

Das Rheingold in Bangkok

(A review of a performance in Bangkok on 5 February 2006)

Bangkok Opera is, in the words of its dynamic Intendant Somtow Sucharitkul, 'a bit of a maverick company, long on vision and perennially grappling with problems of funding and the establishment in Thailand'. Nevertheless, it is a fully-fledged opera company, designing and mounting all its own productions and imbuing them with a distinctive Thai style.

Since its founding by Somtow five years ago, Bangkok Opera has staged *Aida*, *Don Giovanni*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *Turn of the Screw*, *Turandot*, *The Magic Flute*, and two operas on Thai subjects by Cambridge-educated Somtow himself: *Madana* and *Mae Naak*. The 2005-06 season comprises *Mae Naak*, *The Magic Flute*, *Così fan tutte* - and *Das Rheingold* which heralds a five-year project to stage *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for the first time in South-east Asia. A full cycle is scheduled for 2010.

Das Rheingold was given its Bangkok premiere on 5th February in the modern and well-equipped Thailand Cultural Centre. A second performance followed on 6th February. Somtow was both conductor and stage director. The sets were by San Pho-On, costumes by Surat Jongda and lighting by Supatra Kruekrongsuk. The Siam Philharmonic was augmented by musicians from the Vietnam National Opera and Ballet and the Tamnak Prathom Harp Centre, and by Hans Pizka, Principal Horn of the Bavarian State Orchestra (which also lent Wagner Tubas). There were eighty musicians in the pit and a full complement of anvils off stage.

For the most part, the costumes were in the Thai Court tradition familiar from paintings and dramatizations of the great Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, the story of Rama, incarnation of the god Vishnu, preserver of the universe. Any allusion to the *Ramayana* has particular resonance for Thais. For the past two hundred years nine Thai kings have been named Rama, and for four hundred years the capital of Thailand was Ayutthaya (Ayodhya), Rama's kingdom in the epic. It is certainly possible to draw comparisons between the myths on which Wagner based his narrative and the *Ramayana*. Such comparisons may be superficial but they exemplify a growing international trend of drawing on non-European (or at least non-Germanic) imagery to highlight the universality of Wagner's drama.

The central ideas underpinning the Bangkok production were derived from a Buddhist view of Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold. From a Buddhist (non-judgmental) perspective, this action, which sets the entire *Ring* in motion, is not in itself *evil*. Somtow was determined to avoid the usual moral judgments, flowing as they do from Judaeo-Christian notions of original sin and the need for cleansing or redemption. He observes that Alberich's act changes the world from a timeless and non-human state to a cosmos that exists in time and in which it is possible for humans to exist, because mutability exists - death exists. Alberich doesn't necessarily make the *wrong* choice; but the consequence of his choice is that the world actually gets to start moving.

It is our preoccupation with '*attachment*', either base attachment (greed, lust, envy etc) or noble attachment (love, self-sacrifice etc) that perpetuates the cycle of action-and-consequence that we call 'existence'. It is only by letting go of *attachment* that the ring can ultimately be returned to the primordial state and the cycle cease to be. This of course is what happens at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

These notions were alluded to on stage by the ever-present symbol of an enormous Buddhist mandala, dominating the scene and slowly fracturing during the course of *Das Rheingold*. In *Die Walküre* next year, the shattered mandala will become the human world itself on which the action takes place.

On stage, Alberich (English bass-baritone Colin Morris) offered the first of many surprises, arousing as much sympathy as distaste for his behaviour. At one moment priggish, at another comical and child-like, he showed us a character who was clearly out of his depth even in a world of his own making. With a light, flexible voice, small frame and nimble manner, Morris offered a fascinating variation on the usual diet of unrelieved alienation and vindictiveness.

In contrast, Danish bass-baritone Lars Waage as Wotan displayed a commanding presence and powerful voice, cutting a lordly figure in his Thai court regalia. Clearly, he was a god not to be trifled with. American mezzo-soprano Barbara Smith Jones was a suitably 'put-upon' Fricka. It remains to be seen whether she will be able to rise to the great confrontation in Act Two of *Die Walküre*.

In many ways, *Rheingold* is Loge's opera, and American tenor Marc Deaton proved a reliable exponent of the role's tricky rhythms and other vocal demands. However, he struck me as being a little under-rehearsed, never daring to take his eyes off the conductor, even when addressing characters elsewhere on the stage.

Particular mention should be made of American bass John Ames, whose rich and resonant voice made his *Rheingold* Fafner a memorable performance. He would make a terrific Hunding in *Die Walküre*

Rheingold has an episodic structure, complicated stage action and frequent transformations, all needing to run like clockwork. This was not always the case on opening night, and the work generally could have done with more rehearsals. Given the challenge of assembling principals from eleven different countries and an orchestra from several more, lengthy rehearsals would not have been easy to schedule. There were several instrumental and vocal glitches (including a missed entry on 'Zur Burg führt die Brücke' by Froh, Norwegian, Sigve Vidnes) and a staging mishap precipitated by a partisan burst of applause for German soprano Julia Oesch as Erda. Thinking that her scene must be over, stage hands lowered her prematurely beneath the stage – only to raise her again for her final bars. I understand these wrinkles had been ironed out by the second performance.

A faultless first night performance of any production of *Das Rheingold* is a rare phenomenon – as Wagner himself could attest. 'I want to die' he said after the first Bayreuth performance! Somtow has every reason to live!

Incidentally, Oesch made a striking Erda, her four arms conjuring visions of Shiva, god of time and 'the great destroyer' – a suitable context for Erda's warning of the twilight of the gods.

Contrasting with the elaborate traditional costumes were the ultra-modern outfits of Freia (Israeli soprano Ronit Widmann-Levy as a mini-skirted sex goddess) and tourist Loge (the outsider) in shorts, sneakers, Hawaiian shirt and straw hat. By the final scene, even Donner (the fine Thai bass-baritone Saran Suebsantiwongse) and Froh had discarded their traditional robes for 'hip' western gear; and the despairing Rhinedaughters had been reduced to coloured-haired, provocatively attired 'floozy' on a street float.

The scenery was simple but effective, reminiscent of the settings for traditional Thai outdoor entertainments. Framework pavilions and moveable staircases were guided into place by dancers who moved expressively about the stage during the orchestral interludes. The use of dancers in this way was an inspired piece of stagecraft.

The Nibelung treasure assembled to ransom Freia turned out to be nothing more than a pile of modern consumer goods. Attachment to consumerism had become absolute in this brave new world and, in the final tableau, Valhalla was revealed as a modern Asian metropolis, rising from the background to loom over all and sundry.

Bangkok Opera's *Das Rheingold* was an impressive achievement for such a young company, bringing fresh insights and new perspectives to a seemingly inexhaustible work. I am looking forward to *Die Walküre* in 2007 and, in due course, to the first complete South-east Asian *Ring*.

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