

THE BENDIGO RING

THE MELBOURNE OPERA'S PRODUCTION OF *DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN* IN BENDIGO

A Personal Report by Minnie Biggs

Bendigo was built on gold.
The Ring is built on gold.
The ring is gold.

The connection feels more poignant as the operas take place at Ulumbarra in Bendigo; an old jail made into a beautiful well-designed hall. No one goes to jail in the Ring although many should. Nevertheless, a suitable resting place for the Ring of the Nibelung. Jail. Not heaven, not the underworld, not the forest, not the sky. The jail.

We go down in the mine, the Deborah mine in Bendigo town, down to the underworld, down to the dark of the Nibelung, down in a noisy lift, ninety seconds, to wet, muddy earth below the water level. Yes, the place where they mined the gold. Only we were privileged to hear Maestro Negus and a group of musicians and a glorious Lee Abrahmsen (who sang Sieglinde) regale us with the Siegfried Idyl and the Wesendonck Lieder, more appealing than I have ever heard them. Intimate in the damp dark, our hard hats with flashlights removed for the occasion.

The word that really describes this Ring is beauty. From the very first video image of clouds rolling past as the orchestra leads us to the bottom of the Rhine and to the maidens, some swimming above and some below. The grace of the swaying swimming maidens on poles, and later the Valkyries riding high into the sky over the riders below, exquisite.

Soon we are introduced to the magical effective stage that rises and falls, a circle in the middle of it, the first notable circle, of many beautiful circles, rings. The circle at the back often showing the sky, or clouds reflecting the action in the story, dark, menacing, rushing, slowing. The ease of the moving stage hardly noticeable, contributing to the overall pleasing effect.

The costumes gorgeous, every woman in the theatre longs to have Fricka's gown. The lighting is perfect.

A few memorable scenes: Brünnhilde on the rock, dressed in silver against the black, later against deep blue, stunning. Siegfried dead, in white, in a dark circle. The Gibichung house, red carpet, empty circle in the middle, smart modern



Concert in the Deborah mine

sculptures. Even the white edged chair benches chic, the background golden curtains wafting up. Guttrune in simple plain dark pink, the men in fitted plain suits, dark green, brown. Later the vassals at the front of the stage dressed in black, with measured movements, choreographed. Heart stopping.

Many Wagnerian singers, that is, nearly all Wotans and Brünnhildes have arguably wonderful voices and also what I call a wavery quality. On tune but ever so slightly hovering off. Wavering. Warwick Fyfe's Wotan and Antoinette Halloran's Brünnhilde did not, their voices were always right on, beautiful. Fyfe's sung German language was notable for its purity and preciseness.

Suzanne Chaundy let the music and the story tell the story. On stage the singers, and the orchestra in the pit. No need for extra unnecessary imaginative distracting details. Just simplicity.

At the end of *Das Rheingold* and after every act of the Ring thereafter, people got up from their seats, smiling, a bit dazed, vaguely exchanging similar smiles with strangers and friends. A feeling of lightness pervaded the halls and walls of the old jail. An agreement, a coming together in the wonder, the miracle of this beautiful production, everywhere, everyone smiling, happy. Not the usual atmosphere for a Ring Cycle.

Let us hope for a repeat in a couple of years, so we may all come together and smile again. With gratitude to the Melbourne Opera for this outstanding and memorable production.

MEMBERS' PHOTOS FROM BENDIGO

Many Wagner Society members attended at least one of the three cycles and everyone agreed what a wonderful experience it was, with many extra Festival events – talks, recitals and tours – all of a high standard. Sydney visitors got to meet members from other Australian Wagner Societies and caught up with members of the cast in the local bars and restaurants. Singers supported by the Wagner Society were prominent in some of the major roles. Standouts were; **Warwick Fyfe** (Wotan), **Deborah Humble** (Erda, Waltraute), **Eleanor Greenwood** (Sieglinde, Ortlinde, Third Norn) and **Adrian Tamburini** (Hunding, Hagen). Our Vice-president **Marie Leech** was tireless with her networking, aimed at bringing the societies closer and recruiting new members, as was **Leona Geeves**.



Vice president Marie Leech with Director Suzanne Chaundy Cycle 1



Eleanor Greenwood (Sieglinde), James Egglestone (Siegmund), Marie Leech Cycle 1



Members Mel and Sarah Penicka-Smith with Bradley Cooper (Siegfried) Cycle 3



James Egglestone (Loge/Siegmund), his wife Antoinette Halloran (Brünnhilde), their agent Patrick Togher, Warwick Fyfe (Wotan) (WSNSW member Cycle 1 interval)



Interval drinks with happy members of WSVictoria and WSNSW Cycle 1



Secretary Ross Whitelaw, Deborah Humble (Erda, Waltraute), Marie Leech Cycle 3



Miki Oikawa (President, Wagner Society of Victoria), Juliana Lim (former Pres WS Singapore) Esteban Insausti, Agnes Brejzak at Die Walküre . .

MELBOURNE OPERA'S BENDIGO RING CYCLE - 2ND CYCLE

Review by Dr Terence Watson



The Ulumbarra Theatre



The Ulumbarra Theatre

Conductor: **Anthony Negus**; Melbourne Opera Orchestra

Creative Team—Director: **Suzanne Chaundy**; Set: **Andrew Bailey**;

Lighting: **Rob Sowinski**; Costumes: **Harriet Oxley**; Video Design: **Chris Hocking**; Sway Pole Director: **Phillip Gleeson**.

PERFORMERS:

Das Rheingold—Alberich: **Simon Meadows**; Wotan: **Warwick Fyfe**; Fricka: **Sarah Sweeting**; Freia: **Lee Abrahmsen**; Fafner: **Steven Gallop**; Fasolt: **Darren Jeffrey**; Froh: **Jason Wasley**; Donner: **Christopher Tonkin**; Loge: **James Egglestone**; Mime: **Robert Macfarlane**; Erda: **Deborah Humble**.

Die Walküre—Siegmond: **James Egglestone**; Sieglinde: **Lee Abrahmsen**; Hunding: **Steven Gallop**; Wotan: **Warwick Fyfe**; Brünnhilde: **Antoinette Halloran**; Fricka: **Sarah Sweeting**; Gerhilde: **Rosamund Illing**; Ortlinde: **Eleanor Greenwood**; Waltraute: **Jordan Kahler**; Schwertleite: **Dimity Shepherd**; Helmwig: **Olivia Cranwell**; Siegrune: **Naomi Flatman**; Gringarde: **Caroline Vercoe**; Rossweisse: **Sally-Anne Russell**.

Siegfried—Siegfried: **Bradley Daley**; Brünnhilde: **Antoinette Halloran**; Mime: **Robert Macfarlane**; The Wanderer: **Warwick Fyfe**; Alberich: **Simon Meadows**; Fafner: **Steven Gallop**; The Woodbird: **Rebecca Rashleigh**; Erda: **Deborah Humble**.

Götterdämmerung—Siegfried: **Bradley Daley**; Brünnhilde: **Antoinette Halloran**; Waltraute: **Deborah Humble**; Gunther: **Chris Hillier**; Gutrune: **Kerry Gill**; Alberich: **Simon Meadows**; Hagen: **Steven Gallop**; First Norn: **Liane Keegan**; Second Norn: **Rosamund Illing**; Third Norn: **Olivia Cranwell**; Woglinde: **Rebecca Rashleigh**; Wellgunde: **Naomi Flatman**; Flosshilde: **Karen Van Spall**.

Sway Pole Performers: Ashley Grunberg, Emily Ryan, and Meiwah Williams – but only two of them performed in their three appearances (twice as auxiliary Rhine Daughters, once as auxiliary Valkyries on horses on the poles!).

Since I reviewed this production of *Das Rheingold* in the March Newsletter Issue 33 / 160 and *Die Walküre* in the March Newsletter Issue 37 / 164 (both available on the Wagner Society in NSW website: www.wagner.org.au), I will only make passing comments on them before more extensive comments on the other two music-dramas.

The first point to make about the completed cycle is how significant Melbourne Opera's achievement is in Australian cultural history. It is the first production of The Ring Cycle in an Australian regional city; the first by a smaller Australian opera company (again putting Opera Australia on notice about its record of producing Wagner's operas); and the first to engage Australian singers for all the roles, (with the exception of Darren Jeffrey, who is English).

All the reviews of the cycles 1 & 2 praised the production as a generally unqualified success. I add my gratitude to Melbourne Opera for taking such a risk and completing it so magnificently. The coherence of the production—the common, but adaptable set with its moveable platform and ¾ circle as the backdrop; the exquisite lighting designs and video projections that underscored subtly and sensitively each scene's emotional

and psychological focus; the stage movements and interactions for most of the characters; and the exhilarating support from the conductor and orchestra for the singers who put their hearts into their portrayals—all contributed to a thoughtful, persuasive interpretation of one of the most complex artworks of the western cultural tradition. Chaundy's no-nonsense oasis of respect and appreciation among the frequent approaches that seek to critique (and even demolish) Wagner from within, or even from outside, his artwork. I would happily recommend this production to anyone coming to The Ring Cycle for the first time, as I would recommend the Metropolitan Opera's 1987 Otto Schenk production for its similar faithfulness to Wagner's stage directions and straightforward presentation of the narrative (and cast).

If you were not at one of the Bendigo cycles, I encourage you to search the web for images of the production to see how beautiful the set, lighting, and video projections were. The production can stand proudly in comparison with those of major opera companies around the world, indeed higher and more proudly than some recent Ring cycles in Bayreuth, for instance.

Das Rheingold

Where **Eddie Muliaumaseali**'i had sung Wotan in the first outing of this music-drama, **Warwick Fyfe** sang the role in all three of the Wotans in the 2nd Bendigo cycle, Erda was now **Deborah Humble**, and Fasolt was now **Darren Jeffrey**; otherwise, the major singers were the same as in the Melbourne premiere. In her program note, director **Suzanne Chaundy** explains her thinking about the way in which Wagner's work can be seen to relate to contemporary problems: "The other operas in the cycle are largely about people—albeit some heroic ones. We have asked ourselves what is the essence of the characters; the Gods, Giants, Nibelungen and Rheinmaidens [sic] and how they can be presented in a way that speaks to contemporary audiences, to reinforce the eternal relevance of this story of the machinations of power, entitlement and greed." The Bendigo cycles enabled her to complete her vision.

While the lighting effect for the arrival of the sun, a golden glow bathing the stage, was impressive; the gold itself was not. Alberich opens a little trapdoor and grabs a handful of what I took to be alluvial gold and smeared it over himself, making me wonder how he made a ring and a Tarnhelm out of that small haul. However, in Bendigo, the idea of alluvial gold seemed much more credible. As with the original production, Loge arrives, resplendent in a flame red suit with black pinstripes, a yellow T-shirt, and a cheeky porkpie hat with a red riband. Now, the costuming seemed to make both a political and a character point. As well as being dressed like a Mafia spiv, Loge, or rather **James Egglestone**, behaved like a Mafia heavy as well. Indeed, Egglestone was the only performer, in my opinion, who confidently and completely inhabited his character, filling his every moment on the stage with meaningful stances, gestures, and expressions. The descent into Nibelheim was again effected by raising the god's dais a little to reveal that the underside was fitted with pipes and lights suitable for an underground gold smelting operation—again very relevant in the context of Bendigo's goldmining history.

Perhaps because the Ulumbarra Theatre's stage is not as deep as the Athenaeum Theatre, characters who entered stage rear previously were now entering from stage front, as did Erda to warn Wotan to also surrender the ring to the giants. Again, very impressively, her face is projected onto the scrim at the rear of the stage where she appears rather like a cross between Medusa without serpentine hair and a portrait on an ancient platter with crazed glaze. This face slowly mouths something, but I still could not tell whether she was saying any or some of Erda's actual words. The image, though, again added *Unheimlichkeit* to the scene. The final moments of the production contained some of the most effective images. As the gods process up three small stairs at the back of the set, into the base of an enormous three-quarter circle cut into the



Das Rheingold Scene II

backdrop, through which we can see the tower of Valhalla, the dais rises to frame them, as if in a family portrait. Under the dais, and right at the back of the Nibelheim-space, a row of white-blue lights appears, with stage smoke drifting through them, suggesting the Rhine river again. Next, a row of rainbow-coloured lights appears behind. From the flies above, more rainbow lights bathe the stage and the stage smoke that is, by now, drifting up to the stage and into the auditorium—altogether a lovely image.

This was another exceptional performance of which the orchestra can again be very proud. Negus's direction resulted in a nuanced performance, with none of the voices drowned by Wagner's more exuberant dynamics. I do not know how many of the orchestra's members have played for Melbourne Opera's previous Wagner productions, but the orchestra is building up that impalpable quality that shines through when Wagner's style seeps into the performers' own relationship to the music to create what is often called the Wagner tradition of playing.

I have already commended James Egglestone for his embodiment of Loge, but I wish also to praise his voice, which again seemed to me to be one of the few of the cast to fit the character's Fach like a glove. The gods in general, though, failed again to persuade me that their voices were ideal for their roles. I still have reservations about the way in which Alberich in *Das Rheingold* is directed to behave like the village idiot, and yet becomes a threat to Wotan's universe in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*. And the way in which Mime in *Siegfried* is turned into a campy, nasty, deceitful caricature, and asked to don a pink apron! In Wagner's text, Mime is indeed nasty and deceitful, but he is also as desperate for appreciation and affection as Siegfried and so a complex study in ambivalence and desire—one of Wagner's fortes in characterisation.

I must praise again Meadows' voice. When he rose to his full height, freed briefly of the silly mannerisms of his characterisation, he thundered his curse in a thrilling, chilling voice that I could believe belonged to a character of great malevolence and power, who was also intelligent enough to conceive plans that would challenge the putative all-powerful god of the universe.

Die Walküre

With Melbourne Opera's *Die Walküre*, the significance of **Andrew Bailey's** conception of the major set elements of *Das Rheingold* becomes clearer, and created anticipation about how the set would be used for the last two as yet unseen music-dramas. The platform that descended and rose as needed in the first work to distinguish between the upper and lower realms of the gods and Nibelheim, served again generally to separate the world of the gods from the world of Sieglinde, Siegmund, and Hunding. When raised, the platform, with its hole in the middle, served as part of the backdrop, within which **Rob Sowinski's** lighting effects and **Chris Hocking's** video designs produced a wondrous variety of skylines from glorious dawn to threatening storm clouds, as well as effective changes of mood lighting on the stage, including an intensely bright light for Fricka's interrogation of Wotan. Out of a hole in the stage of Act 1, the tree Wagner calls for at the centre of Hunding's home stretches high into the flies, but it looks dead and wrecked, with all its branches broken off, as if Wotan had broken off most of the branches as he practised to make the spear that now has his runes of contract burned onto it.

In all cases, the singing in this revival was again admirable, and easily comparable with the standard in many other productions of *Die Walküre* I have seen. Chaundy is to be commended for eliciting such committed performances from her cast and having them move on the stage as if they really lived in the world of the music-drama. As the most immediately, emotionally arousing of the Ring Cycle operas, deliberately intended as such by Wagner, it can be easy to arouse superficial responses at particular moments during the drama. But it is much harder to craft a series of related actions and relationships that lead inexorably, it should feel, to each act's climax, but Chaundy achieves this with great skill. Sieglinde (sung again by Abrahmsen) and Siegmund (now sung by Egglestone) whose ranges of vocal delivery matched their emotional expression impeccably. Egglestone looked the part, tall and handsome, with a powerful, flexible tenor voice, a nice contrast to his louche Loge. Abrahmsen again conveyed a touching mixture of innocence, fear, and desire. The tenderness between them helped Chaundy "portray this epic work in a truly affecting way," as her notes say.

Wotan and Brünnhilde now take centre stage as their relationship breaks down through his intransigence (motivated as much by fear as by a sense of authority flouted) and her emerging independent identity. The Todesverkündigung is another of the moments in which Wagner pulls the heartstrings almost to breaking point. **Antoinette Halloran** and Egglestone wrought genuine pathos out of this scene, while also persuading me that this was a discussion between two highly intelligent people about the best course of action for all three characters. I have always understood this scene as the beginning of Brünnhilde's awakening into a subjectivity independent of her father, through the expansion of the compassion she has already shown Wotan after his demolition



Die Walküre Act III curtain call

by Fricka, and which will eventually blossom into her self-realisation in *Götterdämmerung*. The conclusion of this scene was also reinforced by the striking scenic image created with the lovers in the well of the ring circle of the stage, and Brünnhilde standing statuesquely above and behind them as she promises to protect him against her father's express command.

The swarming of the Valkyries at the beginning of Act 3 was again highly effective; their individualised movements around the stage showed their agitation and increasing fear of Wotan's anger as Brünnhilde reveals to them what she has done. Each Valkyrie was nicely characterised by some gesture or movement and intonation. Then Wotan storms in, bellowing anger, resentment, and betrayal. I have always admired Fyfe's voice; his power is something to witness. His skills in characterisation and his vocal power have grown even stronger and more subtle than in the original production of this music-drama.

Fyfe uses small gestures very effectively. Small moves to embrace Brünnhilde, then pulling back and sighing in frustration; waving his spear ineffectually; walking around in apparent aimlessness; then stabbing his spearpoint into the stage in impotence—all convey the impasse to which Wotan's own ambition, lust, self-disgust, and laws have brought him. Fyfe recapitulated the intense physical contact and sense of brokenness in the god of that earlier portrayal. It contrasted strongly with the increasing understanding Brünnhilde now shows, and the wistful compassion she bestows on the god who is falling to pieces before her eyes even more dramatically than after his encounter with Fricka.

Our Brünnhilde—Antoinette Halloran—as far as I can find, has not sung this role before. However, she was the Valkyrie Helmwig in the same production in Singapore in which Warwick Fyfe sang Wotan: *Die Walküre*, Orchestra of the Music Makers, Esplanade Concert Hall, Singapore, Singapore. You could watch this very fine semi-staged performance at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBSp8qQiiiQ&ab_channel=OrchestraoftheMusicMakers.

I was therefore a little apprehensive that Halloran would be able to match **Bradley Daley's** Siegfried as, in *Die Walküre*, she seemed either a little under-powered or holding her voice a little in reserve for the challenges ahead: it turned out to be the latter. While her voice was adequate to this opera, her acting showed that she understood the character very well.

A large part of the success of the production was due to the inspiring playing of the Melbourne Opera Orchestra who again put their hearts and souls into bringing the music to thrilling life.

There were many goose-bumpy moments with the playing of the clarinetist and oboist in the solos in which they accompany many of the most touching moments in the work. I found Negus's quite fast tempi matched very satisfyingly the rises and falls of the emotional intensity of the drama, and again guided the narrative energetically, but with subtlety and nuance in the moments of quietness and intimacy. Negus and the orchestra players were also helped by the warm acoustics of the Ulumbarra theatre. In this theatre, I was told, some of the orchestra players were actually under the floor of the first few rows of seats.

Siegfried

The setting for Act 1 was also located under the raised platform, showing a very messy lair for Mime and Siegfried, with the smelting and metalworking paraphernalia stage left and a kitchen stage right. A set of stairs led from behind these sets through the centre hole of the platform through which we could see a dark blue sky. Fyfe/Wotan/Wanderer made his first appearance in the opera to taunt Mime (again Robert Macfarlane) with his inability to admit his incapacity to mend Siegfried's father's sword, broken in *Die Walküre* by Wotan. Fyfe played up well the barely disguised disdain Wotan has for the stupid, self-centred Nibelung who cannot see the offer Wotan is making to give him the answer to the problem of re-forging Nothung. Sadly, Mime is made an object of heavy-handed directorial comedy so that the menace that he should show is diminished.



Antoinette Halloran as Brünnhilde

Act 2 is set on the platform, which is now turned into a forest by the simple act of dropping from the flies numerous bands of off-white cloth decorated with slashes of black to represent branches. This simple scenic gesture was remarkably effective in suggesting a new world in which there might be a chance for renewal, but of course greed and deceit are already in the forest: Fafner in his lair, Alberich skulking in the shadows, the Wanderer about to enter, and Mime on his way with Siegfried. Again, the lighting effects and video projections enhanced the music's sense of menace and doom. In the ¾ circle a scaly body was projected to hint at what was about to happen.

When Siegfried awakens the dragon, the green scaly body changes into a dark golden Chinese dragon's head, perhaps another nod to Bendigo's rich heritage of Chinese life and culture dating from the gold rushes. The dragon continued to writhe across the screen until Siegfried kills the giant. The Woodbird coyly flits among the drapery trees until she flies off to show Siegfried the way to his future bride. Intriguingly, after Siegfried kills both Fafner, with whom he quickly established a kind of heroic rapport, and Mime, Siegfried seems to develop a degree of compassion for them both, while also mocking them by positioning their bodies back to back as if guarding the entrance to Fafner's lair

Wotan's summoning of Erda at the beginning of Act 3 was so powerful I wondered if any creature could have resisted the call. Again, Humble as Erda was stately, though deeply confused and conscious that her time had passed. Her voice

and body conveyed her resignation and despair poignantly. The confrontation between Siegfried and Wotan was another highlight. Their voices were very well matched, with Fyfe reducing his volume to signal his own resignation and despair, but also his reluctance to concede to himself that the end for which he had wished earlier was now approaching as the on-fire Siegfried smashed his spear on his way to his first lay.

While Halloran took a while to warm up in her appearance at the end of the opera, Daley had been singing powerfully and very expressively for some 3 hours (showing that his previous fine interpretation of a loving Siegmund to his sister/wife was just one side of a highly talented actor-singer). Nonetheless, they were very well matched vocally and in their interactions.

The performance more than met my expectations: the singers were convincing, the set continued to be used in clever and appropriate ways for the different locations, and the orchestral playing had strengthened, as if they were now relishing the increasingly complex and demanding writing Wagner was producing after finishing *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. The orchestra's playing in the opening to act 3, which Wagner wrote after the aforementioned works, sent goosebumps up and down my spine—a rare occurrence in my jaded old age. The lighting and video effects for Brünnhilde's awakening, reflecting her greetings to the light and the sun, presented a dazzling sunrise, leaving me with joy and wonder as the lovers embraced as Siegmund and Sieglinde had done under moonlight.

Götterdämmerung

With both Daley and Halloran having won our ears and appreciation for their acting, I knew that the experience of the final music-drama would be memorable. And it was. From the weird opening bars, through the Norns' long lament over time past, present, and not to come (for them), to Siegfried and Brünnhilde sorting out their marital relationship (into a very conventional set of roles, thanks Wagner), to Siegfried's arrival in the Gibichung Hall, the 2+ hours of the Prelude and Act 1 passed very quickly (aided by Negus's still fast tempi). I am grateful to Cosima Wagner for her insistence that there be a scene between Brünnhilde and her sister Waltraute, since it gave Halloran and Humble the chance to sing together as they range from gentle joy at seeing each other again, through appeals and rejections, anger and resentment, to the final raging parting—a true highlight of vocal and physical characterisation.



Bradley Daley (Siegfried), Steven Gallop (Hagen), Christopher Hillier (Gunther)

Again, the drawbridge platform created the spaces, with the Norns underneath (though they were supposed to be on a mountaintop), and the Gibichungs in a modernist, minimalist living room that must have cost a fortune from the local de rigueur interior designer—only two very uncomfortable looking small benches to sit on! However, through the $\frac{3}{4}$ circle at the rear we could see over the Rhine River to the other bank. The river very effectively changed colour and movement in accordance with the emotional temperature and moods of the characters and their actions.

The singing in this act was very even, with the balance between the various characters ebbing and flowing according to the narrative flow. In general, the singers' tasks were made a little easier because the Ulumbarra Theatre, with 950 seats, is smaller than the larger Regent and Her Majesty's Theatres (over 2000 and 1800 seats, respectively) in which the previous productions were presented. This meant that all the singers in The Ring Cycle did not need to strain their voices to project to the cheap seats at the back, and that there was more chance for interaction between the singers as they did not need to reserve all their energy for projecting. The bloodbrother oath scene between Siegfried, Gunther, and Hagen had, for example, almost the atmosphere of two mates in a pub drinking each other's health.

One of my favourite scenes in this work is the unheimlich encounter between Hunding and Alberich at the beginning of Act 2 in which they attempt to outmanoeuvre each other in their pursuit of the ring. It is a moment of high dramatic irony, since we know (if we are familiar with the story) that neither will gain the prize. The following musical interlude is also one of my favourites as the gentle horn music heralding the dawn modulates into the corrosive harmonies and motif of the Curse.

The arrival of the Vassals in Act 2 for only the second chorus episode in The Ring Cycle, after the Valkyries have left the scene, is always a highlight of *Götterdämmerung* and we were not disappointed. Their discipline, accuracy, diversity, and sheer vocal power were gripping. The choral buzz rose again when the women arrived to add vocal and colourful variety (the Vassals are all in black). Hunding's summoning of the Vassals was also thrilling and menacing in its intensity.

The scenery for this act was spectacularly simple, with a huge, but what I took to be ironic, Celtic love knot posing as both a religious icon and a very stylish light descending from the flies to hover over the Gibichung's modernist Hall. While Gunther (**Christopher Hillier**) was adequate to the role of a silly, decrepit representative of a moribund royal house, he was out-sung and out-acted by his half-brother Hagen (Steven Gallop again after his intimidating appearance as Hunding). Halloran rose to rousing vocal and acting heights in her denunciation of Siegfried's apparent deceitfulness and her spearpoint oath.

In Act 3, Daley's final aria, delivered as he dies from Hagen's spear thrust into his back, was increasingly emotional, lyrical, and intense as he remembers his first encounter with Brünnhilde. The scenery was exquisite, with the dying Siegfried, among the forest draperies, lifting his arms toward the blue heavens in the $\frac{3}{4}$ circle. Siegfried's Funeral March was appropriately thunderous and lyrically wistful and melancholy by turns. Back in the Gibichung Hall, as Brünnhilde calls for a funeral pyre for Siegfried, herself, and Grane, the lighting changes to violent red as the fire takes hold. Halloran certainly let her voice rip for the Immolation scene taking the entire audience with her as she farewelled the gods, and sent the ravens to take the embers of the Ash Tree to set Valhalla afire. In the $\frac{3}{4}$ circle we briefly saw two huge projections of ravens obeying her call. She then tenderly lay beside Siegfried to be

consumed. Unfortunately, as the Rhine River rises to flood the Gibichung Hall, the sway dancers return, and refuse to depart. We are then treated to a never-ending swaying pair over the top of the couple who are supposed to be the centre of the drama—the dead Siegfried and Brünnhilde engulfed in flames. In Wagner’s text, the Rhine River retreats as the fire reaches Valhalla and destroys the gods, as well as the Gibichung Hall. In my view, keeping the sway polers ducking

back and forth destroyed what should be the transcendent effect of the music and the final image.

As far as I could see, the other 949 audience members rose with me to give all the performers and creative team a thunderous ovation of gratitude for such a wondrous and moving experience. As with my responses to most other productions of The Ring Cycle, I was ready to start again.

THE BENDIGO RING CYCLE SETS A NEW STANDARD FOR OPERA IN AUSTRALIA

The Bendigo Ring Cycle was a surprisingly satisfying achievement, given that it is the product of a registered charitable organisation, supported by very generous sponsors, and probably the Bendigo City Council and Tourism Victoria, and it will enter Australian theatrical history for its ambition and the quality of its accomplishment. Victorian Opera, in contrast, receives about 67% of its income from government sources. Melbourne Opera website notes: “The current Melbourne Opera Orchestra has been developed into Melbourne Opera’s third orchestra since its formation in 2002. The Orchestra leads an active concert life as well as playing in the opera pit. The Melbourne Opera Orchestra has appeared at the Melbourne Concert Hall (Hamer Hall), Crown Casino, Her Majesty’s Theatre, and the Athenaeum Theatre, and at numerous regional Performing Arts Centres and wineries, and in December 2015-January 2016 undertook a very successful tour into China, and has been invited to make two further visits there this year.” On this basis, we can look forward to the orchestra building on its remarkable achievements in playing Wagner’s artworks, especially after the guidance, training, and encouragement of their conductor for their most recent productions of Wagner’s operas Anthony Negus.

According to Wikipedia, “Melbourne Opera was founded in 2002...dedicated to producing opera and associated art forms in Melbourne, Victoria. [...] Melbourne Opera is the business and trading name of South East Regional Touring Opera Ltd. [...] Despite receiving no government funding since its foundation, the company mounts between three and five main stage productions each year.” Apparently, in 2005, it was to be funded by a grant of A\$7.6 million from the Australian government for the development of opera in Victoria—it seems that none of the money reached Melbourne Opera. Over 18 years, it has produced 38 operas, and employed a 96 member orchestra, 177 performers, and 329 chorus members. Of The Ring Cycle in particular, Sophie Founé reports in her “Ring cycle premieres” article in the 30 March 2023 Bendigo Times: “With an all-Australian cast, aside from the conductor, the production has involved about 300 people over three years and cost \$5 million.”

I understand that the box office returns broke even for the three cycles—I hope that this is a preliminary and conservative result so that Melbourne Opera decides it is worthwhile reviving it in the next few years. And, after The Ring Cycle, and a 2018 *Tristan und Isolde*, can we look forward to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Parsifal* before long? I certainly hope so.

REACTION TO THE BENDIGO RING by WAGNER SOCIETY MEMBER DOUGLAS STURKEY

The whole festival-like experience in Bendigo was wonderful. A conscious decision had been taken to perform the four parts of each Cycle on Fridays and Sundays over two consecutive weekends, in the expectation that visitors would pump some money into the economy during the intervening weekdays. For those of us who needed even more music, there were superb recitals on the non-“Ring” days which illustrated the work of Wagner’s contemporaries who were influenced (positively or negatively) by his *oeuvre*. I went to almost everything.

The staging of Melbourne Opera’s production of the Cycle was excellent. It was clear, uncluttered and faithful to the text, for which Director, **Suzanne Chaundy** deserves considerable credit. This was my tenth “Ring Cycle”; and there were scenes which were the best I have ever seen. Just to pick the first - the ascent to Valhalla at the end of *Das Rheingold*. Gone was the staircase to the heavens painted in rainbow stripes, to be replaced by joyful New Year’s Eve-type revelry amongst the gods in which silent ‘fireworks’ (no bangs!) emitted puffs of ‘clouds’ in rainbow colours. It really looked like a celebration in

honour of the realisation of Wotan’s ambition, even though we never saw the castle.

Musically, the whole effort was commendable. There were ‘stars’ like **Warwick Fyfe’s** Wotan/Wanderer, and **Antoinette Halloran’s** Brünnhilde (although some others would have preferred a rounder and fuller voice), to whom I would add my personal plaudits to **Deborah Humble** (Erda/Waltraute), **James Egglestone** (*Loge/Siegmond*), and **Bradley Daley** (Siegfried). The orchestra, under **Anthony Negus**, was pretty good too, although the brass section clearly had some noticeable weaknesses. Nevertheless, the grand sweep of the score upheld its majesty and the orchestra certainly swept us along, comfortably so.

I did not meet anyone who was not impressed by Melbourne Opera’s overall presentation. It was well worth the effort (to get to Bendigo) and the accommodation/ticket costs. And the venue - a renovated and imaginatively rejuvenated Sandhurst Gaol, now the Ulumbarra Theatre - is an excellent and interesting destination in its own right, with good seating and sightlines for around 900 patrons