

ArtsPlus

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'Siegfried' simply soars

Surprisingly strong music propels 3rd part of 'Ring' cycle

By John von Rhein
TRIBUNE MUSIC CRITIC

With a new production of "Siegfried" Tuesday at the Civic Opera House, Lyric Opera reached the three-quarter mark in its traversal of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung" cycle.

If you subscribe to the received opinion that "Siegfried" is musically the weak sister of the tetralogy, prepare to revise your opinion.

Lyric's artistic team, headed by director August Everding, designer John Conklin and conductor Zubin Mehta, clearly conveys of "Siegfried" as the scherzo movement of a four-part "Ring" symphony. The fairy-tale element, subtly sounded throughout "Das Rheingold" and "Die Walkure," emerges here with the full force of the young Siegfried's hunting horn.

Everding is that rarity—a musical stage director who knows his Wagner and who is not so smitten with his own cleverness that he subjugates the score to his personal "vision." He tells the story as straightforward myth. Since "Siegfried" is by far the least ideological of the "Ring" operas, that was a sensible decision.

Conklin's stylized, vaguely Asian designs are the simplest of any of his "Ring" sets thus far—a small latticework hut on stilts for Act I, a green platform to suggest the forest primeval of Act II and a ruined grotto representing the Valkyrie's rock in the final act. This allows plenty of open, uncluttered space for the singers to move around in. There is

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one curious contradiction: Siegfried discovers Brunnhilde asleep atop a fluorescent-ringed table, not standing upright within the flat pyramid to which Wotan consigned her at the end of "Walkure."

For "Rheingold" we got Rhinemaidens on bungee cords; for "Walkure" the gimmick was Valkyries on trampolines. The prime visual coup in "Siegfried" is the dragon Fafner, a large skeletal lizard with snapping steel jaws and Freddy Krueger claws, its head and body operated by black-clad acrobats. Less effective is the Waldvogel, a white origami bird borne by a scampering dancer and, at the end of Act II, an aerialist soaring into the wings on Peter Pan wires.

Once again Lyric has managed to corner one of the best, and perhaps the only true "Ring" cast in the world.

Siegfried Jerusalem is among the very few tenors in history to portray Siegfund and his son Siegfried in the same "Ring" cycle.

None of today's Heldentennors can deliver the vocally punishing title role with such reserves of strong, steady, ringing tone, such command or such musicality. He paced himself well, although strain was evident by the end. An athletic actor, he was totally convincing in his progress from cocky, impulsive young hero to fearless dragon slayer to entranced lover.

Graham Clark's twitchy, conniving,



Tribune photo by John Bentley

Eva Marton is Brunnhilde and Siegfried Jerusalem sings the title role in "Siegfried," cackling Mime was a performance to cherish, brightly sung even if he made the villainous dwarf almost too likable. James Morris wielded a warm, rounded bass-baritone with his usual authority in the Wanderer's four duets.

Ekkehard Wlaschika repeated his menacing Albertich, Nancy Mauhsby her rich-voiced Erda, Eric Halfvarson intoned Fafner's music with dark menace, and Olga Makarina chirped prettily as the offstage voice of the Forest Bird.

In terms of sheer vocal output, Eva Marton's Brunnhilde certainly was heroic. For the love duet she scaled down her voluminous voice to suit the character's womanly, loving nature.

At full volume and under pressure,

however, the voice spread into an intrusive wobble. (Wolfgang Schmidt and Jane Eaglen will take over the roles of Siegfried and Brunnhilde Monday and Feb. 3.)

Tuesday's performance lasted 4¼ hours, including two intermissions, but the pace never flagged, thanks to Mehta's energized baton. His conducting connected more strongly with the orchestra and singers than in the two previous "Ring" operas; only a less-than-radiant love duet disappointed.

Few operas demand such virtuosic concentration from every orchestra player, but the Lyric musicians rose to its demands well beyond expectation. Kudos to the tuba and horn players.

TODAY'S TEMPO

A breath of fresh air
on Super Bowl Sunday?
Yes, nasal dilators.
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