

A Golden *Ring* triumphs in Beijing

(A review of performances in Beijing in November 2005)

Each year the Beijing Music Festival chooses a different country to be the focus of its cultural attention. In 2005 the garland was given to Germany. Visiting artists for the eighth festival, from 15 October to 5 November, included the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra and soloists such as Joshua Bell who, though not German themselves, gave prominence to the music of German composers.

At the heart of this festival was a single cycle of the Nuremberg State Theatre's production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, chosen ahead of two other contenders: the *Rings* of Mannheim and Chemnitz. This was the first complete staging of *The Ring* in China although in 2001 the China Philharmonic Orchestra performed Act One of *Die Walküre* featuring American soprano Cheryl Studer as Sieglinde, a role she performed again this year.

One million Euros were required to move principals, chorus, sets, costumes and the entire Nuremberg Philharmonic Orchestra to Beijing. The funding was provided collectively by the governments of China, Germany and Bavaria, and by German business firms with interests in China, such as Audi and Deutsche Bank. Commercial sponsors spoke frankly of their expectations. "The performance opens an economic door to China for us," said Hans-Peter Schmidt, who heads the board of management of *Nuremberg Insurance Group* (Germany's largest insurer) and organized the search for sponsors. He added that Nuremberg's future depended on business ties with Asia - ties that sponsors would seek to strengthen in the foyers of Beijing's Poly Theatre. Next year, Nuremberg's commercial sector will co-finance the State Theatre's production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Hong Kong.

Frenchman Philippe Auguin, Nuremberg's General Music Director conducted the performances in Beijing, and Englishman Stephen Lawless directed the stage action.

It is always fun to try to deduce the inspiration for a production's visual imagery. This time, the imagery seemed to owe much to Nuremberg's golden age (12th - 16th centuries) - with 'golden' being very much the operative word. The free imperial city on the Pegnitz was long regarded as one of the most significant goldsmith centres in Germany – indeed, one of the most important in Europe.

Gold features in the very first scene of *The Ring*. In its inert state in this production, it took the form of a roughly shaped triangular ingot. However, when we (and Wotan and Loge) saw it again in Nibelheim in scene three, Alberich had transformed it into huge golden letters of the alphabet – 'A' and 'U' – in both Gothic and Roman script. *Au* is of course the chemical symbol for gold (*Aurum*).

Alberich too had undergone a remarkable transformation. From a hairy, wraith-like intruder reminiscent of Howard Hughes in his years of pathetic self-isolation, he had become a suave and well-groomed plutocrat sporting a bowler hat and a modern black business suit appliquéd all over with the golden letters 'A' and 'U'.

Why should *lettering* feature so prominently as a symbol of power as distinct from merely a scientific tag for harmless gold? Because the printed word played an important role in the commercial and artistic 'powerhouse' of old Nuremberg, where Germany's first paper mill was established (1390) and where the greatest astronomer of the fifteenth century, Johannes Müller von Königsberg (nicknamed Regiomontanus) established a printing press with a Roman font in 1471. It was Regiomontanus who observed: "Who does not realise that the admirable art of printing recently devised by our countrymen is as harmful to men if it multiplies erroneous works as it is useful when it publishes properly corrected editions?" Words can be power, as every demagogue knows.

Nuremberg gave birth to one of the most outstanding examples of early printing: the *Nuremberg Chronicle* or, more correctly, the *Liber Chronicarum* of 1493. It was a history of the world from creation to the 1490s – '*Stadt- und Welt-Chronik*' as Hans Sachs calls it in Act 3 of *Die Meistersinger*. This was the most lavishly illustrated book of its time and one of the first to integrate illustrations and text. It demonstrated the influence of Renaissance humanism, but it also showed a society in the process of transformation from medieval to modern, and from a scribal culture to a print culture. What is *The Ring* about if not transformation, social and individual?

The fame of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* stems primarily from the quality of its illustrations (to which even Dürer contributed) and it is to these that the stage designers seem to have turned for inspiration. Lettering – Gothic and Roman – is given honoured treatment in the *Chronicle's* illustrative woodblocks, as is the rainbow associated with Noah's Ark – and of course the entry of the gods into Valhalla. There is a graphic illustration of rocks hurtling from heaven in the course of some catastrophe, paralleled on stage by large scenic rocks descending from the Flies as Erda foretells of the twilight of the gods. When Wotan reluctantly gives up the ring and Freia is restored to her family, the other gods engage in a morality play mime, 'pushing' the rocks up out of sight and averting catastrophe.

The Valkyries who appear on the first day of *The Ring* (several as early as Act 2 in this production) are depicted on stage as fearsome winged harpies modelled, it seems, on the *Chronicle's* illustrations of winged demons with remarkably similar appendages.

At the end of the first Act of *Siegfried*, Mime (looking rather like Franz Liszt in his later years) inexplicably takes to his bath, fully dressed. What could this possibly mean? Another illustration in the *Chronicle* provides a clue – that of Seneca, Roman philosopher and tutor to the young Nero, who was forced by his monstrous and ungrateful pupil (for whom read Siegfried) to take his own

life. He did so, eventually, in his bath. Does Mime see himself in the same predicament as Seneca? Quite possibly, since his life has just been forfeited to one who doesn't know fear: Siegfried.

Apart from the illustrations of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, at least one other fifteenth century idea seems to have inspired the director/designers. This is the notion of *The Ship of Fools*, the subject of a poem by Sebastian Brant published in 1494 and of a famous painting by Hieronymus Bosch (now in the Louvre) - an allegory of all mankind, voyaging through the seas of time on a ship in which we 'eat, drink, flirt, cheat, play silly games and pursue unattainable objectives'. A poem by Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* also embraces the idea of humanity sailing aimlessly on journeys that have no end, searching for a place to land. These ideas were given substance by the arrival of the gods in an ocean liner in scene two of *Rheingold*. The ship's engine room became the setting for the first Act of *Siegfried*, although the vessel now seemed to be in the depths of a forest.

At the climax of *Götterdämmerung*, those who witnessed the final catastrophe tried desperately to reboard the ship but their way was blocked and it sailed on without them – except for Gutrune who was helped to escape by Brünnhilde(!), just as the latter had helped the distraught Sieglinde two operas earlier. For her part, Brünnhilde, at the very end, walked magisterially into the wings while the orchestra painted an entirely different picture. Such is the way of many modern productions.

One recurring and effective visual motif took the form of a bright red rope. It was offloaded by the gods from their ship and was later used to tie up a subdued Alberich, bind Sieglinde in marital servitude, entangle Wotan in contractual webs and subjugate Brünnhilde to be Gunther's bride. Finally it broke apart in the hands of the Norns as the end of the gods drew nigh.

There were many examples of fine singing, especially by the Danish soprano Iréne Theorin who was a magnificent Brünnhilde. Even her impossible costume in *Siegfried*, which looked like tangled bed-clothes, did not prevent her from singing and acting outstandingly well. The role of Siegfried was shared between the German tenor Gerhard Siegel (who also sang Siegmund) and Canadian Alan Woodrow – Perth's Tristan next year. Woodrow in particular was in powerful, ringing voice and matched Theorin convincingly.

A number of singers performed more than one role, notably Heinz-Klaus Ecker who was variously Fasolt, Hunding, Fafner and Hagen. His was a remarkable contribution. Johann Werner Prein was a mesmerizing Alberich, playfully tossing a globe around in Nibelheim as he rehearsed his plans for ruling the world (*à la* Chaplin's Great Dictator). Jürgen Linn was a forceful Wotan/Wanderer and also sang the role of Gunther from the side of the stage when Ronnie Johansen was prevented by an accident from travelling to Beijing. Prein acted Gunther's part. American mezzo-soprano Andrea Baker was a stunningly sensuous Fricka (complete with a golden head-dress of curly rams' horns). She also performed Erda, the Second Norn and Waltraute.

Of all the innovative moments in this production, my particular favourite was Lawless's handling of the death of Siegmund. After the stormy and deadly confrontation between Siegmund and Hunding in which the sword *Notung* is shattered, Wagner provides a melancholy, contemplative passage during which (usually) Wotan gazes with infinite sadness at the body of his son. In this production, Siegmund's death is delayed for the entire length of the orchestral passage. Hunding, armed with a crossbow has released its bolt which Wotan intercepts mid-flight. For a split-second it seems that Wotan might be having second thoughts. All the characters except Siegmund 'freeze' as in a cinema frame – Hunding with his crossbow extended and Wotan clasp the missile. Only Siegmund moves, looking repeatedly in bewilderment at his father and his assailant. At last, with a shuddering orchestral chord the scene is reactivated, Wotan releases the bolt and it flies to its mark in the flesh of his son. The inspiration for this scene may have come from the cinema but in the hands of Stephen Lawless it was a stunning and powerful piece of theatre.

And what did the Chinese make of all this? Initially, they behaved as if witnessing a performance of Peking Opera, and the auditorium was a lively and distracting place. However, Wagner's music gradually worked its magic and the emergence of familiar concepts such as family tensions, struggles for power and star-crossed lovers, not to mention dragons and other mythical beasts, soon convinced them that there was much cultural common ground. The fairy-tale quality of *Siegfried* in particular found a responsiveness that is rare today amongst western audiences but certainly applied to audiences of Wagner's own time.

In his essay *Art and Revolution* Wagner wrote "...the artwork of the future is intended to express the spirit of free people irrespective of national boundaries; the national element in it must be no more than an ornament, an added individual charm, and not a confining barrier." He would have been gratified to know that, in China's capital, a large audience was attentively following his words with the help of surtitles in Mandarin, and that his masterwork was at last being performed in the most populous nation on earth.

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