

Seattle Ring – Summer 2009

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Stig Andersen (Siegfried) and Janice Baird (Brünnhilde), with Star (Grane).

The Seattle Opera staged three *Ring* cycles during August of 2009, and I was very happy to be at the second cycle. This production was first staged in 2001 (and last staged in August of 2005) and emphasizes the humanity of the characters, but the production has actually improved this time. **Stephen Wadsworth** directed, **Thomas Lynch** designed the sets, and **Martin Pakledinaz** did the costumes, with lighting by **Peter Kaczorowski**. It was wonderful to be able to see the action and the faces of the singers, thanks to the bright lighting. The production remains realistic without being kitschy and succeeded to presenting Wagner's *Ring* rather than some director's concept of it. All the characters become complex and often sympathetic human beings here, not robots or cartoon figures.

There were some major assets and some liabilities – always the case with the *Ring* since the perfect *Ring* exists only on disks, and often not even there. **Robert Spano** became a major asset as the conductor, leading a careful but still exciting *Ring*, the orchestra resounding quite resonant under his leadership, though there was some messy playing from the brass and horns during the second and fourth operas and one wishes the strings had a more mellow and rich tone, but still this was an orchestra and conductor to take seriously.

Greer Grimsley has really improved as Wotan. The last time this production was staged four years ago he was a promising Wotan but now he has the volume and beauty of tone of a great Wotan, though his German diction is sometime unclear. Janice Baird's Brünnhilde was promising rather than fabulous – she has some wonderful notes, but some of her notes wobbled and some were inaudible. However, she impressed most in

her greatest scenes because of her fabulous acting, such as the end of *Walküre* and the Immolation scene at the end of the cycle.

Stephanie Blythe became a major asset in Seattle, making Fricka vocally fabulous but still a complex goddess with varying reactions of love and hate for her wayward husband. Blythe's Waltraute and Second Norn succeeded as well because of her large, gorgeous voice with fine German diction plus vocal accuracy and clarity.

In the individual operas, there were also high points and low points, ever so. In *Das Rheingold*, the three Rhinemaidens amazed both for their singing and their acrobatics. They could twirl around on their supporting wires, paddle their feet, sing beautifully, and still give the illusion of swimming up and down the Rhine. **Julianne Gearhart**, **Michele Losier**, and **Jennifer Hines** made a real Olympic aquatic team of Rhinemaidens. **Marie Plette** impressed as Freia (and later as Ortlinde and Guttrune), singing with lovely tone and always audible. **Andrea Silvestrilli** and **Daniel Sumegi** were convincing as Fasolt and Fafner, conveying both the vocal menace and the competition between these two brothers. But **Kobie van Rensburg's** Loge had some vocal problems; he was sometimes inaudible or unclear, though he acted the part quite well. **Richard Paul Fink** became a dominating presence as Alberich, suitably desperate in the first scene and vengeful and menacing in the last scene. Here was an Alberich who was sympathetic rather than grotesque.

The Wälzung twins, **Stuart Skelton** and **Margaret Jane Wray**, won the audience's sympathies both for vocal beauty and conviction in their acting, and neither wore out by the end of *Walküre*. Their love as well as their desperation maintained the audience's attention.

In *Siegfried* **Stig Andersen** certainly impressed during the second cycle. The local newspapers reported that he was sick and did not sound good during *Ring* cycle 1, but when I heard him in *Ring* cycle two he was completely recovered—he sounded fresh and youthful and he did not wear out by the end. He sang carefully in the first act, though he was not running around the stage with youthful abandon, but he sounded effortless throughout and convincing even in the final duet with Brünnhilde. **Dennis Petersen** succeeded as Mime, though both he and Alberich were not costumed as dwarves so they looked like normal people. In fact, Mime and Siegfried actually looked like father and son, and Wotan looked like an old friend of Alberich's in this *Siegfried*, which killed many of Wagner's intended dramatic conflicts in this opera. **Maria Streijffert** became an old and discarded lover as Erda in the final act, though **Eva Podles** was even more memorable in this part four years ago because of her larger voice and greater resonance.

In *Götterdämmerung*, Stig Andersen remained clear and youthful-sounding but Janice Baird still made me uncomfortable as Brünnhilde; she will undoubtedly grow and improve in the role. Daniel Sumegi disappointed as Hagen – his voice was not big enough and forceful enough in this dominating role, but his acting succeeded in conveying Hagen's fear of his father and determination to avenge his wrongs—one generation dooming the next remains a major theme in the *Ring*.

By the end of *Götterdämmerung*, the entire company got a well-deserved ovation for the completion of a wonderful *Ring* cycle. The company plans to do this production one more time in four years, but *Tristan und Isolde* is scheduled for next summer. So Seattle Opera continues its commitment to the operas of Richard Wagner—to the gratitude of Wagnerians everywhere.



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Mime (Dennis Petersen, on the right) and Siegfried (Stig Andersen) actually looked like father and son