

THE BRISBANE RING DECEMBER 2023

THREE IMPRESSIONS

THE FIRST CYCLE by Terence Watson

Who could have imagined, even after the 1998, 2004, 2013, and 2016 *Ring Cycles* in Adelaide and Melbourne, that Australia would have two productions in the same year. Even more surprising is that a small state-based company achieved a remarkably successful production at its first attempt, while the national opera company chose not to revive again its bicentenary production, but to embark on a very different production. This situation gives us the unprecedented opportunity to consider the merits of both productions and to wonder about the future of Wagner productions generally in Australia. I won't repeat my comments about the Bendigo *Ring Cycle*; they are available at the Wagner Society in New South Wales website at <https://wagner.org.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/0.pdf> or in the June Quarterly Issue Vol 42 No 169. Here, though, I will compare some aspects of the two production's approaches to staging this monumental artwork. There is no doubt that the Brisbane *Ring Cycle* will also go into Australian theatrical history as a spectacular presentation with digital imagery that often delighted, always amazed, and many times established a suggestive and emotionally arousing setting for the narrative.

One of the selling points of Opera Australia's Brisbane production of *The Ring Cycle* was that it would be the "world's first fully digital *Ring Cycle* production." Quite what that claim entails is problematic. Opera Australia's production of this work is not the first to employ digital projections. The Metropolitan Opera's 2010-2012 production by Robert LePage, for example, used digital imagery extensively: even more so in its 2019 revival. If I recall correctly, all the imagery was of the natural world, and intended to project a recognisable locale onto the Machine that dominated the stage. The Bendigo *Ring* also used digital projections tightly integrated into the *mise en scène*, also largely to establish a locale for the characters, but also to influence the audience's mood (*Stimmung*) in accordance with Wagner's credo in *A Communication/Revelation to My Friends*:

...no mood (Stimmung) could be permitted to be struck in any one of these scenes, that did not stand in a weighty relation to the moods of all the other scenes, so that the development of the moods from out each other; and the constant obviousness of this development, should establish the unity of the drama in its very mode of expression. Each of these chief moods, in keeping with the nature of the material, must also gain a definite musical expression, which should display itself to the sense of hearing as a definite musical Theme (369).



Das Rheingold Scene 1

The creative team of the Brisbane *Ring Cycle* clearly had these effects on mood in mind as they aspired to expand the range and significance of the digital imagery in its evocation of mood and emotion.

The program contains comments about the intentions of the company and the creative team, about the significance of *The Ring Cycle* generally (by conductor Philippe Auguin), and this production (by commissioner Lyndon Terracini, CEO Fiona Allen, Director Chen Shi-Zheng, and Digital Content Designer Leigh Sachwitz).

I will focus on these comments to try to understand and evaluate the intentions and the results, rather than a scene-by-scene account of the production. There are many insightful, sometimes witty, and generally laudatory reviews on the Internet by Australia's music and theatre critics. Our members will be familiar with Dr David Larkin from his informative talks to the Wagner Society and his reviews are well worth reading. Other reviews were published in *Limelight* and major newspapers. Links to some of these reviews are given below. I agree with many of their assessments, but my overall reaction is that this production is less successful as a presentation of Wagner's great artwork than the Bendigo *Ring*, though clearly much more spectacular to watch.

Both Fiona Allen, and Director Chen, tell us that Lyndon Terracini approached Chen to create a "fully digital production" in 2017, i.e. a year after the revival of Opera

Australia's bicentenary Cycle. This might make us wonder why it didn't deserve a second revival. Most other opera companies keep productions in their repertoire for many years. Perhaps Lyndon will tell us the reasons in his memoirs! More intriguingly, we might ask why Lyndon was thinking digitally. We might recall that, on 9 December 2008, the Age's Robin Usher had reported that the one-time owners of *Lonely Planet*, Maureen and Tony Wheeler, were interested in helping to subsidise a *Ring Cycle*. At the time, there was speculation that the artwork could be presented in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne with digital projections to reduce the cost of the production. Sadly, that venture failed to happen, but an Opera Australia production did arrive in 2013. Was Lyndon, though, building on that earlier idea? But what did Lyndon and Chen understand a "fully digital production" to be like?

First, I feel a need to register a quibble about the concept of a "digital production." This would seem to be misleading, since at least half the production must be analogue, that is, the singers, the orchestra, the props, and of course the many screens. A fully digital production would then seem to need to be presented in Virtual Reality or Augmented Reality. The creative team for Bayreuth's current production of *Parsifal* seems to have attempted (generally unsuccessfully, some reports suggest), to present such an experience at selected moments, when the more adventurous and/richer members of the audience were instructed to don their VR goggles. We could wonder at the reaction of the singers to a gaggle of blank goggles in the audience instead of human eyes watching their intense performances.

In response to Lyndon's brief, Chen tells us in his Director's notes for the program that he conceived the production as a "game-changing kind of a Chinese *Ring Cycle*," then he says he developed the concept into a "version that's neither a modern interpretation of classical Western culture, nor an adaptation to an Eastern framework." Chen then outlines his ambitious intention to universalise the work: "to expand the works references beyond European history to our shared universe, making it relevant to all people — a new world myth, like a mosaic where each jagged piece reflects our past, present, and future." We might consider that, with its admixture of mythological elements from ancient Greek, Roman, Christian, Nordic, Icelandic, Hindu, and Buddhist cultures, Wagner had done a pretty good job of creating a universal work in his own "mosaic." This aspiration, though, might explain the images of the universe in act three of *Die Walküre*, more galactic imagery in act two of *Siegfried*, and the galaxies seen flying back and forth through the palace windows in the latter part of act three of *Götterdämmerung*, as well as an array of popular culture references to science-fiction and science-fantasy movies, games, etc.

All directors of new productions of *The Ring Cycle* are probably aware of Wagner's oft quoted dictum from his letter of 8 September 1852 to Franz Liszt in Weimar: "*Kinder, macht Neues! Neues! und abermals Neues! —hängt Ihr Euch ans Alte, so hat euch der Teufel der Unproduktivität, und Ihr seid die traurigsten Künstler!*" ("Children, do new things! New things! and new things again! —if you cling to the old, the devil of unproductivity/barrenness will have you and you will be the saddest of artists!") (to Franz Liszt, Weimar Zurich, 8 September 1852).

Rather than enunciating a general principle, as many directors et al have understood it, Wagner seems to have intended it as a specific critique of people who reproduce or rearrange their own works, rather than creating unique new works, as he believed he was doing. He specifically refers to Berlioz's reworking of his opera *Benvenuto Cellini*, a waste of time, in Wagner's view. Rather, Berlioz should create new works. However, when it comes to a new staging of an existing work, we enter different waters. We are often willing to see new, provocative stagings of Shakespeare's plays, especially if they help us understand the complex works better. The question might then be, how far we are willing to follow a staging that seems to have a life independent of the artwork itself and which might not illuminate the artwork much or at all? These philosophical and technical questions have faced western culture for many centuries, as directors tackled the challenges in staging, for instance, ancient Greek tragedies.

I do not know if Chen was aware that he was also entering into a long-standing philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural debate in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when he tells us that he wanted to use Wagner's artwork to create a "new mythology." The German philosopher Schelling captured this aspiration for a new mythology in his 1802-03 *Philosophy of Art*, some of which Wagner probably read. Schelling writes:

Every truly creative individual must himself create his own mythology, and this can occur using virtually any material or content, thus also from that of a higher physics [because Schelling wanted to blend philosophy and science]. This mythology, however, will quite definitely be created, and is not allowed to be designed simply according to the instructions of certain ideas of philosophy, since in the latter case it would likely be impossible to give it independent poetic life (p. 75).

This aspiration was and still is "in the air" in many cultures. We see it in Western capitalist consumerism, the Chinese Communist Party's reframing of Marxist Communism, the Russian president's construction of an imaginary imperial history, and in former President Trump's deconstruction of US democratic mythology, along with the efforts of lesser demagogues around the world.

What then might Chen's interpretation of Wagner's own mythopoeic aspirations entail? Chen points us toward a core element of both his interpretation and the aesthetic in which it will be embedded: "To me, ancient mythology is equivalent to modern science fiction." I would have liked to have read more about what he meant by this statement, given that most modern science fiction recapitulates many of the same motifs and themes as ancient mythology, though in radically different costumes and locales. So, does Chen mean that replacing horns and bearskins (at the worst) with Matrix-style trench coats, and locales from the "multiverse," which Chen also mentions, achieves his intention of creating a "new mythology?" From the variety of cultural references contained in the multitude of visual images, it could be concluded that Chen has not created a "new mythology," but a largely independent artwork parallel to Wagner's own mosaic of mythological references. I think that, despite some of the

questionable ethical and moral implications of some pieces of Wagner’s mosaic, his pieces form a generally coherent mythology about human beings and our ambivalence about taking a stand on hard ethical subjects.

Ironically, perhaps, once we leave the realm of the gods, the digital imagery becomes relatively representational, so that we can recognise that we are “in” the Hunding hut, “on” the Rhine, “in” a castle hall, etc, at the same time as a cascade of coruscating, kaleidoscopic more abstract images flood our vision. And our minds, since many of the images reference films and series some of us would have seen. But what is the “new mythology” being created by the digital staging? I haven’t been able to formulate one, partly because I don’t think one is on offer.

The Designer of the “digital stage,” Leigh Sachwitz, offered an expansion of Chen’s concept — “it’s total sci-fi about gods and dragons in the struggle for survival.” This seems, at one extreme, to reduce centuries of human mythopoeticizing to the often-juvenile stories concocted from one or other of human myths for blockbuster films and video games aimed at teenagers, and at the other, to the elevation of works created by one person, such as novels, movies, series, to the status of mythologies that have emerged out of centuries of human experience, contemplation, and imagination.

Sachwitz explained what she meant by the ambit concept of a “digital stage” by referring to “digital and interactive design” and a “long piece of modern digital art,” which suggests that the design could stand alone in an art gallery. Sachwitz saw her task as “delivering images which go way beyond creating scenery and evoke deep emotion inside the audience member. [...] To take the audience in journey, to let them play with their own imagination, to inspire.” The images which Chen and she and her creative team have chosen are indeed radically different from the generally supplementary uses of digital projections in earlier productions of *The Ring Cycle*, and from the very naturalistic scenery that Wagner approved for the premiere, and which reflected his personal tastes in art. In many instances, the images are also inspirational, or rather, aspirational, in seeking to direct the audience members’ emotions and moods in particular directions.

One question raised by Sachwitz’s approach to the role of digital imagery in the production is whether



Keanu Reeves as Neo in *The Matrix*

or not the emotions to be evoked in the audience members complement, contradict, or reinforce the emotional effects that Wagner seems to have been seeking to arouse. A situation in which the scenic elements complement Wagner’s intentions about emotional responses will probably result in a relatively straight production. One which contradicts or questions Wagner’s intentions will probably result in a more controversial directorial production, even, in some people’s view, a “Eurotrash” production.

There is no doubt that this production falls somewhere in between: it is not provocative in any “Eurotrash” manner, nor does it question Wagner’s underlying political views, nor does it insert overt political messages. Yet, the digital imagery takes the production well out of the “straightforward” category. However, if the observation of my companion in this experience is right, then the projections in the curtain of what seems like a cascade of lights and Chinese characters do evoke the opening of the film *The Matrix*, then the creative team might be understood to be exploring the supposed difference between reality for people in the Matrix, and Reality for those outside the Matrix who manipulate the reality of those inside. We could read this as referring to the gods of *Das Rheingold* as those who exist in Reality, and the other characters as existing in an illusory reality; or vice versa, perhaps.

We could also understand this in a Feuerbachian sense that the gods are products of human imagination and we have lost control of them. Chen makes a similar point when he asserts that he sees the work as presenting the “core idea of gods and



Daniel Sumegi as Wotan 1999 Brisbane 2023 OA photo

humans being one.” Wagner was deeply influenced by some elements of Feuerbach’s philosophy, particularly his assertion in his 1841 *The Essence of Christianity*, which Wagner read in 1849 in Zurich: “*The personality of God is thus the means by which man converts the qualities of his own nature into the qualities of another being. — of a being external to himself. The personality of God is nothing else than the projected personality of man*” (226).

Mythologies can be understood as presenting a people’s broad consensus about who they are and what their purpose is. On that score, does *The Matrix*, or any of the other movies or series really represent a consensus of US, Western, or global views about who human beings as a whole are, and what our purpose might be?

Where, then, does such a view of reality/Reality leave an audience trying to decipher or decode the many images presented to us in this production? Its immediate effect, for me at least, was to split my attention as I tried to make sense of the imagery while also trying to both enjoy and assess the singing, orchestral playing, characterisations, and interactions between the characters, which would have surely been Wagner’s preference? But then Wagner built his own politico-aesthetic-moral agenda into the artwork. The difference, though, is that his agenda is fully integrated into *The Ring Cycle*, whereas the messages of the digital imagery compete with, even displace at times, Wagner’s messages.

In the post-modern age, perhaps, we have become familiar with the dangers of accepting anyone’s “agenda” uncritically, and with the benefits of identifying elements in artwork that no longer reflect contemporaneous ethical and cultural values. Most “Eurotrash” directors would justify their interpretations on such a basis. In none of Chen’s or Sachwitz’s comments is there any suggestion that they are seeking to impose any particular critique on Wagner or his artwork. Rather, their comments suggest a great respect for this monumental artistic achievement.

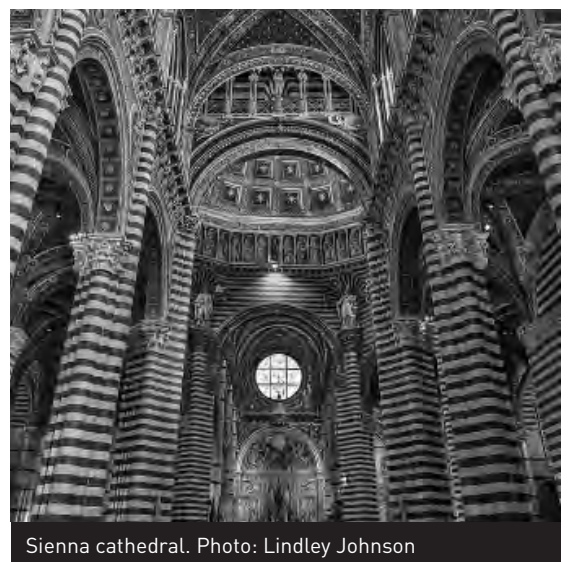
Unlike Chen and Sachwitz and her team, the conductor Philippe Auguin has long experience in opera, and Wagner in particular. Auguin pointed to one of the aspects of the discourses of the artwork when he introduced the concept of the “ideal spectator.” Wagner had very specific ideas about this spectator that entailed the submission of this spectator to his changing politico-aesthetic-moral guidance, as embodied in his artwork, from vague *Junge Deutschland* principles to outright reactionary doctrines in his later essays, such as *Was ist Deutsch, Religion und Kunst, Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik*, and *Was nützt diese Erkenntnis?* (*Of What Use is this Knowledge?*). In this context,

“ideal spectator” is a loaded term in any discussion of Wagner’s relationship to his audiences. In brief, that figure could be described as anyone open to indoctrination by Wagner through his artwork. Auguin seems to point to this feature of Wagner’s aesthetic practice in suggesting that the artwork contains “subliminal messages or clear warnings:” to whom and about what? I would have liked to read more of Auguin’s thinking on this point. He hinted at the orchestra’s crucial role in promoting Wagner’s agenda when he said the orchestra “tells us the true meaning of each moment in the work.” It might be true within Wagner’s *Weltanschauung*, but is it true in and of itself? Is it true, for example, that the greatest sacrifice a female human being can make is to immolate herself on a Pyre that is also burning her lover and their horse?

I said earlier that Wagner’s preferred very realistic portrayals of the locales of each episode of his artwork. He did insert stage directions as guidance, as he does at the beginning of *Das Rheingold*: “*At the bottom of the Rhine (Greenish twilight, lighter above, darker below. The upper part of the scene is filled with moving water, which restlessly streams from right to left. Toward the bottom, the waters resolve themselves into a fine mist, so that the space, to a man’s height from the stage, seems free from the water, which floats like a train of clouds over the gloomy depths.*” This stage direction seems to call for the kind of dynamic video projection Sachwitz and her team created. His stage direction for scene two calls for a more realistic painted backdrop or projection: “An open space on a mountain height (The dawning day lights up with growing brightness a castle with glittering pinnacles, which stands on the top of a cliff in the background. Between this cliff and the foreground, a deep valley through which the Rhine flows is supposed.” For *Parsifal*, he similarly wanted his set designers Max Brückner and Paul von Joukowski to reproduce the nave of Siena Cathedral as the Grail Hall—a provocative moment of cultural appropriation in itself.



Grail Hall for Parsifal by Paul von Joukowski-Public Domain



Sienna cathedral. Photo: Lindley Johnson

It is therefore one of the interesting features of the Brisbane digital staging that its imagery tends towards more realism as the artwork moves from the gods to the mediaeval human world of the Gibichungs and their Vassals, although the realism is qualified by many popular culture references to such entertainments as “The Game of Thrones,” “The Wheel of Time,” and *The Lord of the Rings*—my thanks to another Wagner Society in NSW member for these suggestions. These references seem to be very strong in the digital rendering of the Gibichung Hall, while the forest in which Siegfried dies recalls the glittering tree in the film *Avatar*. The references to *The Lord of the Rings* seem to include Sauron’s eye, which seems to dominate much of the ending of the final music-drama—possibly Wotan’s or Alberich’s eye watching the world nearing its end. It would result in an even longer review to comment more specifically on the digital imagery. If members were not able to see the production in Brisbane, there are images of it on the internet, as well as in the many reviews published in the press coverage (see below).

I’m happy to concede that I am not acquainted with gods or demigod heroes, that I know of, nor have I visited any divine realm, so I have no idea what they might behave like or look like. While dazzled by the changing kaleidoscopic imagery of *Rheingold*, I found it hard to derive a cogent understanding of the imagery. Once past the exquisite realistic opening scene of the Rhine daughters frolicking in the Rhine and over their Coral playground, the rest of the digital projections range between abstract (horizontal bands of colour in white), semi-realistic (for the underground pillared chamber of Nibelheim), to the abstract again (for the piling of the gold), to the rave party (when the gods enter Valhalla through a tunnel of smoke and laser light with rainbow bursts of colour).

Many props were wheeled on and off by one or some of the many helpers, according to the narrative. Wotan’s and Fricka’s Divan was one of the most effective of these. The quasi-Chinese Divan and accompanying lion dragons served many purposes. It arrived with Fricka in lotus position and Wotan in louche lounging position. During their contretemps in *Walküre*, the Divan splits apart to represent their marital dissension. Inexplicably, in *Rheingold* the Divan becomes the locus for Freia’s covering with gold. Except she isn’t! She stands next to the Divan while the Nibelungen workers, helped puzzlingly by numbers of Valhalla helpers, pile the gold on to the Divan. Freia is never obscured from anyone’s sight! The Divan and its golden cargo and Fasolt’s body are then just wheeled off stage — practical, but hardly thrilling.

For *Walküre*, the Coral was matched by a large Bonsai tree also in white, and also lit by various colours to match the action and set the mood. Brünnhilde was consigned to a triangular prop, point down, reminiscent of the floating rocks of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park in Hunan province in China or, as my companion said, of those in the first *Avatar* film. A delightful touch was the wheeling on stage of a small Chinese dragon that encircled the Rock and then

burst into flame. Sadly, it did not reappear for later Rock appearances; instead, the circle was suggested in the screens through icy crags lit with a range of fiery colours. I should also mention the dazzling appearance of the Valkyries on a phoenix. Though truncated, it provided a mythologically suggestive alternative to a horse.

In A1 of *Siegfried*, Mime has a stylised forge that looks like a model of a Kerl-class battleship from *Star Wars*, but which Siegfried does not split in half. In A2 there are no props on stage, unless one includes the clichéd mist/smoke, which regrettably reappears often in this production. There is also a mainly bare stage in A3, until the Rock trundles forward to be bathed in changing mood lights.



Avatar 2009 floating rocks



Brünnhilde’s Rock Brisbane 2023. OA photo

In the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung*, the Norns, dressed as ancient Middle Eastern pottery goddesses, seem to spin a rope or web out of themselves like spiders. A1s1 was dominated by a vast white table, with a small video screen and perhaps a model of Gibichung city, perhaps to suggest the power and status of the ruling family. A1s2 returned us to Brünnhilde’s Rock. S3 returned us to the family’s Hall, with the table turned parallel to stage front. In A3s1 the Vassals light real fires on the stage—an odd but effective touch of realism. After Siegfried’s murder, the helpers placed his body on a sleigh, which looked very much like Mime’s forge, and pushed him off stage. In A3s3 the stylised funeral Pyre emerged from backstage, lit with a variety of colours as the action progressed. Grane-Phoenix arrived, but hid behind the Pyre, rather than leaping onto it with Brünnhilde on its back. The Pyre is finally bathed in rainbow colours.

Some of these props were aesthetically striking and effective, especially the Rhine daughters’ Coral playground, and the Bonsai World Ash Tree. Though Brünnhilde’s Rock was

similarly large, it lacked the simple beauty of the Coral and Bonsai, instead looking unfinished and drab. The pyramidal funeral Pyre was imposing, though as awkward as the Rock for characters to mount. I assume that neither the Rock nor the Pyre could be lowered in darkness from the fly tower, and then spectacularly lit, because of the track work needed to hold and move the video screens. Instead, they trundled in rather clumsily, with the Rock squeaking on its way.

The problem of what to do with people and props no longer needed by the narrative or directorial vision faces all theatrical creative teams. How the problem is solved is a mark of the directorial imagination and inventiveness. On this score, I think Suzanne Chaundy and her team showed more ingenuity and perhaps more theatrical experience in solving the problems that the Brisbane *Ring Cycle* seemed to sidestep awkwardly. Or, perhaps it was an indication of a Brechtian directorial decision to regularly break with naturalistic theatre conventions: or a post-modernist refusal to contrive Realism in any detail.



The Norns *Götterdämmerung* Act 1 Scene 1

While I was at times bedazzled, delighted, intrigued, bemused, challenged, and at other times frustrated, by the almost constant changing of the digital displays, I was also conscious of having my attention distracted from what I take to be the point of attending Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*: to experience Wagner’s artwork, not someone else’s overlay of it with an almost independent artwork that could stand alone in the gallery, as a digital interpretation of themes from Wagner’s artwork. This is a quite different situation from the director dropping the swastika banner into the middle of say *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* or dressing the Vassals in fascistic uniforms.



Neural network

Despite these reservations, I found that aspects of the digital displays underscored aspects of Wagner’s artwork, rather than distracted from it. As the artwork unfolded, it became obvious that there were visual motifs in the projections that gave visual form to musical and narrative motifs. One of the most arresting for me was the gradual development of a weblike structure (possibly also a neural network) from its early appearance in act two of *Die Walküre*, through its growth in *Siegfried*, to its full expression in *Götterdämmerung*, and then to its fragmentation after Siegfried’s death. I understood the web to be the rope being woven by the Norns until it is broken, possibly by Siegfried’s death — “*Es riss! Es riss!*” cry each of the Norns. Ironically, Siegfried tells the

Rhine daughters: “My sword will sever the Norn’s rope!” (But how does he know about the Norns!?)

The trajectory of the web’s appearances reinforces the idea that the entire narrative demonstrated the role of fate in Wagner’s conception of world history and human existence. Whether one accepts such a belief depends on one’s predisposition, but the belief makes for compelling drama, as Wagner’s models, the ancient Greek dramatists, well knew. Real life, though, is far more complicated, but for 15 hours or so it is rewarding to follow a story in which Fate so clearly runs its course. The irony of *The Ring Cycle* is that the people who were once Vassals are no longer enfeoffed to anyone. It is for them now to choose the kind of world they will inhabit. But in such a world in which they seem to exist, what does Fate have in store for them? It is possible to read the other three music-dramas as Wagner’s possible answers to that problem, but none of them offers us any realistic way to conduct our lives.

With all the former Vassals assembled on stage at the end of the Brisbane *Ring Cycle*, do the digital displays hint at any way forward for them? It is probably a bit of a stretch to read the rainbow colours in the Pyre at the end of the production as a statement about modern political, social, and cultural values of diversity, inclusion, and respect, rather than a clever ironic pointing back to the Rainbow Bridge of *Rheingold*.

In commenting on the singing, characterisation, orchestral playing, and stage movement of the Brisbane *Ring Cycle*, I find it hard to avoid comparisons with these elements of the Bendigo *Ring Cycle*. It is with these elements that the rubber hits the road, so to speak. We might be tempted to close our eyes to a staging that doesn’t please us, but none of us, I suspect, would plug our ears not to hear the music and how the singers present their characters to us. Philippe Auguin and Anthony Negus, for me, represent two different approaches to conducting this artwork. Auguin drew a sound out of the orchestra that reminded me of mid-20th century styles of Wagner conducting: full-bodied, sonorous, evenly paced, focused on the magisterial, with graduated transitions between moods. Negus opted for an interpretation with greater emphasis on moment-to-moment changes of tempi and volume, more *attacca* in the production of the sound, but then allowing the music to slow and swell for the great emotional moments. With Auguin, I felt that the orchestra was doing the leading, while with Negus I felt that the orchestra was working with each character and his or her situation. Both orchestras, though, are to be commended highly for their achievement: neither has a history of performing *The Ring Cycle*, but I certainly hope that both orchestras soon have the chance to play it again for us. The chorus of Vassals was, as with the bicentenary *Ring*, thrilling to hear and watch as they moved more easily around the stage than many of the principals. So was the chorus in Bendigo.

In the singing and characterisation, there was greater variation between the two productions. Overall, I preferred the singing in Bendigo, partly because it was more secure, and partly because it was better integrated with character

and personality. There was little difference between the singers of the lesser roles in both productions. There was, for me, little to choose between Lise Lindstrom and Antoinette Halloran, except for the former’s greater experience in the role. Halloran, though, grew impressively into the role over the 2nd cycle, and promises much for future appearances as Brünnhilde. I would choose James Egglestone and Lee Abrahmsen, the Siegmund and Sieglinde in Bendigo, over Rosario La Spina and Anna-Louise Cole in Brisbane, as much for the intensity of their very physically intimate embodiments of the doomed sibling-lovers as for their rich singing. The Brisbane couple hardly touched, though they both sang with passion. I would also choose Bradley Daley over Stefan Vinke for similar reasons. I have heard Vinke sing this role in several productions, but have been worried about the increasing roughness in his voice. With Bradley Daley in Bendigo, though, there was hardly any strain and many passages where he sang more lyrically and with greater nuance than Vinke in Brisbane. Both singers, though, entered their characterisations with commitment and intelligence so that the problematic character of Siegfried was accorded more depth and sensitivity than Wagner wrote into his text. Deborah Humble continues to amaze with the range and subtlety of her characterisations and the strength and nuance of her voice. I would be happy to hear her in any Wagner production. Her portrayal of Fricka was richer and more psychologically convincing than Sarah Sweeting’s in Bendigo, and her Waltraute, reprising her appearance in Bendigo, was hair-raising in its ferocity and desperation. It was also a great pleasure to hear Lianne Keagvan, with her rich, dramatic contralto voice and haunting characterisation, reprise her role as Erda.

The most problematic, for me, of the singers in Brisbane was Daniel Sumegi as Wotan. I have always found his articulation of texts hard to understand. His diction in his upper register is clearer to my ear so that I could follow the German text (with my schoolboy level of German), but in his lower register, his enunciation seemed to me to disappear into a growl with a degree of vibrato that obscured his words completely. I checked with a German speaking neighbour, who admitted to the same difficulty. In contrast, Warwick Fyfe’s diction as Wotan in Bendigo was very clear through the range of vocalisation demanded by Wagner’s score. This difference was evident in Brisbane where Fyfe’s singing of Alberich was so emphatically clear and defiant that he sang Sumegi off the stage.

The ways in which characters interacted with each other were, for me, superior in Bendigo, perhaps simply because of Suzanne Chaundy’s greater experience in directing opera singers and perhaps also a greater commitment to naturalistic acting. In Brisbane, perhaps also because of a larger stage and auditorium, there seemed always to be greater distance between the characters most of the time, so that intimacy seemed to be generally out of the question. Vinke was one of the exceptions as he seemed to be drawing on his long history of performing as Siegfried to bring a degree of closeness and warmth to his engagement with Brünnhilde and even Guttrune.

CYCLE TWO - SOME NOTES AND EXPERIENCE by Minnie Biggs

Approaching through a long dark tunnel, suddenly brightly lit with yellow signs, or cars, and then again, long and dark. An appropriate path to the much-touted new *Ring Cycle*. Which was full of black and brilliant digital colour. We arrived. The name of the opera was spelled out on a curtain of streamers, the Famous Four Minutes led us into the water of the river Rhine. Maidens swimming and floating and flying through the water as we dove in and swam with them. A perfect beginning. The best digital effects of all.

We come to Wagner's music dramas in different ways. Listening, hearing, watching, understanding, thinking, feeling, and with the intention of the composer and writer in mind. How do these interact with each other or with the music drama itself? Does the watching and understanding enhance or get in the way of the feeling? Questions I asked myself as I watched and listened and felt. Unquestionably the digital water and the digital fire were perfect simple backdrops for the music. The digital water for Siegfried's Rhine Journey was sublime, we were there, sailing down that river, and heading for the beginning of the end. The dragon, the aerial wood bird, perfect. The floating swords. Beautiful.

Interesting as many of the pixilated designs were, did they mean something? Was I meant to understand them? These were not questions I wanted to consider as I listened. Distracting. If beautiful and interesting. The dancers. Dancers? In the *Ring*? Dancers. Why? Who knew?

We were told there is a Chinese influence and a universal view. Did these help or hinder? Chinese lions, Chinese landscapes in the middle of? Gigantic phoenix instead of horses, beautiful phoenixes but not horses. The dots and lines of a star map for the rainbow bridge? No. The table of ice in the Gibichung palace and the geometrical blue and black backdrops, yes. Good, fitting, appropriate. Finally, a trace of the seasons we were meant to enjoy, icy winter of the end of the world. But the springtime blossoming of the bonsai not - ash tree in *Die Walküre* not as effective. The other seasons? Missed them.

The Norns would have provided the ideal subject for digital magic, even my imagination ran wild with possibilities. But no, three figures arose from under the stage in basket dresses, holding a string, the background was one of those often - used spider web patterns moving and changing. Hardly the spinning of the rope of fate. Unfocused.

So much to enjoy, the voices and music, except for most of the four performances there was a disconnect between the voices and orchestra. They were correct and in tune but they did not meld together. Alberich managed to get them together and there were moments for Siegfried at the end when he blended with the orchestra, but for the most part, sad. Dead spots on the stage? Acoustics? Where I was sitting? Disappointing. Very.

There was a lack of direction. It felt as if singers were wandering wanderers not sure where to go or how to be. (This was explained by Liane Keegan in a pre - concert symposium: 'There was little direction'. She asked where to go, what to do? You decide. The costume will tell you. Once in the costume she asked what to do with her hands with the extended fingers? See what you do. She did.) Erda is not a role that demands a great deal of movement or advice but poor Wotan and Fricka in Rheingold, wandering.

Alberich was outstanding, as always. His voice projected and he acted the role, his own director.

Finally, there came one of those inexplicable experiences. Waltraute and Brünnhilde, towards the end of act one of *Götterdämmerung*. Deborah Humble and Lise Lindstrom. I was transported. Carried away to another world, absorbed, affected, grieving with Waltraute's pleas for help, entirely caught up in their fraught exchange. Where indeed was I? The power of music, of this music drama. Feelings nearly impossible to describe or express. That magic. Moments that make the entire sixteen hour's-worth their weight in pure Rhine gold, the niggles and criticisms gone, burned in the glorious fire of the end of the world.

Minnie Biggs January 2024



Götterdämmerung funeral pyre Brisbane 2023



Minecraft Aztec sacrificial pyramid

REVIEWS OF THE BRISBANE RING CYCLE 2023

David Larkin

Wagner on big screens: Opera Australia's digital *Rheingold* is a mixed bag www.bachtrack.com/review-rheingold-shi-zheng-auguin-opera-australia-brisbane-december-2023

Phoenixes and magic fire: Opera Australia's *Die Walküre* is a hit www.bachtrack.com/review-walkure-shi-zheng-auguin-opera-australia-brisbane-december-2023

Nature goes hi-tech: Opera Australia's *Siegfried* a triumph for Stefan Vinke www.bachtrack.com/review-siegfried-shi-zheng-auguin-opera-australia-brisbane-december-2023

Songs amid ice and fire: *Götterdämmerung* provides a fine close to Opera Australia's Ring Cycle www.bachtrack.com/review-gotterdammerung-opera-australia-wagner-ring-cycle-vinke-lindstrom-qpac-december-2023

Chantal Nguyen

Behind the scenes: Opera Australia's vast, digital *Ring Cycle* www.bachtrack.com/feature-behind-the-scenes-opera-australia-digital-ring-cycle-october-2023

Jansson J. Antmann

Das Rheingold (Opera Australia): Chen Shi-Zheng's finely crafted *Ring Cycle* heralds a return to Neue Bayreuth, but with a human touch. www.limelight-arts.com.au/reviews/das-rheingold-opera-australia/

Die Walküre (Opera Australia): Chen Shi-Zheng's meticulous staging of the second opera in Wagner's tetralogy proves his *Ring Cycle* is one for the ages. www.limelight-arts.com.au/reviews/die-walkure-opera-australia/

Siegfried (Opera Australia): The third opera in Wagner's tetralogy throws up plenty of challenges, but Chen Shi-Zheng tackles them boldly and triumphs. www.limelight-arts.com.au/reviews/siegfried-opera-australia/

Götterdämmerung (Opera Australia): A six-star finale to Chen Shi-Zheng's five-star *Ring Cycle* sticks to the script and proves all the world loves a good bedtime story. www.limelight-arts.com.au/reviews/gotterdammerung-opera-australia/

Olivia Stewart

Fifteen hours of Wagner: Opera Australia's *Ring Cycle* brings big spectacle – and a world first – to Brisbane www.theguardian.com/music/2023/dec/07/opera-australia-richard-wagner-ring-cycle-brisbane-der-ring-des-nibelungen

Michael Halliwell

Das Rheingold ★★★★★ *Die Walküre* ★★★★★: Opera Australia's new *Ring* is underway www.australianbookreview.com.au/arts-update/101-arts-update/11697-das-rheingold-die-walkure-opera-australia

Siegfried ★★★★★ *Götterdämmerung* ★★★★★1/2: Chen Shi-Zheng's Asian-Pacific *Ring* <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/arts-update/101-arts-update/11761-siegfried-goetterdaemmerung-1-2-chen-shi-zheng-s-asian-pacific-ring-by-michael-halliwell>

THE THIRD CYCLE by Mike Day

As a total experience – music, production, talks, symposia, friends, cocktails, local food, the Brisbane riverfront, museums and galleries – it was a wonderful week. I have many criticisms of the production, but, in the end, the music always triumphs. What an amazing, indestructible, hymn to love, human genius and creativity the *Ring* is. I went with some younger friends who are classical music lovers but not opera goers. They were unfamiliar with the *Ring* and were enraptured by the music and the visual production. Being familiar with video games, Minecraft, DC and Marvel comic's Superheroes, *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, Fanart, etc. my youngest companion responded with enthusiasm to Director/Designer Chen's visual references to popular culture. Is this the way to build a new younger audience for Wagner? My friends also heard the link between Wagner's 'cinematic' music and modern gaming music, which often uses sweeping orchestral themes and leitmotifs. Gaming music is some of the most engaging orchestral 'classical' music being composed today. E.g., *'Starfield'* by Inon Zur. I think it's well worth listening to as performed and recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra; it's full of soaring melodies, atmosphere and drama. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXjy0pnEDCc>

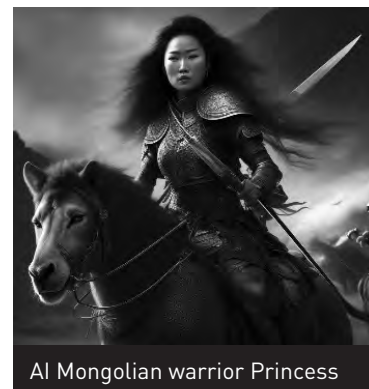
As *Ring* virgins, my friends found Peter Bassett's talks and the Symposium very useful, along with the pre-performance talks in the foyer. We had good seats in the centre of the back of the circle – perfect view and balanced orchestral sound quality and at eye level with the surtitles. From this distance the LED screens weren't too dominant and the lighting of the actors was exemplary. The use of large-scale sculptural elements was effective and the variety of images extraordinary and sometimes very beautiful. But, at other times, the visuals were quite banal, too cartoonish for my taste with too much distracting movement. A younger audience, with shorter attention span, would be entertained by all the busy-ness. My final conclusion was that it was rather superficial – very few stimulating ideas or profound insights. Apart from the aerialists, the dancers, in my opinion, were an irritating mistake. Well executed but irrelevant. Ribbon dancers in the forge scene? NO! Siegfried threw his glove at them in annoyance! If there is a revival the dancers could easily be eliminated. A new director who cared about what the actors and their characters were doing would also be a step in the right direction. But I mustn't carp – the singers and musicians were totally committed and we all had a marvellous time.



The Valkyries – Brisbane 2023



Wonder Woman 2017 movie



Al Mongolian warrior Princess