

OUR MEMBERS ABROAD

REPORT FROM ROSS WHITELAW ON BAYREUTH 2024

Once again, I made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth for the second Ring Cycle (there being only two this year) and also fitted in yet another of the popular **Tobias Kratzer** *Tannhäuser* productions, the latest *Parsifal* which I was unable to attend last year due to a COVID infection, and the new *Tristan und Isolde*. Arriving fresh from a stay of a couple of days in Munich to get body and mind back in the same time zone, I approached the Green Hill with much anticipation, knowing that our Patron, **Simone Young** AM, was going to be in the pit. Would she make a difference to what is an unusual and controversial production by **Valentin Schwarz**?

I had seen the first run of the Cycle in 2023 and the second up to the end of act one of *Siegfried* (COVID prevented me from seeing the rest). I had also watched it on the excellent streaming platform Stage+. Perhaps another viewing would be more rewarding. Well, in terms of stage action and direction, certain things became clearer but the use of children, as potential hostages in the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, abducted by Alberich as a metaphor for the Rheingold and imprisoned and terrorised in the Nibelung scene made for uncomfortable viewing. I'm not sure where the child abuse fits in to Schwarz's conception.

On the other hand, the singing was excellent as one should expect. Highlights were **Tomasz Konieczny's** Wotan, the Fricka of current Bayreuth go-to Mezzo, **Christa Mayer** and **Olafur Sigurdarson** as Alberich. **Tobias Kehrer** as Fafner is also worth mentioning. I sat with **Mirko Roschkowski** (Froh) during the traditional Wagner Society of Southern California dinner held after the show and hope to have him talk to our Society by zoom on 12 March.

Ms Young's conducting was spot on from the start. Too often I have heard the first act of *Das Rheingold* performed as a sort of warm up for the conductor, but not this time. More of which later.

As an aside, I took a back-stage tour organised by the Friends of Bayreuth that morning and watched at least ten stagehands try to get one aspect of the bump in just right. They were still at the minute detail as I left. I also pitied the crew who were meticulously cleaning the vast glass room, part of the act two set as it will be spattered with paint later on.

Die Walküre featured some very special vocal talent. **Catherine Foster's** Brünnhilde was everything you could wish for in that role, but the highlights went to **Michael Spyres** as Siegmund and **Vida Miknevičiūtė** as Sieglinde. Mr Spyres was exceptional for the quality and tone of his darker tenor voice. Ms **Miknevičiūtė** has sung in Melbourne recently and reprised that role for the SSO *Die Walküre*. There was a real chemistry going on between these two despite the best efforts of Mr Schwarz to play down the physical side of their relationship at the end of the Act. Another Bayreuth performer, **Alexandra Ionis** (Siegfrune in Bayreuth) portrayed Fricka and Rossweisse for us in Sydney.

While not usually a great fan of *Siegfried*, **Klaus Florian Vogt's** performance lifted the entire opera for me. Sung confidently and with great beauty, he did not flag throughout, even when joined by the awakened Brünnhilde. I later met him at dinner and learned that he was staying in his motor home with his wife. **Alexandra Steiner**. She was playing the Woodbird and participated in a Society zoom for us last year.

Götterdämmerung again was strongly sung and once again Mr Vogt and Ms Foster featured. This time, Alexandra Ionis took the role of Second Norn. I still haven't grown to love this Ring production as I did that of Mr Castorf. As I said, you can see it on a streaming service and make up your own mind. Simone Young's conducting was definitely a feature although I don't think she has got the full measure of the Bayreuth pit. She certainly had the measure of the orchestra and performers. Every one of them to whom I spoke had nothing but praise for her expertise and respect for both the music, musicians and singers.

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