

Wagner: The Fearsome Genius
Notes and References for Class Number 3
“Wrapping up the Ring”

Dan Sherman: February 7, 2011

Our second class focused in the first two operas of the Ring Cycle – Das Rheingold and Die Walkure, which we listened to and watched through its second act. Today, we will listen to the third act of Walkure in some detail, before moving on the Siegfried and Gotterdammerung, two long operas that make up the rest of the Ring Cycle. We have a lot to cover in a short time, so will very much have a “highlights” approach.

Remember as you listen to **Walkure**, that it is the most popular opera of the Ring, and is often done as a separate opera outside of the Ring, just as it will be at Virginia Opera later this month. The reason perhaps is obvious (and more than the 10 minutes of music that make up “Ride of the Valkyries.”) It is deeply touching in terms of emotion – the love of the twins, the despair of the god Wotan, the humanity of his daughter Brunnhilde, and the sadness (and glory) of the farewell between Wotan and Brunnhilde. Despite its grounding in myth, the human story captures us, combined with very effective music.

Act 3 of Walkure thrilling with well-known music. Eight of the Valkyries joyously ride in carrying dead heroes to guard Valhalla – They wonder where Brunnhilde is and then see her racing to them. She is carrying despairing Sieglinde, whom the Valkyries refuse to help out of fear of Wotan. Brunnhilde tells Sieglinde she is pregnant with Siegmund’s great hero son and send off to the forest (near the dragon) to hide with pieces of Siegmund’s sword. Sieglinde sings MOST IMPORTANT MUSIC IN THE RING to the “wonderous woman” Brunnhilde before running off. Wotan arrives and announces he will punish Brunnhilde as the Valkyries flee. Fabulous, touching scene follows. Wotan punishment is to take her godhood away to make her mortal and place on a rock where anyone can find and wake her. She pleads with him and he agrees to surround the rock with fire only a great hero can find her. He sings a heartbreaking farewell, puts her to sleep, surrounds her by fire, and sings that only one who is without fear can pass through the fire.

Siegfried is a more problematic opera (at least for two acts). Young Siegfried is basically a jerk, an impetuous teenager (I think) born of Sieglinde and raised by Mime, the brother of Alberich (remember him?). The plot and music more or

less plod along, with little (for me) human interest, though there are some good musical moments.

Mime sees Siegfried as his way to acquire the ring from the dragon Fafner who guards it. Mime (a blacksmith) works to forge the Siegmund's powerful sword but cannot. Wotan is now wandering the earth, resigned to the end of the reign of the gods and knowing Siegfried and Brunnhilde will rule the world. Wotan tells Mime only Siegfried can forge the sword and kill the dragon, which he does before killing Mime, who Siegfried realizes want to kill him for the Ring. At the end of the second act, a talking bird (!) tells Siegfried to pass through the fire in search of Brunnhilde, a potential friend for the lonely Siegfried.

Act 3 of Siegfried blazes. Wagner has taken 12 years off from composition on the Ring and writes in a much more symphonic idiom, often blending and mixing his themes freely in a way he did not in Rheingold and Walkure (where usually no more than one or two themes played together). We hear this clearly in the beginning of the act, where seeks to meet (mother earth) Erda to hear her wisdom (she has none at this point) and then to meet Siegfried, in part to challenge him but to also given up his power. There is a superb transition as Siegfried climbs the mountain, passes the fire, to see the sleeping Brunnhilde (who he first does not realize is a woman!). Siegfried is learning fear as he kisses Brunnhilde who awakes (in fresh voice -- Siegfried has been singing for 4 hours). Brunnhilde first realizes she has lost her immortality and repulses the advances of increasingly ardent Siegfried (remember he a is teenage boy), but then yields for 20 minutes of glorious singing, including her farewell to the gods.

Gotterdammerung is an immense opera (nearly 5 hours) that is some ways is very traditional, in part because it was the basic story Wagner wrote for the Ring in the 1840s. It has choruses, duets, trios, etc. and perhaps the greatest spectacle in all opera. It is a very human opera where the gods are absent, though there are a few bits of "clunky" magic. Wagner brings tremendous orchestral skill to the opera and sometimes writes long orchestral pieces (e.g., the Rhine Journey and the Funeral March).

In Act 1, we briefly meet the (spooky) Norns, daughter of Erda who determine the world's fate. Their rope of destiny snaps and the world is on its own as Brunnhilde and Siegfried emerge from their cave – She gives him her horse and he gives her the Ring as Siegfried goes off on adventure. Very quickly, Siegfried meets Hagen (son of Alberich), who drugs him to forget Brunnhilde and have him fall in love the human queen Guttrune (brother of Gunther). Siegfried

changes shape to look like Gunther and brings back Brunnhilde to marry Gunther, while he Siegfried will marry Gutrune.

In Act II, Brunnhilde shows her fury and conspires with Hagen and Gunther to kill Siegfried (Brunnhilde knows his back is not protected) and they decide he will be killed in the hunt that will take place in Act III. Siegfried is stabbed but remembers Brunnhilde before he dies (with the great FUNERAL MARCH) Brunnhilde learns the truth before entering the stage and sings farewell to Wotan ("rest, rest O god!"), sings gloriously to Siegfried, before riding her horse into his burning funeral pyre (at least walking over to it) in order to purify the ring of its curse and return it to the Rhinemaidens. The music is FANTASTIC and the Ring end with Sieglinde's music from Walkure of the "wonderous woman" Brunnhilde.

REFERENCES:

Note: The Rackham illustrations are at: <http://rackham.artpassions.net/>

Note: An Amazon list I created about the Ring has 25+ items and is at: http://www.amazon.com/lm/1TB48M5ULFG80/ref=cm_pdp_lm_title_2

Of particular interest to this class may be the DVDs of the Met production we are watching, the Solti or Bohm Ring recordings on CD (both are good; Bohm is half the price), and the Andrew Porter translation of the Ring (good to read along with a recording or in preparation for listening to or watching Ring operas). Finally, here are a very good set of short (half hour each) lectures by John Culshaw (record producer) from the Metropolitan Opera intermission features of Ring opera broadcasts from the 1970s (cut and paste into browser):

Rheingold

<http://www.operainfo.org/intermissions/intermissionFeatures.cgi?month=03&year=2004&language=5>

Walkure, Siegfried, Gotterdammerung

<http://www.operainfo.org/intermissions/intermissionFeatures.cgi?language=5&month=4&year=2004>