directors to impose some sort of tendentious interpretive “concept” on opera productions, to say nothing of Wagner, audiences will find welcome relief in the Windy City. Pountney, who leads the Welsh National Opera as chief executive and artistic

director, astutely avoids politicizing the *Ring*. Those who embrace his approach will dodge *soi-disant* ironic commentary on the corrupting pursuit of power, duck warnings of imminent environmental catastrophe, escape bludgeoning feminist critiques of male-dominated society, and go to sleep at night untroubled by somebody else's annoying quest to impute contemporary relevance to a work that is fundamentally about humanity at its most profound. At the same time, Pountney's production is lively and stimulating enough to keep clear of the witless caricature that so many lamented in Robert Lepage's disappointing Metropolitan Opera production, scheduled to return in 2018–2019. It is all the more remarkable that Pountney accomplished this feat without resorting to hi-tech special effects of the type that mercilessly clutter the action and sideline so much of Wagner's music in other productions. Having seen Mariusz Treliński's muddled and over-engineered new *Tristan und Isolde* at the Met's opening night just five days before the Chicago premiere, the ascendant simplicity had a palpably reassuring effect.

Pountney's alternative to an obnoxious interpretative approach is an appealingly narrative one. The story of *Rheingold*, which sets off the tetralogy with the theft of the Rhine Maidens' magic treasure by a base being who forswears love, unfolds in the guise of a late industrial era stage drama. Stagehands thus facilitate the action from wooden towers bracketing the performance space beneath a false proscenium arch. At opportune moments they arrive to add or remove sets and props, brighten or darken the stage with old fashioned klieg lights, or provide elements of the action. The giants who built Valhalla, for example, are huge puppets with limbs that can be manipulated to menace and fight. We are clearly watching a performance of *Rheingold* being staged parallel to the action. But the "play within a play" concept is far from intrusive in the way that Mary Zimmerman's clumsy approach to Bellini's *La Sonnambula* obscured the Met's current production of that work, or Christof Loy's somewhat less offensive reimagination of Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, for the 2011 Salzburg Festival, as a tale told through the prism of the opera's historic Viennese studio recording of 1955. Pountney admits that his idea might very well be "naive," but it nevertheless allows the work to proceed on its own original merits; it highlights rather than hijacks the opera's ability to be taken on its own narrative terms. In short, it goes a long way to restoring the *drama* so essential to Wagner's innovative concept of "music drama."

Freed from unwieldy ideological constraints and obtuse directorial concepts, it was a revelation to see the characters stand for what they truly are—that is to say, human. Pountney's *Rheingold* exposes the unrestrained folly of the psyche, the war between ego and superego. One readily gets a solid sense of Wagner's well known sarcasm and biting cynicism, as yet untouched by the Schopenhauerian doom and gloom that influenced him as his work on the *Ring* continued. Moments that gave a sense of black comedy emerged in ready relief. In about twenty-five performances of the work, I have never heard a *Rheingold* that got so many laughs. When Alberich makes his existential choice to gain power by forswearing love, he gives one of the gowned Rhine Maidens a solid shove off of her stage-managed lift so that he can take the gold. His whole persona, magnetically played by the excellent bass-baritone Samuel Youn in his American debut, snorts and sneers and snarls through the entire performance. It is entirely appropriate that access

to his lair in Nibelheim comes through a trapdoor sewer cover marked, "*Achtung!*"

Regal gods in attire suggesting medieval Habsburgs are wheeled on stage in vast contraptions with hints at their divine powers (Donner with a large hammer, Freia with an apple tree, Wotan with his ravens perched on the desiccated branches of the faded World Ash Tree). Eric Owens's much anticipated role debut as Wotan introduced a refreshingly unusual bout of skepticism to what can be a stolid part. So he laughs mockingly through Alberich's disgrace at his hands, nursing a bright glass of rosé before sawing off his alter ego's entire left arm with a butcher knife to get the ring (the supertitles replace Alberich's metaphorical line comparing the ring to his "*Hand und Haupt*" with a prophetic reference to his "limbs"). Stefan Margita's Loge, in full-length red English riding coat, maintains his detached poise with aristocratic aplomb, delivering his final lines musing on burning up the gods in a vast fire (which he does at the end of the *Ring*) not from a discreet part of the stage but rather facing the audience from the conductor's podium. The Rhine Maidens send the gods on their way to Valhalla—suggested by a wall decorated in popular fin-de-siècle Oriental tropes—by crawling out from their watery depths to point with starlet vindictiveness at Wotan, who laughs them off. The moment was more brutally effective than the usual disembodied voices wailing off stage. The Norns, whom we do not normally meet until *Götterdämmerung*, shadow the action knitting what will become the Rope of Fate like a trio of obsessive Mesdames Defarge.

After his much applauded Alberich in Lepage's Met production and elsewhere, Owens's Wotan drew the most attention in the buildup to the premiere. Unhappily, it might not have been the wisest casting choice. The voice is stentorian and rests on a firm technique. But neither the high notes for this young incarnation of the god nor the stamina needed to support the role through nearly three hours of music were at the singer's command. The last thirty minutes or so, which feature some of Wotan's best music, sounded disappointingly under-voiced. Youn's visceral Alberich fared rather better, leading one to wonder whether he should have reprised his recent Berlin Wotan (in which Owens appeared, perhaps ironically given the results here, as his signature Alberich). Along with Margita's buoyant Loge, Tanja Ariane Baumgartner's supple Fricka (another American debut), Zachary Nelson's determined Donner, and Laura Wilde's lilting Freia made fine impressions among the supporting cast. Jesse Donner's (no relation to the god) Froh and Rodell Rosel's Mime seemed a bit overwhelmed and overacted. Okka von der Damerau had a fine stage presence in Erda's brief scene, even if her natural mezzo did not quite descend to the contralto depths with which Wagner endowed the earth goddess.

Local celebrity conductor Sir Andrew Davis led a fast-paced performance. Not everyone will appreciate his brisk tempi, but they moved the action forward in excellent time with the action on stage with scarcely a moment of drift or distraction. Hearing the future installments of this dynamic new production will keep Chicago on every Wagnerian's map.

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