

'Ring'

A Winner

Epic Better in One Big Bite

By WYNN DELACOMA
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Richard Wagner was right.

"The Ring of the Nibelung," his four-opera, 15-hour-long epic of gods, dwarves and human beings locked in mortal combat for control of their own destinies and world domination, is best seen in one, music-besotted swoop.

Lyric Opera of Chicago gave its first-ever production of a weeklong "Ring" cycle over four nights last week. With a cast headed by some of today's finest singing actors: an austere but glittering production full of mythic symbolism, whimsy and raw emotion, and the orchestra propelling the drama with an irresistible flow of powerful music, it was a triumph for the 41-year-old company.

The first of three complete "Rings" running at the Civic Opera House through March 30, it also proved Wagner's point once more. Lyric audiences have seen all four of the operas already—"Das Rheingold," "Die Walkure" and "Siegfried" as part of the company's three previous seasons,

Marton delivered her moving elegy to the slain hero, Siegfried (Siegfried Jerusalem) as the stage glowed a fiery red. The aerialist Rhinemaidens proudly held their reclaimed ring as they swam toward the top of the proscenium.

Making his way through the confused commonfolk, the fire god Loge (Graham Clark) held up his arm as if to sneer "I told you so." Children brought out ropes from which the adults formed a circle, symbol of the world's renewal. The Rhinegod reappeared, a fact duly noted from the sidelines by the dwarf Alberich (Elkehard Wlaschna). The glint in his eye told us the cycle would begin again.

The world may have been purified by flame and redeemed by love, but avarice, corruption and lust for power, as Everding reminds us, are ever-present.

This touch of bemused cynicism was not amiss at the end of a "Ring" that often treated serious matter lightly and playfully; that portrayed family relationships on an intimate, involving scale; that listened with fresh ears to what Wagner's magnificent music has to say. With jokey, ironic, postmodernist "Rings" all the rage these days, it was good to encounter a production that dared to regard Wagner's gods, dwarfs, giants, dragons and men as believable figures whose problems are not unlike our own.

If the "Ring" is a litmus test of what an opera house can do, the Lyric passed with flying colors—also flying Rhinemaidens. Heard as a cycle, the sheer momentum of singing, drama, orchestral playing and stagecraft exerted a cumulative hold on the audience.

Nowhere this side of Bayreuth, and not even there, can one find a cast as strong as the one Lyric is fielding for its cycles. Zubin Mehta's vigorous conducting, John Conklin's stylized designs and clear vistas, and Duane Schuler's evocative lighting attested to the high level of artistic effort put forth by dozens upon dozens of personnel.

ARTS & SHOW

I heard mutterings from one or two visiting critics that "there weren't enough ideas" in Everding's "Ring." It's a reaction I can understand but can't share. It seems to me the German director showed admirable taste by not settling for tiresome Eurotrash clichés, by not loading the tetralogy with political and cultural baggage, by not "explicating" Wagner.

In short, the composer's intentions were respected without sticking slavishly to the text. The audience was invited to ponder what lies beneath the myths and symbols of an endlessly meaningful masterpiece, rather than to ponder the cleverness of its interpreters. And Everding drew admirable acting performances from virtually everybody in the large cast.

If the audience remembers anything about the visual design, it will be the bungee-jumping Rhinemaidens and trampolining-bounding Valkyries as choreographed by Debra Brown, also the oversized dragon and giant puppets by Lisa Aimee Sturz, striking creations all.

As for Mehta and the orchestra, they began well but really came into their own musically by the end of the cycle. His conducting had nobility, warmth, impetuosity. Save for a few dead patches in Act I of "Walkure," he underlined the action with a firm command of sonority and the arching Wagnerian line, while his balances were so well judged that the singers never had to fight to be heard within the sometimes dense orchestral textures.

The Lyric orchestra made it through perhaps the longest and most difficult week in its history with remarkable poise, beauty and balance of sound. Siegfried's horn calls were among the several fine instrumental contributions.

Francis Rizzo's projected captions proved a godsend in helping the audience sort out the central ideas in a long, convoluted and talky German text.

Of the singers, James Morris' Wotan/Wanderer and Wlaschna's Alberich were pillars of vocal strength, their familiar portrayals as incisively sung and acted as ever. Jerusalem strongly conveyed Siegfried's growth from callow adolescent to gawky, macho hero. He sang as bravely and musically as could be expected, even if he had next to no voice left by week's end.

Marton continued to impress with her wise, valiant, tireless Valkyrie, almost making up in dramatic intensity for squally vocalism on top. Clark doubled as the deliciously cunning Loge and hilariously evil Mime. Matti Salminen brought a blackly baleful voice and hulking physical presence to four bass roles.

The problem with Poul Elming's lyrically voiced Siegmund was that he and Thina Kiberg's high-strung Sieglinde didn't generate much sexual tension in the first act of "Die Walkure."

The Gibichungs Gunther and Gutrune, Alan Held and Elizabeth Byrne, were characterfully sung and acted. Also exceptional were Marijana Lipovsek's Fricka and Waltraute, Nancy Maullisby's Erda and Dennis Petersen's Mime in "Rheingold."

The trio of Rhinemaidens and Norms sound better tuned than their Valkyrie sisters.