

Götterdämmerung

Alan Frost is awed speechless in Seattle.

I have often been transported at the opera but never transported to it in such style. A few hundred metres from my hotel lay the mono-rail terminal and it took just 90 seconds to whisk me to Seattle's space needle and the opera house. At the time of my visit there was much in the press about the level of obesity in the US population and I am happy to report that, on average, the American audience besotted with Wagner was svelte, although quite eccentric and dressed in everything from open plastic sandals and baseball cap to black tie. The same could not be said of some of those on stage and after seeing Fricka, Freia, Erda, Sieglinde, and Brünnhilde there was scope for believing I had wandered into a Teletubby convention.

I had planned for the visit well in advance because Seattle Opera's *Ring Cycle* sold out on the day the tickets were released and has earned justifiable praise for its realistic staging. There are no post-modernistic concrete slabs, empty lofts, or obscure metaphors on set, thus leaving plenty of room for thinking about the music and the messages. If you have not had the experience I should explain that the four operas comprising the *Ring* are sung usually over the course of six nights, beginning with *Das Rheingold*, which lasts 2½ hours without interval.

Elapsed time of the four works is just over 17 hours with actual singing time under 15 hours. The well-known feature of time apparently stopping during the performance is because in each of these music dramas Wagner has characters summarise events that previously happened. They often take 15 or 20 minutes to sing something, in archaic German, that could be spoken in three and about which we might have been informed, also at length, a night or so earlier. The orchestration is full of leitmotifs which allude to a character, an object, or an idea, and during the sometime tedious monologues these themes continually underpin the singer's recitative. The devotee endures the longeurs stoically while eagerly awaiting the bouts of lively action; the majestic, climactic orchestral passages; more harps than you can shake a stick at; the thrill of singers singing beyond the competence of most; and the food for thought.

The staging was superb. It began with the Rhine maidens 'swimming' in the Rhine by means of trapezes enabling them to move in all three axes behind a greenish gauze curtain.

Each also somersaulted around the axis of her waist and one admires the invention that allowed this as well as effective singing. Fafner, as the dragon, was huge and rather cuddly; Loge, the god of fire, dispensed fireballs willy-nilly; we saw Grane, Brünnhilde's horse, and marvelled that it could bear her – let alone fly with her; the magic fire was awesome; and the forest scenes very north American. A few days later Mrs Frost and I ascended the foothills of Mount Rainier to the bottom of the Nisqually glacier, fully expecting to bump into Wotan, in 'wanderer' mode, as we puffed up the trail. Only then did I realise how Washington state was the woodland scene on stage. It was wondrous.

The singing was mixed but competent. I enjoyed Gidon Saks's sonority as Fafner and Hagen; Richard Paul Fink's Alberich was well characterised; Ewa Podles as Erda was moving; and Jane Eaglen's Brünnhilde was well paced and provided a thrilling finale. The three Rhine maidens deserve mention for their athleticism, Junoesque figures, and unique curtain calls. Roberto Spano produced a good sound from the orchestra in the huge auditorium in his first *Ring*. All in all it was worth the trip and I would recommend it next time around to any *Ring* addict arranging her next fix.

At a pre-performance lecture the relevance of the four primitive elements – earth, fire, water, and air – was explained. Alberich and the dwarves live and work in the earth; Loge is the god of fire and Siegfried's fateful sword is forged in fire; the Rhine maidens inhabit the water; and the gods live above the earth in Valhalla. The end of *Götterdämmerung* is symmetrical in that the waters of the Rhine flood the earth and fire consumes the gods. In the last week of August as Wagner's final, moving, thundering chords resounded throughout the opera house, as the Nibelung empire was inundated, and as Wotan and the rest were destroyed in their airy eyrie, so life imitated art and the Gulf of Mexico overflowed. In a marvel of stagecraft and special effects, once we had seen the flooding of the Rhine and the burning of Valhalla, the final image on stage was a utopian sylvan landscape as the natural state of things was restored. Let us hope that the same order will eventually be in place in those areas devastated by Wotan's kinswomen, Katrina and Rita.

And note that Loge now includes oil and its derivatives in his portfolio.