

Minnie Biggs attended the rehearsal and performance of *Die Walküre*

The rehearsal – Tuesday night

Lucky to be invited to the rehearsal of *Die Walküre* with Simone Young at the helm, lucky to be among so many Wagner Society friends, lucky to sit in row G in the orchestra. It was hard to tell which were stage hands and which were singers, everyone in mufti. And then, and then, the orchestra struck up *Happy Birthday* and everyone sang, the orchestra members and all those singers, all those amazing voices, happy birthday to our Stuart Skelton, our most beloved Siegmund. What a start!

Simone Young does not do a straight through rehearsal, rather - impossible to hear her speaking to the orchestra as she faced them - we are treated to: guess where we are in the opera? I was mightily impressed that there were often the correct surtitles on the screen - how do they know what she was going to want to work on next? To start, Act one, there was little of Stuart and less of Sieglinde who was mostly lying not quite dead on a bench until the very last part of the act. Then on to

the battle scene, with Hunding up in the circle and Siegmund on the far side and Wotan finally appearing on the stage. In his glorious strength.

With the delicious opportunity to just listen to and watch the orchestra, I noticed for the first time that there are at least two sections when only the violas played with the brass or woodwinds, no violins. Such a lovely sound. Many of the voices of the other instruments were heard in a quite different way, not outstanding as they always blended perfectly. The only question we did hear Simone ask a production person in front of us was about the balance. Happily, he always gave the thumbs up.

(Ed. Note: This was actually Assistant Conductor, Chad Kelly, and his colleague, Repetiteur, Thomas Johnson, who played for our May concert, both of whom are on the music staff at Opera Australia).

Then all the Valkyries lined up across the stage and, again, we were able to hear and see their expressions, and their words, which are almost always drowned out or rather distracted by the staging, whatever staging there is. "Ride" staging. Spectacular, interesting, unusual, beautiful or ugly as it may be. Now just a row of women singing. A delight.

The major singers Simone has brought from her time in Europe, some unknown to us, some very famous indeed, are a treat. I want to follow Anja Kampe wherever she sings her next Brünnhilde. They seldom sang at full voice - it was a rehearsal after all - but full enough so I could hardly wait for the performance at the end of the week.

The performance – Friday night

The clouds were scudding across the evening sky, the moon was full, the harbour beautiful. Inside, a hall full of people ready to be entranced - and entranced we were.

Simone Young led her orchestra into the prelude. After the opening voices of doom, the orchestra played with rhythmic contrast, just slightly louder and softer, faster and slower, almost imperceptible but noticeable

and different, beautiful. A new hearing. The beginning of five hours of nearly holding one's breath as the opera in concert unfolded and, undistracted by elaborate or even simple sets, we were treated to the sublime pleasure of hearing and seeing the orchestra play this familiar music as we are never able to do in a staged version. The singers expressed enough 'acting' through their understanding of the music and their voices to bring us right into the hut of Hunding, or the outskirts of Valhalla so they we could see vividly was what not actually shown. Again, we heard instruments always in perfect alignment with the music, never overpowering the singers. Simone knows her stuff!

For Act two she came on with hardly a nod to the audience clapping loudly, sweeping on to the podium and straight into the music, baton waving. What a thrill.

Vida Miknevičiūtė as Sieglinde, Stuart Skelton as Siegmund, Peter Rose as Hunding, Alexandra Ionis as Fricka, Tommi Hakala as Wotan and Anja Kampe as Brünnhilde, a cast beyond compare. (Are there any superlative words I have not used? Add them, please!) Best ever.



Leona Geeves, Minnie Biggs, Michele Day, Jenny Edwards having a great time



Simone Young, Stuart Skelton