

Modernism at the opera house

By James Stevens Curl

Some years ago I attended a performance of *Die Liebe der Danae* by Richard Strauss (1864-1949), with a libretto by Joseph Gregor (1888-1960) based on a sketch by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929). This beautiful opera conflated two myths: Danae's visitation by Jupiter in the guise of a shower of golden rain; and the legend of Midas and the golden touch. *Danae* was written in very difficult times for the composer, for his daughter-in-law, Alice (*née* von Grab-Hermannswörth [1904-91]), was Jewish, and it became doubtful if his grandsons would be able to attend school, or even if they and their mother would be allowed to survive under the murderous National Socialist régime. For several anxiety-fraught years Strauss sought protection for his family, and in these dreadful circumstances he found solace in composition. *Danae* only received a dress-rehearsal in 1944, but the première was posthumous, in Salzburg, in 1952, under Clemens Krauss (1893-1954).



Given the terrible times in which the opera was composed, not helped by Gregor's indifferent talents, it nevertheless contains some glorious music, and I made a special journey to Berlin to attend a performance at the *Deutsche Oper*. The evening was ruined by the production (by Kirsten Harms [1956-]), a ludicrously hideous series of absurdities which featured for much of the time a grand piano suspended upside-down above the stage. It was impossible to enjoy the opera as one's attention was distracted by ugliness, incongruities, and showing off, all of which could be summed up as merely an ego-trip for the perpetrators.

Against my better judgement I was persuaded to journey to Berlin again this year to hear a complete performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by Richard Wagner (1813-83), also at the *Deutsche Oper* (a mediocre Modernist building which has not worn well), under the musical direction of Sir Donald Runnicles (1954-), with staging by the Norwegian, Stefan Herheim (1970-). When the curtain rose on *Das Rheingold* my heart sank: not only was there a grand piano in the centre of the stage, an ominous taste of things to come, but troupes of people in trilby hats and overcoats, carrying suitcases, marched across the stage. Throughout the four evenings almost every scene was spoiled by superfluous beings who had never been specified at any time by the composer (he was his own librettist, of course, and his stage-directions were always very clear, so are today an obvious target to be ignored): what was even worse, those extras often appeared in dirty underclothes, and stripped off at every opportunity to display those unattractive garments, often in order to suggest unlikely sexual activity from which all visual erethism, of course, was completely absent.

There were, however, some redeeming things, if one kept one's eyes firmly shut: the *Rheintöchter* sang splendidly, and in general the performances were *musically* excellent, notably a wonderful Loge, Alberich, and Mime (wearing, oddly, a replica

of the velvet cap favoured by Wagner himself, which appears in many photographs of the composer), but there was far too much that was unnecessary, distracting, ugly, inappropriate, and made nonsense of what should have been an elevating, stimulating, and aesthetically glorious evening, not least because of the marvellous playing of a great orchestra under an impressive conductor, and some very fine singing.

But things got steadily worse as the *Ring* continued.

From the start, the orchestral playing was exemplary, and there were occasions, such as when Hagen summed the Vassals in *Götterdämmerung*, when Runnicles and his band nearly blew the roof off the auditorium in one of the most exciting orchestral and choral performances I have ever heard. The chorus was truly splendid: when the Germans decide to really sing, they do it superbly. The conductor's tempi were well judged, but when we got to the first Act of *Die Walküre* I became very uneasy indeed. That Act is one of the most wonderful things in all opera, and could well stand alone as it is so well constructed, dramatically sound, and contains some of Wagner's finest and most lyrical music. In this horrible production there was yet another superfluous being, spoiling everything, called in the programme, "Hundingling", a mute creature (in today's weaselly parlance "challenged", presumably the offspring of Hunding and Sieglinde's loveless coupling), who appeared to crave affection in a grim household, but only succeeded in diverting attention from the intensity of the drama: Sieglinde, emulating Medea, cut this annoying creature's throat at the end of the Act. The great sword, *Nothung*, was embedded, not in the tree Wagner specified, but in the ubiquitous piano. Inwardly, I groaned, but later on there were further gratuitous horrors when the Valkyries were raped and sodomised by the undead "heroes" in soiled undies, although one wondered how the director imagined such activities could proceed when those partaking if they were so repulsively clad.

Heaps of discarded suitcases, another obsession with displaced persons, refugees, and, presumably, death camps, piled on the agony, but were probably intended to signal the soundness of the director in matters concerning National Socialism. With tedious inevitability Wotan (who was also prone to stripping off to his unbecoming underclothes as well) put his beloved daughter to sleep inside the grand piano at the end of Act 3, which should have been another sublime moment in the theatre, but which merely descended into bathos. To add to the mess, Mime assisted in the bloody birth of Siegfried, severed the umbilical cord, and stole the child away. It was a horrible moment without a single redeeming second to alleviate what was now painful.

Siegfried brought its own æsthetic problems. Not only was the *Heldentenor* (despite a magnificent voice) rather large and perhaps, one uncharitably thought, rather too old for the youthful hero, prompting unflattering remarks overheard in the audience (the name of Reichsmarschall Goering cropped up, to some amusement), but the forging scene was feeble in the extreme when *Nothung*, shattered in *Die Walküre*, was reassembled. There were two disasters which spoiled that evening: Wagner's beautiful evocation of the sounds in the forest was marvellously played, but the *Stimme des Waldvogels*, a taxing part usually sung by an experienced soprano, was allotted to a boy, who was really not up to it at all, ruining what ought to have been musically delightful. When Siegfried fought his way through the flames (not too difficult, as they were paltry, unconvincing things) to the grand piano and made the profound observation when viewing Brünnhilde: *Das ist kein Mann!* (to the usual ripple of laughter), we awaited the inevitable, and we got it. The hero needed some instruction in how to copulate, so a crew of refugees in dirty underclothes emerged to gave us distasteful simulations of what I suppose was merely *frottage*, but I confess that had I been an innocent such as Siegfried, given such an unappealing lesson, I would have chosen permanent celibacy with immediate effect. That

such glorious love-music, with those delightful themes familiar from the *Siegfried Idyll* should have been accompanied by such visual squalor, a mass orgy in vile *dishabille*, was really too much, and at the end there was much loud, and perfectly justifiable, booing.

And so it went on, with far too many scenes ruined by the introduction of unattractive people in unappealing underclothes, all unrequired by the composer and absent from his instructions, not to mention the absurdities of characters popping up *from* and down *into* the unfortunate piano, which, incidentally, was mounted via a piano-stool by several characters, who precariously tottered to the top and tottered down again. I fully understand the feelings of the conductor, Marek Janowski (1939-), who has declared himself somewhat leery of conducting in opera-houses: frankly, I shall stick to his splendid *Ring* on CD in future, with its distinguished cast and the great *Staatskapelle*, Dresden, and imagine the cycle in a more agreeable imaginary production, rather than fork out a large sum of money to be insulted in an opera-house.

Productions of Wagner operas in these benighted times are not actually productions at all, but are "interpretations", usually intended as a barrier between the work and the audience, to show off the outrageous conceit of the director and demonstrate his or her soundness in matters of political correctness, especially with regard to the Third Reich, a piece of virtue-signalling which recurs with monotonous and infuriating regularity. Indeed, this tendency is now so common, one wonders if those directors do protest too much.

And there are, of course, unique reasons as to why Wagner has to be made ridiculous, for much of his work is concerned with sacred matters, those especial aspects of the spiritual which are intolerable to a mob of unbelievers: the most noble, the finest, the sacred in life, together with their symbols, are targets for iconoclasts to tear down and destroy, for they must not be permitted to survive because they are powerful,

and their elimination is essential to ensure a shift of sensibility and therefore of power itself. The befouling of the operatic stage represents a major victory for the culture of repudiation, that which flourishes and finds its sustenance in denial of everything that is fine and elevated: in the end, it is all about the destruction of that which consoles, absolutely necessary because the destroyers not only have nothing to fill the vacuum, but because they wish to deny everybody else the possibility of a consolation which might be an indictment of their terrible, hideous, and foul moral emptiness. It is a process of relentless desensitisation, and it appears to be succeeding all too well

One of the problems of the German *Regie-Theater* is that the director is a dictator, and that was painfully obvious in the *Komische Oper*, Berlin, some years ago, when I attended a performance of one of my favourite pieces, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, that glorious *Singspiel* (KV 384) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) to a libretto by Johann Gottlieb Stephanie Jr. (1741-1800) after a play by Christoph Friedrich Bretzner (1748-1807), first given in the *Burgtheater*, Vienna, in 1782. I should have known better, for the horror that was revealed that evening was directed by Calixto Bieito (1953-), who transferred the action from an Ottoman harem to a modern German brothel where every depravity, every taste, was catered for, and depicted with foul realism on the stage, including buggery, sadistic brutality, murder, and mutilation: it was all about the dynamics of absolute power wielded through violent sexual exploitation. That a rather jolly piece of entertainment, steeped in the *Aufklärung* (with a nod to the Noble Turk, of course), could be reduced and besmirched with such unremitting vileness, says everything one needs to know about the state of opera productions today. I walked out, as did a great many others. I am no prude, but I was sickened by the cruelty, the sheer horror of the perversions, the gratuitous violence, the in-your-face obscenities.

This is what Modernism does, in its deliberate rejection of history and its demand for the *tabula rasa*, uninformed by anything worthy that went before, for it denies there is any value at all in the past. It therefore covers everything in ordure, devalues the composer, corrupts the legacy of the librettist, and insults the audience. Abstraction, however anæmic it might at first appear, and no matter whether emanating from the Left or the Right, will always morph towards authoritarianism, even totalitarianism, and from the will to control to its odious self-righteous justifications to destroy and murder is just a very short step into mayhem. In the modern opera-house is a microcosm of what is happening everywhere outside it. What was once good, true, and beautiful is now all reversed, or inverted, so the absence of anything by which hideous crimes can be judged underscores that, increasingly, there are no measurements for crime on any scale, and so the evil, the false, and the hideous are universally imposed. Humankind has been detached from the cultural and religious roots of its history, quite deliberately, too.

Robert Musil (1880-1942), in his gigantic *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, suggested that if Humanity could dream collectively, it would dream murder, and history shows that this is all too true. The destruction of æsthetic, compassionate, educational, empathetic, ethical, and religious standards, all essential parts of the Modernist agenda established in their odious manifestos, has played no small part in the making of a hideous dystopian future, devoid of the numinous, devoid of beauty, devoid of hope. Modernism is in essence puritanism, with its distaste for that which is beautiful, its rejection of æsthetic values, its self-righteous slow-wittedness, its will to destroy, and its abhorrence of all gaiety. It has no sense of humour: it has made fun a crime.

If you want a glimpse of what is in store for you, go to the

Opera.

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