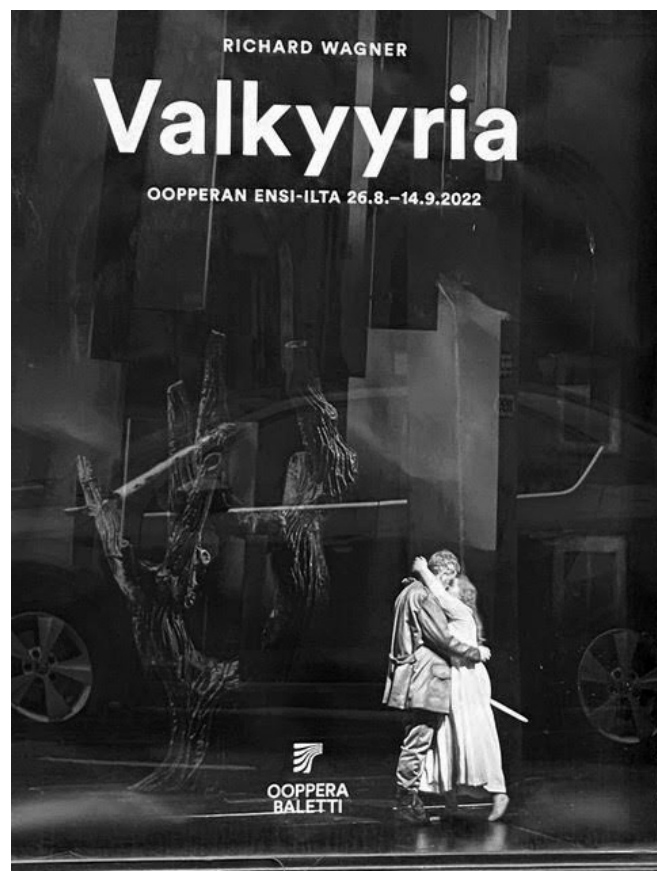


AN ACCIDENTAL VALKYRIE IN HELSINKI

Wagner Society member The Hon Justice **François Kunc** sent us this review from Finland



Let me explain immediately that the (happy) accident was all mine and not Wagner's. I was in Finland last August/September to fulfill an ambition to attend the annual Sibelius Festival in Lahti, just north of Helsinki. It was by good luck rather than good management that my pre-festival days in Helsinki coincided with the second performance of the Covid-delayed *Die Walküre* in the evolving cycle by the Finnish National Opera. And it was, as they say, well worth the detour.

The cast were, as best I could tell, nearly all Scandinavian, and mostly Finnish. For a country of 5.5 million, it punches well above its weight when it comes to classical music. In the new modern concert hall known as the Musiikkitalo there was a glass case containing batons of famous Finnish conductors: there were a lot batons, with the names of all of the former owners being well known on the world musical stage.

So, what of the performance? Outstanding in nearly all respects. The opera house is large and modern. It was lovely to encounter members of the Finnish Wagner Society in the foyer selling their wares. (see photo) I had a seat just off centre about a third of the way back in the stalls and enjoyed a clean acoustic that carried both orchestra and voices with what I thought was an ideal balance of definition and warmth.

The two critical pairings - Siegmund (Joachim Bäckström) and Sieglinde (Miina-Liisa Väreälä), and Wotan (Tommi Hakala) and Brünnhilde (Johanna Rusanen) – were exemplary. Bäckström had a beautiful rather than big tenor which matched his characterisation, which moved in Act I from exhaustion to exaltation in a fine musical arc. And while not a huge voice, he was well able to produce the ringing tones the part requires. Väreälä also has a wonderful voice which I suspect still has a way to go in development, but confidently presented the emotional palette the role requires.

As Wotan, dressed in a black SS style uniform, Hakala gave his all, perhaps starting to tire towards the end. His was one of the most poetic Wotans I have heard, putting well thought through emphasis and meaning into the words, ensuring that colour and volume brought out the text to its best advantage. Rusanen was an engaging Brünnhilde, who conveyed a real sense of the enthusiastic ingenue, desperately wanting to please Wotan, but who is then shocked and confused at her own strange, new feelings for the twins. I was left looking forward to seeing how she would develop the character into the loving, tragic, defiant adult of *Götterdämmerung*.

The rest of the cast were all well and truly up the task. One of the joys of revisiting these great works is when a director creates a moment which, like a lightning flash, casts a familiar scene or character in a new perspective for the viewer. For me one such moment came when the fine Hunding of Turunen insinuated a relationship of sexual abuse of Sieglinde by himself and one of his Neiding cohort. It was chilling and spoke volumes about who Hunding was, in this case emphasised by being dressed as some kind of priest (as to which more below).

Notwithstanding my overall strong recommendation for this production, I did have some reservations. The Finland National Opera Orchestra under Hannu Lintu had a fine sound and maintained an overall excellent balance with the singers. It was definitely a case of co-operation rather than competition between stage and pit. However, from what I thought was generally such a good orchestra, there were several moments of poor ensemble between brass and strings, together with two or three distractions of wayward playing by the brass.

It was only the second performance of the run, so I hope these moments were able to be repaired. It was particularly disappointing in hindsight after the quality of what I heard a few days later in Lahti. The fault may have been compounded by what I thought were some unnecessarily fast tempi from Lintu. While not inviting a Knappertsbusch like pace, I personally prefer less St Vitus dance than is sometimes the fashion (and, yes, I must confess to luxuriating annually in the great, but by today's standards hopelessly lugubrious, Karl Richter recording of the Matthew Passion).



that was the only unwelcome distraction in what was overall a very fine performance. And if you want to see it for yourself rather than just read about it, I am delighted to report that it is available for free viewing on demand at arena.yle.fi.

I hope you will forgive me if I end where I began – Sibelius. Lahti is a former industrial town a short drive north of Helsinki.

The production was not without its oddities, or at least things which may have seemed odd to me without appreciating the full cultural resonance of some touches for Finns. The general setting seemed to be Second World War with Wotan in black Nazi-style uniform operating out of a bunker. But the Neiding appeared to be back in the nineteenth century, in what struck me as an isolated Old Believer community deep in the forest. Hunding was dressed as a priest with a prominent pectoral cross (albeit in the Western style), which of itself is fine, but which made his pagan appeal to Fricka feel rather out of place.

There was also one piece of distracting *Regietheater* (with apologies if I just did not get the point). When the Valkyries brought the dead heroes to Valhalla, most of them (and all of the non-singing supernumerary Valkyries, several played by men) bared their chests to wave large, fake breasts at the audience. However, at least for this audience member,

You can visit Sibelius' home and grave in the countryside on the way. The town is on the shore of one of the largest of Finland's 160,000 (or thereabouts) lakes and surrounded by some of the however many millions of the country's birch trees. On the beautiful lakeshore they have built a stunning timber concert hall encased in what looks like a glass box. The hall is home to the Lahti Symphony Orchestra under the very impressive chief conductorship of Dalia Stasevska. And they know how to play Sibelius.

In addition to the home team, the festival guest orchestra was the Estonian Festival Orchestra under its founder Paavo Järvi. The Estonians are another Baltic musical powerhouse. Their performance of the Sibelius Second Symphony was quite simply the best I have heard anywhere. Don't let 30 hours flying put you off if you ever get the chance to hear them play.