

THOUGHTS ON THE BRISBANE RING

by Peter Bassett

The new production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* planned for Brisbane in December this year is hugely exciting. There is still nothing quite like the *Ring*! Wagner described it as a 'festival drama for three days and a preliminary evening', and everything we associate with the word 'festival' applies. Spread over a week or so, it can be savoured by audiences without distraction, while ancillary events such as the symposia and pre-performance talks that I shall be presenting, broaden and enrich the experience.

The *Ring* draws us into its story of ambition, lust, sacrifice, love, generosity, fear, and deceit; the embrace and beauty of nature and, above all, wisdom, and the promise of a better world. During the past quarter of a century, I have witnessed the *Ring* phenomenon all over the world. Like all great works of art, it speaks of universal and timeless human experiences, and so, productions can remain true to the drama's inner workings even when being viewed through the eyes of different cultures and in different times. The *Ring* in Brisbane promises to resonate with the culture in which it is being performed, just as the original Bayreuth production resonated with its time and circumstances in 1876.

It will be great to have French conductor **Philippe Auguin** with us in December. He has conducted more than a dozen *Ring* productions around the world, and I have attended two of them – the first in 2005 in Beijing, when he took the Nuremberg State Theatre's production to China, and the second in 2016 for Washington National Opera of which he was also music director. At various times he was musical assistant to both **Herbert von Karajan** and **Georg Solti**.

Chen Shi-Zheng is the director and production designer of the Brisbane *Ring*, a production that will use giant LED video screens, and so, visually, all things will be possible. Chen Shi-Zheng was born in China in 1963 and lost both of his parents during the cultural revolution. He developed a deep knowledge of Chinese opera and emigrated to the USA in 1987. As well as staging traditional Chinese works, he has directed many western operas in the United States and Europe, including *Eugene Onegin*, *Nixon in China*, *La traviata*, *The Coronation of Poppea*, *Orfeo*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Flying*

Dutchman, *Così fan tutte* – and *Turandot* for Opera Australia's 'Opera on the Harbour' in 2016.

He has been quoted as saying: "Wagner productions, in recent history, are always trying to relate the story of the *Ring* to current western society. But this story is fantasy, a myth. So, what I want to do is take the myth as a platform to dive into, and re-imagine it in the 21st Century, in Australia, in this very landscape. The references also relate to where I come from. What we are trying to avoid is using the familiar methods of European cultural reference. We are trying to get away from that." He has assigned a different 'season' to each of the operas, starting with *Das Rheingold* in spring (with the Rhinemaidens frolicking around the Great Barrier Reef), and ending with the winter of *Götterdämmerung*. He will be careful to not impose too much visual baggage on the music because Wagner should be allowed to speak for himself. He compares his task to that of a Chinese painter - knowing where to provide detail, and what to leave to the imagination. "You have to leave enough for people to imagine, but you also want to provide a framework for people to enter into that world. When I listen to Wagner's music, I respond in my mind. I hope people will have a similar kind of journey, but I don't want to dictate every second of what people think."

Consider how he approached Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* for the Spoleto Festival in 2017. Prominent among Chinese mythological figures is the Moon Goddess. She had been a woman who had drunk a draught of immortality out of love for her husband, but this action had separated her from him. She then flew upwards to the heavens and chose the moon as her place to live. Her sad husband was left to worship her from afar – which, when you think about it, is not unlike the fate of Onegin. In his production, Chen Shi-Zheng set Tatiana's 'Letter Scene' against a backdrop of a Russian birch forest, through which the moon could be seen passing slowly across the sky as Tatiana wrote passionately of her love. Onegin, after receiving the letter, callously rejected Tatiana's expressions of love, only to regret this deeply when it was too late. This handling of the Spoleto production strikes me as a simple but beautiful evocation of Chinese aesthetics and visual simplicity, which augurs well for the Brisbane *Ring*.