

# WAGNER NEWS

*Wagner News* is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

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In view of the present situation, even though not all of the promised editorial material has been delivered on time, we make this incomplete issue available now so that the three articles included will not become outdated, and, what is more important, to make available to our readers a listing of some of the leading opera houses in the world featuring FREE performances from their archives.

The list is by no means complete but it is a beginning.

The Editor

**Opera Wire** is a good source; it lists many companies.

**Carnegie Hall** - [https://www.carnegiehall.org/Events/Season-Highlights/Watch-and-Listen/WQXR-Broadcasts?utm\\_source=wordfly&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=cs-03-20-2020&utm\\_content=version\\_A&sourceCode=33914](https://www.carnegiehall.org/Events/Season-Highlights/Watch-and-Listen/WQXR-Broadcasts?utm_source=wordfly&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=cs-03-20-2020&utm_content=version_A&sourceCode=33914)

**metopera.org**

**Wiener Staatsoper:** [www.staatsoperlive.com](http://www.staatsoperlive.com)

**Paris Opera:** <https://www.operadeparis.fr>

**Royal Opera House** - live-streamed via Facebook and YouTube

**operaliege.be**

**operanorth.co.uk** ; the Ring cycle

**Opernhaus Zurich**

**Opera Vision** - a selection of operas from all over the world - <https://operavision.eu/en>

**La Fenice on YouTube** - snippets <https://www.youtube.com/user/TeatroFeniceVenezia?fbclid=IwAR3vHdHokLjnx8LuobxZZ7LFYzLIDg4NjVyTo2fi2DWzI76uo5sAVRrM1c>

**Bayerischer Staatsoper TV:** <https://www.staatsoper.de/en/schedule/schedule/all.html>

**Berlin Staatsoper:** <https://www.staatsoper-berlin.de/en/staatsoper/news/our-daily-video-on-demand-programme.142>

**DeutscheOper Home page** - [https://deutscheoperberlin.de/en\\_EN/home](https://deutscheoperberlin.de/en_EN/home)

**DeutscheOper Performance Index** - [https://www.deutscheoperberlin.de/de\\_DE/corona-aktuelle-hinweise](https://www.deutscheoperberlin.de/de_DE/corona-aktuelle-hinweise)

# Opera - by - Request: Der Ring des Nibelungen

February 14 - 17, 2020

Reviewed by Barry Millman

On February 17<sup>th</sup> I saw the world end at a most unlikely venue: a church at the corner of College and Bathurst Streets in downtown Toronto where a complete cycle of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was presented by Toronto's *Opera-by-Request* (OBR) in conjunction with Germany's *Berlin Wagner Gruppe* (BWG).

**Opera-by-Request** is a Toronto organization, founded by William Shookhoff in 2007 to give concert performances of operas without an orchestra, sets, or special staging and lighting. The orchestra is replaced by a piano, usually played by Shookhoff, and acting is limited to what can be done in the space available. The venue is much smaller and more intimate than an opera house, allowing for easier viewing and more direct interaction with the singers. The low cost of the performances enables operas to be presented at a price much lower than in fully-staged productions. Where else could one attend a full *Ring* cycle for \$70.00?

**The Berlin Wagner Gruppe** is a somewhat similar group of young, international opera singers living in Berlin, who 'present full performances of Wagner operas in concert and semi-staged format'. It provides singers with the opportunity to study, rehearse and perform a full Wagner role with a complete cast and it gives our audience the unique opportunity to hear Wagner (and Wagnerians!) up close and personal." The BWG was founded in 2017 by Peter Furlong (British born, raised in New England and now studying in Berlin, Germany).

This *Ring* cycle was performed in the College Street United Church. William Shookhoff was the Musical Director and, as usual, he played the piano throughout all four music dramas (a truly heroic marathon of over 15 hours!). He was assisted periodically by several other instruments (clarinet, trumpet, horns, cello, piccolo, percussion, violin, oboe, English horn and a second keyboard). The Stage Director was Julie Wyma, a singer from the BWG, originally from California, who also acted as Stage Crew (often seen rearranging chairs, music stands and other props between scenes). The singers were a mix of young professionals and professionally-trained singers who, while not full-time musicians, had maintained their

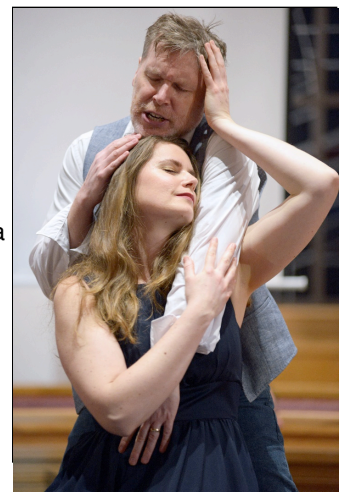
vocal abilities. Most of the latter used printed scores throughout their performance, but those from the BWG generally did not.

## Das Rheingold:

In the opening scene, the Rheinmaidens (Kiera Allison, Jennifer Carter and Alexandra Beley) got things started in a cheerful mode with well-coordinated singing but relatively little movement, until the arrival of Alberich (Peter Bass), whose arrival contrasted nicely with the earlier fun, and the scene ended with him stealing the gold-coloured cloth covers from the music stands. In the second scene we met our first Wotan (Michael York) and Fricka (Jillian Yemen), strong singers with good interaction. Vanessa Lanch (BWG, originally from the Toronto area, but now living in Berlin) sang the first of her three roles here as an impressive Freia. Leonard Whiting was Loge; Dylan Wright, Fasolt and George Ossipov, Fafner. The transition to Nibelheim was accompanied by pre-recorded anvil sounds during the descent and confrontation with Alberich and Mime (Oliver Dawson). Francesca Corrado was an effective Erda; John Holland was Donner and Chris Bauer, Froh, to round out the cast.

Die Walküre, Act 1;

Siegmond and Sieglinde:  
Peter Furlong and Vanessa  
Lanch



## Die Walküre:

I found *Die Walküre*, in this version, the most satisfying of the four music dramas. It was not only well sung but also very well acted, especially during the first act. Peter Furlong was Siegmund (singing despite a cold), Vanessa Lanch was Sieglinde and Gene Wu, Hunding. I have seen *Die Walküre* more than a dozen times over the last 50 years but this was the most moving version that I have seen. The staging, which has

been developed by the BWG, is different and exciting - much more intense than normally seen, more passionate and physical, matching the passion in the music.



The fine singing of the first act was maintained throughout the second and third acts, though the acting was more restrained, largely because of the use of scores by some of the singers. Andrew Tees presented a more subdued Wotan, while Jillian Yeman was his feisty wife. The interaction between Siegmund and Brünnhilde - Miriam Gordon-Stewart (from Australia, now living in Virginia, USA) was touching and the final fight fierce and effective.

At the start of the third act, Valkyries emerged from all parts of the hall (startling some of the audience) and gave full voice to their *Hie-a-Ha*'s. Despite the lack of scenery it was not difficult to imagine the rocky peaks and Brünnhilde's rock. The confrontation between Brünnhilde and Wotan and their tender farewell was moving. I did, however, miss a full orchestra during the final scene.

#### Siegfried:

*Siegfried* was well sung, but again acting was limited by the use of scores by several singers. Although a percussionist provided hammer sounds during the forging scene, I missed physical action; I also missed (unrealistically) the serpent in the second act. The powerful and beautiful voice of Julie Wyma as the Forest Bird, standing on a table at the rear of the stage, made one want to hear her in a larger role. The third act, which must have been a major challenge for William Shookoff, came off well. Andrew Tees again sang Wotan and Francesca Corrado, Erda, while Robert

Martin and Miriam Gordon-Stewart sang Siegfried and Brünnhilde.

#### Götterdämmerung:

A fitting finale to the cycle, *Götterdämmerung* was well sung and well acted, considering that several singers were carrying scores while performing. The Norns (Meghan Symon, Wendy Cladman and Julie Wyma) in the Prologue and the Rheinmaidens at the end of the third act provided strong bookends to the rest of the action. The principals: Susan Tsagkaris as a new Brünnhilde, Robert Martin as Siegfried, Michael Robert-Broder as Gunter, Jessica Lanch in her third role as Gutrune, Dylan Wright as Hagen (Fasolt in *Rheingold*), Jilian Yeman as Waltraute and John Holland as Alberich (Donner in *Rheingold*) were good and effective in their various roles. I missed a full orchestra for Siegfried's death march and in the finale, although extra instruments, particularly the horns, provided a good compromise.

#### In Conclusion:

Before coming to this presentation, I had reservations about how effectively a piano could substitute for a full orchestra in the *Ring*, despite having seen, and enjoyed OBR's performance of *Lohengrin* two years ago, which had William Shookhoff at the piano and featured Vanessa Lanch as Elsa, along with Leonard Whiting (*Lohengrin*), Andrew Tees (*Telramund*) and John Holland (*Herald*) who all sang in this *Ring*. In both productions I found lack of an orchestra much less of a drawback than I had expected. The 'spirit' of the *Ring* came across well. Much of the credit for this success must be given to Shookhoff who was truly the 'hero' of the performances. As a former but now very rusty pianist myself, I marvelled that anyone could survive the 15-16 hours of performance over four days, do such a great job of it and still stand at the end!

BRAVO!" to you, William Shookhoff.

Kudos as well to all the singers without whom such success could not have been achieved. That such a strong cast could be assembled from young professional and (semi-)retired singers, mostly Canadian, speaks to the strength of the vocal talent present in this country. Though the need for scores is understood, the story came across best when the singers did not use theirs. The Berlin singers appeared more comfortable with action on stage, undoubtedly because they were used to working together. Vocally, they were outstanding and surely have a great operatic future ahead of them.

It was a pity that the Hall, which seats about 200, was not filled to capacity for all performances.



Although each music drama was quite well attended, there were too many empty seats. This was an excellent *Ring* cycle, well sung, with enough staging to give a good sense of the action. Those present showed their approval at the end and will, I am sure, retain the memory of a very significant presentation of this immense work that is only rarely seen this side of the Atlantic. Congratulations to all involved in bringing this *Ring* to Toronto.

### **Further performance cancelled, of course**

*The Ring* cycle was scheduled to be performed again in Belleville in May, over two and one-half days (from **Friday May 22nd at 7:30pm** to **Sunday May 24th at 3:00pm** in **St. Matthews' United Church, 25 Holloway Street, Belleville\***. \*

For information call: **(416) 455-2365** or visit: <https://operabyrequest.wixsite.com/theringcycle>



Götterdämmerung, Act 3  
William Shookhoff, Susan Tsagkaris - Brünnhilde)

Photos (copywrite) courtesy of G. Wu,  
Opus Photography, Toronto



Götterdämmerung, Act 2; Men's Chorus

Götterdämmerung, Act 2; Men's Chorus

## My look at *Götterdämmerung*,

### “Opera by Request”

Edward Brain.

Over the Family Day weekend this past February (the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>), “Opera by Request” presented a semi-staged concert version of the *Ring Cycle*. I attended only two of the performances which were so good that I regretted not having seen them all.

Of the performances I have seen my favourite opera was *Götterdämmerung*. It was presented on February 17th and featured Susan Tsagkaris (Brünnhilde), Robert Martin (Siegfried), Dylan Wright (Hagen), Michael Rober-Broder (Gunther), Vanessa Lanch (Gutrune), and Jillian Yemen (Waltraute.) *Opera by Request*'s director, William Shookhoff, played the piano.

The quality of singing in this one, as in the other operas they appeared in, was unexpectedly excellent. Ms. Lanch, a guest of the Wagner Society a couple years ago, was an impressive Gutrune, singing most of the performance without a score. Ms. Tsagkaris also sang part of the Immolation Scene without the score.

I found that the concert version actually helped the performance for me as I was able to concentrate more on the music and lyrics and was not distracted by a set. In this performance, I distinguished the Ring Motif more often. Also, perhaps this is something that the piano can accomplish more than a full orchestra, as it is easier to highlight certain elements of the music.

Similarly, during Act one, the scene between Brünnhilde and Waltraute, I found myself visualizing Wotan sitting in Valhalla with the gods, heroes, and Valkyries, all sitting around him, and how Waltraute slipped through the rows of heroes in order to go to Brünnhilde. While I have seen this scene before, I never really remember what Waltraute was singing before.

The performance saw a modified funeral march with Siegfried being walked down the centre aisle of the hall surrounded by the vassals. They would walk back up the aisle for the final scene when Siegfried's body was laid on a table.

For me, the Immolation Scene was the best part of the performance. It started with Ms. Tsagkaris – who sang the scene very convincingly – standing over Siegfried's body, giving a eulogy to the hero and her husband. I found Ms. Tsagkaris' performance, and Mr. Shookhoff's playing, so moving that I was getting chills up my back – and I was spellbound during the entire scene, sitting upright throughout it and collapsing back into the pew when the performance was over.

It was one of the most moving scenes I have ever experienced. I didn't want the scene, or the performance, to end.

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# Madrid *LA VALQUIRIA*

Richard and Susan Horner

In the latter part of February *Teatro Real* offered nine performances of Robert Carsen's *Die Walküre* from his 2000 *Der Ring des Nibelungen* production for *Oper Köln*. We sampled three of those performances. To meet the vocal demands of this schedule, *Teatro Real* adopted baseball's spring training split squad concept. Mentioning spring, the Madrid weather enabled us to walk and sit in many of its parks. We did avoid sitting under trees containing monk parakeet nests which can go up to 200 kilograms. In addition to the danger of falling branches we would have risked some very unpleasant showers, which brings to mind the quote "The relationship between critic and writer is similar to the one between the pigeon and the statue".

Conductor – Pablo Heras-Casado

Siegmond - Stuart Skelton (16 & 21) Christopher Ventris (18)

Sieglinde - Adrienne Pieczonka (16 & 21) Elisabet Strid (18)

Wotan - Tomasz Konieczny (16 & 21) James Rutherford (18)

Brünnhilde - Ricarda Merbeth (16, 18 & 21)

Hunding - René Pape (16 & 21) Ain Anger (18)

Fricka - Daniela Sindram (16, 18 & 21)

Act 1 had some military strongboxes, tent and brazier house left with a tree trunk partly covered by a tarpaulin house right. Soldiers brought in additional boxes from a vehicle at the back of the stage beyond a scrim at half height. Snow was falling. Two of the soldiers with German Shepherds seemed to be searching the area for any interlopers. Siegmund took advantage of a break by the soldiers and crossed the stage to climb partly up a metal enclosed staircase. The German Shepherds' olfactory system failed to detect Siegmund and they were not present at the end of Act 2 when Hunding tracked down Siegmund. Perhaps they had been given their walking papers for their failure! After the soldiers

left, Siegmund climbed down and warmed himself at the wood burning brazier. Sieglinde entered wearing army fatigues. When Hunding appeared, he was accompanied by soldiers and he carried a rifle with an attached bayonet. When alone, an impatient Siegmund looked through the strongboxes and found an assault weapon but Hunding reappeared and locked it away.

Thankfully when Spring arrived there was not some sudden and, in our opinion, often ludicrous action, but the back scrim slowly fell to exclude the snow. The back scrim then seemed to show a dark forest, but it appeared more autumnal than spring. In the ensuing dialogue both cover each others' eyes and Siegmund removes Sieglinde's jacket. Sieglinde striped off the tarpaulin to reveal Nothung. The twins embraced after Siegmund extracted Nothung and presented it to his sister as a wedding present.

Act 2 opened in a large room in Valhalla with dress-uniformed soldiers enjoying cocktails. Brünnhilde was reading a novella and lounged on one of two long sofas separated by a square table which contained a tray of apples. A fireplace blazed at the backwall of the room with a Rackham inspired landscape painting either side of the fireplace. At the front of one sofa was a small coffee table with framed photographs of some of Wotan's children. As Wotan approached with his armed guard, the soldiers left the room. Wotan was dressed in an army uniform and carried a walking stick. Fricka arrived with her Margaret Thatcher handbag which she placed on the table. The servants served tea or coffee to which Fricka waved away the sugar whilst Wotan helped himself to two teaspoons. Perhaps Fricka had a forlorn hope she would retain a modicum of allure for Wotan by avoiding sugar. Wotan ate one of the apples and threw the core into the fireplace when his thought process was taken to the woodshed by Fricka. Wotan looked longingly at the largest photograph which we assume was Siegmund. As Wotan explained his situation to Brünnhilde we did think what psychological impact his impassioned talk of Siegmund was having on his supposed favourite daughter. Wotan's frustration at his self created situation was manifested by tossing the tray of apples. When they moved to the front of the stage the front scrim of that dark forest descended.

When the scrim again arose, a snow-covered stage appeared with on stage right a jeep that seemed to have struck an IED. The vehicle was used as a resting place for Sieglinde. When Hunding arrived, he was not accompanied by his soldiers. As they prepared to fight Wotan pointed his walking stick at Nothung and it broke

in half. Hunding used the butt of his rifle to fell Siegmund and then stabbed him with his bayonet. Hunding was in turn felled by Wotan's walking stick. As Wotan raged at Brünnhilde's disobedience the sides of the stage lowered. If Wotan thought he was not free, it was now confirmed by an absence of an exit from the stage! Faced with no- where to go, Wotan returned to embrace the dead Siegmund.

We are again back in the snow for Act 3 with a stage filled with bodies of potential heroes. The Valkyries arrived with one half carrying apples and the other novellas. They looked into the faces of most of the heroes who then arose and walked to the back of the stage to climb up the two metal enclosed staircases – presumably to Valhalla. Our original observation of the Valkyries' action was that they were giving the potential heroes vampire bites – our subsequent view we think is better, if somewhat less interesting! Wotan arrived in a greatcoat and with his walking stick. After he agreed to surround Brünnhilde with fire Wotan went to walk off stage but ran back to embrace her. Wotan covered Brünnhilde with his greatcoat and used his walking stick to summon Loge. Wotan took a lighter from a rejected potential hero and we thought this flame is

none too fearsome. Then the back scrim arose to reveal a wall of flames. Wotan placed the lighter by Brünnhilde's side. Perhaps a fatherly thought of a nightlight in case she has bad dreams? Wotan walked off to the back of the stage and through the wall of flames.

Physical intimacy (or attempted) by way of a hand from behind on the shoulder was common to all three acts. Siegmund was tentative in putting his hand on Sieglinde's shoulder and backed off with open hands as her frightened reaction reflected her past abuse by Hunding. Just prior to leaving, Fricka goes to put her hand on Wotan's shoulder but wisely thinks better of it. Brünnhilde put her hand on Wotan's shoulder when defending her actions and advocating some fearsome trial for her intended.

Pablo Heras-Casado kept the orchestral forces in check for most of the time and frequently we seemed to be listening to a delightful chamber piece. We did not feel short-changed with the one performance with the "B team", although to our ears there was more colour and depth to the singing of Skelton, Pieczonka and Konieczny than their counterparts.



Photos: Javier del Real

# SEEN and HEARD

## **Kent Nagano will lead period reading of the *Ring* Cycle**

Plans are being made for Kent Nagano and the *Concerto Köln* to present a semi-staged version of the *Ring* cycle at the *Kölner Philharmonie* in 2021.

What makes this performance unusual is the decision to make it a period reading. It is to be played on early 19th century instruments with gut strings and performed at 435 tuning which was standard in 1858 as opposed to today's standard at 440.

Casting has not been announced at this time.  
(Credit: Felix Broede)

**Alex Ross**, the "*New Yorker*" music critic (since 1996), will publish shortly his third book to do with music, entitled "*Wagnerism*".

His overwhelming interest in Wagner is behind his more than frequent reports on all things concerning this composer.

His previous books are "*The Rest is Noise; Listening to the Twentieth Century*", and "*Listen to This*".

**Instead of the not-upcoming COC showing of *Parsifal***, I recommend this short film of Jeffrey Swann's take on this work, "*The Music of Parsifal: A Mixture, a Summation, or a Culmination?*", recorded in the past year at and by the *New York Wagner Society*.

Jeffrey Swann, Ph.D., is an internationally renowned pianist and lecturer on Wagner, intimately connected with the *New York Wagner Society* where I have seen and heard him on a number of occasions.

Years ago, taking advantage of Jeffrey Swann's visit to Toronto to give a concert, I had a dinner with him and tried, unsuccessfully I have to admit, to convince him to give a lecture to our society. However, we always have access to his published lectures.

In order to see it, go to

<http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2019/05/jeffrey-swann-music-of-parsifal-mixture.html>

**For those who want more**, I suggest a compendium published in *The Wagnerian* in May 2019, "*Wagner in der Wildnis: 11 Hours Worth of Lectures On Parsifal From Simon Williams & Jeffrey Swann*."

Hosted by the *Wagner Society of Washington*, given over a full weekend and featuring: *Ritual and Theatre in Parsifal; A Showcase for the Evolution of Wagner's Style; The Troubled World of Parsifal; In Search of New Orchestral Colours and Parsifal* and the *Avoidance of Tragedy*.

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<http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2019/05/wagner-in-der-wildnis-11-hour-worth-of.html?m=1>