

San Francisco Ring 2011

Text: John L. DiGaetani

I was very happy to be at the second of the three *Ring* cycles which the San Francisco opera performed during June of 2011. The star of the whole cycle became **Nina Stemme**, a Brünnhilde who reminded many of us of **Birgit Nilsson** and her singing of that role. Stemme, another Swedish soprano, sang the role gloriously with a large, gorgeous voice which could easily be heard over the orchestra. Her top was secure, her middle was very good, and her low notes usually projected well. She can even sing with portamento — the shaping and connecting of notes — something Birgit Nilsson could also do. But Stemme is a better actress and can move around the stage with dramatic intent. One wished that her German diction were better, but this was a minor flaw.

Certainly drama and acting were real fortes in this *Ring*, thanks to **Francesca Zambello's** forceful direction so that the singers' acting became consistently involved and motivated. **Donald Runnicles** provided excitement from the orchestra thanks to his conducting an orchestra with a solid and accurate brass, though one sometimes wished for a lovelier tone from the strings. Runnicles also generated rhythmic energy throughout the cycle. This was a feminist *Ring*, with the female roles particularly emphasized, an ending with a young girl planting a tree — an effective symbol of new hope for the world now that the gods have died and humanity takes control. Some of the feminism became rather naive — implying that men are always interested in power and carrying guns. Both Fricka and Brünnhilde voiced murderous intent as well and caused the deaths of Siegmund and Siegfried.

Brandon Jovanovich became a very forceful Siegmund and an interesting Froh — singing both parts very well with a lovely baritone color in his beautiful heldentenor voice and acting with abandon. **Anja Kampe's** Sieglinde became a victim of spousal abuse, though not always sung beautifully enough. **Mark Delavan's** Wotan convinced more for his acting, playing each scene forcefully and presenting Wotan as a leader horrified by his own power and the victim of that power, but his singing sometimes wore out by the final scenes. Andrea Silvestrelli was both Fasolt and Hagen and his acting remained always impressive, though his vocal quality varied from wonderful to gravelly. **Daniel Sumegi** sang both Fafner and Hunding, both very capably. Also in *Das Rheingold*, **Elizabeth Bishop** sang the part of Fricka with gorgeous voice and subtle and varied acting. Stefan Margita stole the show in *Rheingold* as Loge for his comically cynical acting and clear and always audible diction. **David Cangelosi** became a comic but still malicious delight as Mime in the first and third operas, earning well-deserved ovations. **Gordon Hawkins' Alberich** appeared malevolent rather than



Kuva: Cory Weaver / San Francisco Opera

sympathetic throughout this *Ring*, making him a wonderful foil to Wotan's attempts at legality and love.

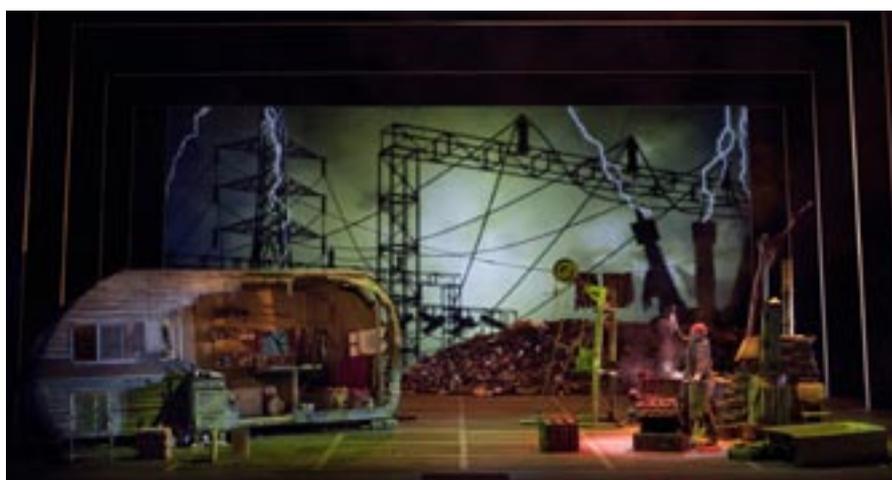
The production mixed visual styles, with most of the singers appearing in contemporary dress, but the updating usually made sense — though if Wotan were a corporate executive why would he be carrying a spear and worrying about what the goddess Erda thinks? Changing time periods usually makes the plot look silly, but can be very effective despite this — which happened in this *Ring*.

Speaking of Erda, **Ronnita Miller** became a vocally impressive Erda, and also a first Norn. Her large mezzo-soprano/contralto voice sounded glorious and added to the impression of her music. The Siegfrieds, always the most difficult roles to cast, were satisfactory as well. Both **Jay Hunter Morris** (in Siegfried) and **Ian Storey** (in *Götterdämmerung*) sang these difficult parts very honorably, though one wished the costume designer (**Catherine Zuber**) had not made them look like stagehands so often.

More successful than the costumes were the sets by Michael Yeargan, which varied from corporate boardrooms to scenes of nature. The film strips by **Jan Hartley** and **S.**

Katy Tucker added tremendous meaning and visual variety during the musical interludes between the scenes, emphasizing nature and its destruction by human greed and corporate industry. The theme of industrialism and its destruction of nature, while relevant in the *Ring*, made for some very dreary sets during the last two operas, often dominated by shades of gray — especially sad during Act II of *Siegfried*. The theme of homelessness, still so apparent in San Francisco, also appeared in this *Ring* with the Rhine maidens in the last opera, appearing as women who lived on the streets and begged Siegfried for their ring back. **Melissa Citro** made Gutrune a lively presence, here having an affair with her half-brother Hagen. **Gerd Grochowski's** Gunther personified the weak leader, looking for direction from his siblings.

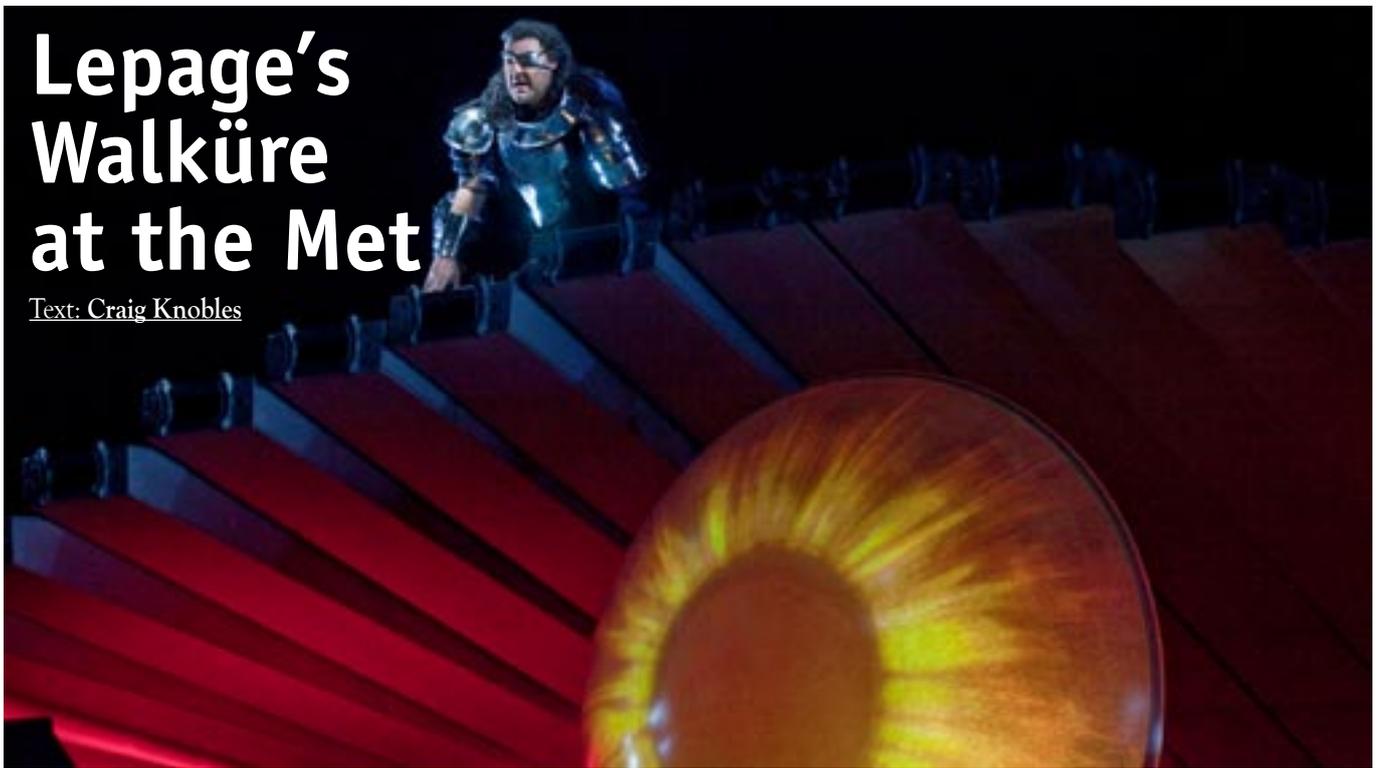
Zambello's production and direction and Runnicles' conducting, plus this excellent cast of singers, created standing ovations at the end of each of the four operas and indicated the success of San Francisco's *Ring*. Both dramatically and musically, this *Ring* became a moving artistic experience and (thankfully) not a freak show.



Kuva: Cory Weaver / San Francisco Opera

Lepage's Walküre at the Met

Text: Craig Knobles



Disappointment was what I felt as I left the Metropolitan Opera House after the premiere of the second segment of Robert Lepage's Ring, *Die Walküre*. The feeling came not just from swollen expectations of the visual excitement that would result from this inventive director, but from the misapplication of spectacle that showed a lack of concern for the drama's profile.

The inevitable machine was back at work, rising to pure vertical to represent logs, like a stockade; then with the planks separating to indicate the trunks of trees in a forest through which Siegmund and his lantern-carrying pursuers wove their way. Next the planks spun to create the ceiling of Hunding's house, with the two central slats remaining vertical to become the sword-pierced tree. Finally with the freeing of Notung, the ceiling turned over to form Hunding's roof and thrust the Wäl-sung pair outdoors. Other than these changes, the machine remained inert in Act I, a mere backdrop to the action. A bit of visual relief did come during Siegmund's narration, when the ceiling was used to show silhouettes of his tale in the flickering hearthlight, an animation almost as clever as that used in Act I of Stockholm's *Siegfried*. But this was all there was of visual excitement; and, what should have been riotously expressed, namely the coming of spring, was shown here merely by the backdrop's being lit a sickly chartreuse.

Lepage has promised an expansion of techniques as the cycle proceeds, just as the music in the *Rheingold* prologue expands and diversifies, and the other two acts did have striking effects, though mostly decorative. The machine scrunched up into a rocky crag for Wotan to stand on at the beginning of Act II, and created an entire snow-capped mountain in Act III, suspended in

air like the floating promontories painted by Magritte. The effects strove for realism (more effective in the opera house than on HD.) Symbolic elements did exist: Fricka arrived on a throne, which glided slowly but noisily down from the top of the crag, her rams as armrests. This impressively enforced her majesty and the correctness of her argument. The crag itself was furrowed by lava flows, or fissures in the earth through which one could see the magma pulsing, Lepage's evocation of the Icelandic fire beneath the ice – suggesting too that Nibelheim was erupting into Wotan's world. Later, in the god's monologue with Brünnhilde, the crag became an eye socket, while a disk rose to form an eyeball, on which were projected vaguely the scenes Wotan described. Was this Wotan's other eye, the one given up to gain knowledge (or Fricka), or was it the eye described to Siegfried as “das eine, das mir zum Sehen verblieb”? These images had vividness, so much so that they trumped what should have been the magic center of the act, making painfully prosaic the *Todesverkündigung*, with Brünnhilde merely stepping out from the wings.

Act III likewise misplaced its effects. The *Walkürenritt* had the Valkyries riding planks made to look like the heads of particularly long-nosed horses: it was a crowd pleaser. Later the magic mountain mentioned above suffered avalanches at two key points in the confrontation between the god and his daughter; but the act's finale misfired, with a *Zauberfeuer* that looked not at all fiery, its projection of flames confined to the outline of the rock, which folded itself into a great bird, and, as it became absolutely vertical, hung the ex-Valkyrie upside down, like a **Georg Baselitz** painting. What was not there was a feeling of flame; nor did the golden

backlighting have much to do with fire as it streamed blindingly into the opera house, not unlike the sun that ended the Paris Opera's new *Siegfried*.

One expects spring, the *Todesverkündigung* and the *Zauberfeuer* to be high points, but here they disappointed. What was memorable, however, in this *Walküre* were the intimate moments, though these came through better in the HD broadcast than in the house. The gestures between that old married couple Wotan and Fricka were sometimes touching, sometimes angry, but always vividly depicted. Brünnhilde's hesitant approach to Siegmund was achingly poignant. The Wotan/Brünnhilde scene of Act III was intricately choreographed up until the last moment when he lifted his daughter off-stage on their two spears. Even a bit of humor was added as Hunding hung his fur cape on the sword: familiarity breeding contempt.

Act I had the most exciting of the principal singers, Jonas Kaufmann, whose virile, throaty sound had a distinct edge, but warmth, endowing his Siegmund with melancholy – and I have never heard a securer high A in “Wäl-sungen-Blut.” His Sieglinde, **Eva-Maria Westbroek** (after a first-night indisposition required her replacement post Act I by the ever competent Margaret Jane Wray) had good moments too, lavishly pouring out her broad soprano at every opportunity. The audience stood up and cheered at the end of the act, but what audience doesn't?

Otherwise, the greatest excitement came from singers in the subsidiary roles: **Hans-Peter König** as Hunding and **Stephanie Blythe** as Fricka. Both had voices the size and quality of the legendary singers of the past, and could easily have been put into a cast with **Flagstad**, **Nilsson**, **Melchior**, **Vickers**, or **Rysanek** without seeming at all out of place.

As each sang, I could imagine that we were in a new golden age. But their splendor did put the others in the shade – in Act II Blythe blew Bryn Terfel off the stage.

No one would claim that the Met and the Met Orchestra is the best frame to display either Terfel's Wotan or **Deborah Voigt's** Brünnhilde. His *Walküre* Wotan had subtlety and none of the hectoring that plagued his *Rheingold*, yet he lacked the impact that great Wotans must have. His singing seemed overly careful and poised. His efforts were focused on defining the character – not a bad thing – and, as in *Rheingold*, he became securer with each performance.

What can be said about Deborah Voigt? I dislike the squeezed quality of her present voice, the gold has tarnished, and far too often in the early performances she was unable to hold a steady tone. That said, she nego-

tiated the heights of the “hojotoho's” well, which perhaps reimbursed us for her breathiness in the lower parts. Her athleticism as well as Terfel's allowed them to hop around the set, while their interaction had extremely touching moments, necessary in the drama that centers on these two.

Despite his pain (after the first night he took all his bows from the pit) **James Levine** conducted boisterous performances, drawing a rough-and-ready sound from the orchestra. His conducting varied from evening to evening: for instance, on those nights when Westbroek was going especially strong, he broadened the tempo at “O herrstes Wunder!” to let her soar.

I should explain my disappointment further. I don't consider the new Met *Ring* a “bad” *Ring*, just unfocused, at least up to now. I continue to hope that something substanti-

ve will result from Lepage's exploration, something that will cast new light on the meaning of the *Ring*. I would be delighted if the machine came to symbolize Fate – **Cocteau's** *Machine infernale* – with its exigencies standing for the limits placed on the characters. Yet in the back of my mind is the example of another innovative director who fell flat on his face when confronted with Wagner's epic. In summer 1999, **Andrei Serban** came in practically at the last moment to restage **Nikolaus Lehnhoff's** production for San Francisco Opera. He seemed awed by the job and spent far more time considering how to dress the giants than how to address Wagner's themes. Lepage, of course, has had much more time than Serban to mull over what he wants to do, and the sets and mechanism are his own, but I get the same feeling of aimlessness. I hope I'm wrong.

Siegfried at the Met Opera Text: John L. DiGaetani

In November of 2011 the Met's new *Siegfried* had its premiere and by and large really pleased the audience. The night I saw it “the machine” worked just fine and everything went smoothly – not always the case. The machine moves enormous planks around so that the unit set changes to reflect each of the scenes and its visual requirements. It is fascinating to see the set moving and sliding and altering to meet the demands of the various scenes. While the images onstage are governed by the dimensions of the machine, these images were consistently enticing.

The machine was also able to project wonderful images of nature onto the planks – a birch forest, falling leaves, a blacksmith's hut, a waterfall, a mountain top, a flying bird, etc. The forest bird was especially captivating in the second act, though the mountaintop at the end of the opera needed more light to reflect Wagner's stage directions. But Robert Lepage's *Ring* did not become Euro trash and did try to reflect Wagner's stage directions and the visual demands implied in the orchestral music. We were never put in someone's basement (as in the Copenhagen *Ring*) and the costumes were never ridiculous (as in the Los Angeles *Ring*). In fact, Francois St-Aubin's costumes and Etienne Boucher's lighting added to the drama onstage, though I did wish the final scene of the opera were brighter since the opera moves from darkness to bright light.

The big surprise of this *Siegfried* was the Siegfried, **Jay Hunter Morris**, who replaced **Gary Lehman**, who replaced **Ben Heppner**. All these cancellations undoubtedly added to the pressure on this tenor. But Morris, who sang the role in the San Francisco *Ring* last summer, sounded much better at the Met – a real Heldentenor who was not vocally exhausted by the end of the opera. His voice is



Kuva: Ken Howard / Metropolitan Opera

large and has real tenor ping and a beautiful tone. He got the biggest ovation at the end for not only getting through this most difficult of tenor roles but singing the part beautifully and with dramatic credibility.

Bryn Terfel's Wotan is certainly now the greatest Wotan around – he sang the role with a lovely, lyrical baritone sound, excellent German diction, and dramatic conviction. Here he was the defeated Wotan, the Wanderer, trying to control events but knowing that they were beyond his grasp. **Eric Owens** was a lyrical-sounding Alberich, though one wished he were more malevolent and more a foil to Wotan. **Gerhard Siegel's** Mime was comic rather than malevolent, though here again more malice would have generated more dramatic intensity. He was too likeable and his plotting to poison Siegfried never became a palpable reality, though Siegel sang the part beautifully.

Hans Peter König presented a very moving Fafner, who appears from beneath the dragon when he is mortally wounded and becomes very sympathetic as the dying giant. **Mojca Erdmann** impressed as the Forest Bird, with all the easy high notes and flexibility that this bel canto soprano role demands. **Patricia Bardon** had dramatic presence and a lovely contralto voice as Erda,

though she did not have the sonorous low tones that the role demands.

Deborah Voigt sang with a fresh, youthful-sounding voice as Brünnhilde. The *Siegfried* Brünnhilde is the highest of her three roles in the *Ring*, and Voigt certainly has the high notes so she sounded wonderful, and her duet with Siegfried at the end of the opera has sexual energy and dramatic excitement to end this most comic of the four *Ring* operas with real flourish.

Fabio Luisi's conducting won a well-deserved ovation at the end, especially since he had to take over quickly due to the illness of **James Levine**. Luisi conducted with brisk tempos so that this *Siegfried* moved along with real energy and dramatic drive. While some of the lovelier passages were not as languorous, one appreciated that this performance never dragged. Luisi also remained sensitive to the singers' needs and, except in the first act, which was too loud, he by and large did not drown out the singers.

The Met's new *Ring*, produced and directed by **Robert Lepage**, has so far won audience approval for its clever designs and emphasis on the cycles of nature which control the *Ring*. Water, earth, fire, and air all become tangible realities in this lovely *Siegfried*.