

Amanda Thane's Valentine is rich, Richard Leech's Raoul is passionate (if a bit too Italianate in 'Plus blanche que la blanche hermine'), and John Wegner's Saint-Bris is convincingly stern, but the rest of the principals fail to impress. Some, particularly in the Berlin production, sound stretched. Sutherland herself is properly regal, but, at almost sixty-four years old, not as on top of the role as when she recorded it for LP in 1962 and 1970.<sup>23</sup> If there is a clear distinction to be made, it is between the two choruses, especially the Catholic aristocrats: in Sydney they sound enthusiastic and full of verve, in Berlin from time to time somewhat ragged (they are, after all, rough and ready storm troopers rather than noblemen). But, as outlined here, these DVDs exhibit other kinds of magnificence. And if neither is quite epoch-making, each also has its own, different, historical interest.

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*Wagner at the Bayreuth Festival*

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*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

Live-Mitschnitt aus dem Bayreuther Festspielhaus 2008.

Inszenierung: Katharina Wagner

Musikalische Leitung: Sebastian Weigle

Chor und Orchester der Bayreuther Festspiele

(Berlin: United Motion, 2008)

*Richard Wagner für Kinder: Der Ring des Nibelungen,*

Live-Mitschnitt von der Probebühne IV der Bayreuther Festspiele 2011;

Brandenburgisches Staatsorchester Frankfurt (Oder),

Inszenierung: Maximilian von Mayenburg

Musikalische Leitung: Hartmut Keil

(Bayreuth: BF Medien, 2011)

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We may new era of the Bayreuth Wagner festival is characterized by two factors: first, the takeover by Katharina Wagner and Eva Wagner-Pasquier, in charge of the administration since late 2008, and second, the implementation of a noticeable media concept marketing the festival productions via DVD. Among these efforts also belong the live transmission of a performance (public viewing in Bayreuth), and the production of a children's opera per season. The latter meanwhile has become an inherent part of the festival. The two DVD productions under review here are results of this new media strategy by the Bayreuther Festspiele realized by the BF Medien.

We may start with the most recent production, the DVD *Richard Wagner für Kinder: Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The label 'Wagner for children' should be

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<sup>23</sup> Still available on CD as Opera d'Oro 1217 (in Italian) and Decca/London 430549 respectively.

taken seriously. It places the composer in the centre, and in this way Bayreuth's concept of children's opera differs somewhat from other opera productions aimed at young people. *Der Ring* is the third production, after *The Flying Dutchman* (2009) and *Tannhäuser* (2010 also available on DVD for 5 Euros). At first sight, it seems hardly possible to condense the sixteen-hour tetralogy into a digest version of hundred minutes without touching parody. But this is not the case. The arrangers, stage director and conductor (including Saskia Bladt for the musical arrangement) designed a remarkable version in which Wagner's music is without any doubt the main focus. It is played by an orchestra of about 30 musicians integrated into the stage setting. The setting itself uses the whole expanse of this huge rehearsal studio, permitting various playgrounds for the action.

Although a sort of framework for the story has been established through the predominant presence of Wotan and Loge, the sequence of events within the action has not been altered. The course of the narrative is as close as possible to the original. Or, to put it in less positive terms: the story follows the tetralogy almost slavishly, without any attempt to breakup the narrative or to 'play' with it. Obviously, it was the intention of the producers not to implement irony or attempt any of the pedagogic goals often to be found in children's operas. Rather, they aim to place Wagner's music at the centre of the enterprise. The highlights of the tetralogy are conserved through more or less longer musical units. The arrangement of the music consists mostly of a reduced, but not modified orchestration; longer passages of the music remain untouched, so to speak. The singers come from the Festspielhaus next door, some of them, such as Norbert Ernst (Siegmond and Siegfried), are superb. We can guess that the aim of 'Wagner for children' is to make the composer accessible to children through high-quality musical performance – to 'convince' them by his music rather than by means of a childlike arrangement of the plot. In this respect, the production has its merits. It keeps the spoken dialogue to a minimum, at some points using the technique of melodrama to provide the necessary hard facts, but for the most part giving way for the musical highlights of the 'Ring'.

On the other hand, without any knowledge of Wagner's 'Ring' it is quite hard for children to understand the plot. Some areas remain in the same darkness as parts of the scenery: the relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde is hard to discern from Siegmund's short statement 'It seems that I have fallen in love'. The love of the two *Wälsungen* remains enigmatic in the same way as it does not become evident why Siegfried actually is destined for death. Fortunately, the performance does not involve the notorious role of a narrator (as so often in children's operas) detailing facts of the story. But one wishes much more boldness in dealing with Wagner's narrative, for example, through some sidesteps in the story or by regrouping music or action. From this perspective, the performance is a bit monotonous.

However, the production has fabulous poetic moments, to which children certainly are sensitive. The skating Rhine maidens at the beginning of *Rheingold*, the video-screened faces of the two giants, Mime's steamy kitchen, and the dragon represented only by a huge mouth of white cloth teeth. Most poetic is the final scene, when, as Hagen and Alberich wrestle for the ring, it suddenly starts snowing, and the two are frozen during their fight – all of this witnessed by the Rhine maidens. In other words, the end circles back to the beginning of *Rheingold* with the skating Rhine maidens. The performance

is also not lacking in funny elements, such as when the giants enter with the Bavarian salutation 'Grüß Gott' or when Brünnhilde interrupts at the height of her 'Hojotoho' addressing Wotan in a colloquial 'Du wolltest mich sprechen?' ('You want to talk?'). Last but not least, the most remarkable musical effects are produced by the use of the accordion for the Walhall motive, ironically one of the rare points where the score has really been arranged. Such aspects of the performance could lead to a more far-ranging discussion around the discourse of 'Werktreue' (faithfulness to the original): which sort of alterations of a Wagner work can be tolerated, in particular in the backyard of the Festspielhaus?

The aspect of 'Werktreue' and its opposite, destruction, is inherent in Katharina Wagner's staging of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. The issue of how to deal with a well-known artwork, especially one burdened with as infamous a reception history as *Die Meistersinger*, has become a *Leitmotiv* for the whole production of the composer's great-granddaughter. This was her debut at the Festspielhaus in 2007, the DVD presents a live performance of the 2008 season. It is hard to review a production that has already provoked such a controversial discussion, and it is even harder not to take into account the 'accompanying music' played by the scholarship that has followed the premiere.

It is also part of the new Bayreuth to organize conferences around the new productions, mostly with renowned scholars from various disciplines. At first sight, this seems a very good idea. A closer look, however, reveals that these conferences – sponsored by the festival – include participation by the production teams. Thus, 'producers' become co-organizers of academic events. In the 2011 season, the conference tended to 'authorize' the *Tannhäuser* production, which had been harshly criticized in the press shortly before. Nevertheless, the *Meistersinger* conference proceedings<sup>1</sup> are worth reading, in particular the article by Lydia Goehr, who also perfectly reflects the ambivalent character of the conference.<sup>2</sup>

One of the basic ideas of this *Meistersinger* production is to go beyond the boundaries of art. The former relationship between craftsmanship and art/music is expanded by a new dimension: the masters are shown to be artists as well. The stage is full of props in order to create an association with the other arts, such as painting. We see busts not only of composers but also of poets and other artistic figures. Furthermore, the art of painting is highlighted throughout the production. Walther von Stolzing is a wild young rebel painter, offending the masters not only by his singing but also by his revolutionary pictures. This concept by Katharina Wagner and her dramaturg Robert Sollich avoids a too-narrow view of the issue of singing/music within the dramatic argument. One might argue that this is fundamentally against Wagner's own dramaturgy, or even against the 'spirit' of the work, but in its consequent scenic realization it is quite convincing. However, one consequence

<sup>1</sup> *Angst vor der Zerstörung: der Meister Künste zwischen Archiv und Erneuerung*, ed. Robert Sollich, Clemens Risi, Sebastian Reus and Stephan Jöris, *Recherchen* 52 (Berlin: Verlag Theater der Zeit, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Goehr, 'Heil wem? Katharina: wasted art or the art of waste', *Ibid.*, 247–59). Also interesting is the contribution of David J. Levin, '*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: drastisch oder gnostisch?', *Ibid.*, 260–71), which engages with Carolyn Abbate's paradigms of live performance.

cannot be overlooked: the composer's ingenious play with diegetic and non-diegetic music is played down. Thus, Walther von Stolzing's first song at the end of Act I is downplayed as he is shown trying to compose a puzzle from a famous Nuremberg etching of the 'Schedelsche Weltchronik'.<sup>3</sup> Beckmesser, on the opposite side of the stage, is at work on the same puzzle in the right manner, whereas Stolzing's picture is presented in the end upside down. This idea is typical of the strong images that support Katharina Wagner's productions.<sup>4</sup> One might even say that she depends on the images to detail her ideas. It is certainly not her strength to develop her reading through a vivid characterization of the *dramatis personae*. The double puzzling by Stolzing and Beckmesser is nevertheless a suitable preview of later developments in the action: in the third act, Stolzing becomes a mainstream painter/ musician, whereas Beckmesser mutates into a cutting edge performance artist. Hans Sachs (Franz Hawlata), on the other hand, is shown at first as an outsider, a mixture of proletarian and intellectual, dressed in black shirt, barefoot, and constantly smoking. He does not participate in the rituals of the mastersingers, and only gradually does he don the master's garb. This change of clothes is connected to a transformation of the 'chief' poet from non-conformist to reactionary, a main focus of this staging.

The ingenious *mise-en-scène* by Tilo Steffens is multi-functional in many senses: it could be regarded as an academy of art, a huge industrialist's villa, or as the interior of a nineteenth-century power station. Nuremberg is in fact shown through its dull and genderless people, characterized by uniform gestures and monotonous choreography. The musical quality of the chorus, however, is outstanding, one of the great assets of Bayreuth festival from its beginning.

When Stolzing approaches Eva in the second act, he is painting her clothes in the manner of body art. Eva is wearing white sneakers, which become an icon in this production, eventually evident by the end of the act: single white sneakers fall from 'heaven' whenever Beckmesser detects mistakes in the performed song. Finally, it rains sneakers, an allusion to the final 'frog scene' in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*. It is also the opening to the well-known 'Prügelfuge' leading eventually into chaos. In Katharina Wagner's staging this is a 'happening', featuring Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans as containers for white paint with which Nuremberg's people are showered. For the production team this marks the turning point of the opera: in the same way as Beckmesser is induced by this action to turn towards performance art, Hans Sachs converts into a reactionary. He tries to save the poetic canon – that is, the books – out of the chaos. Furthermore, Sachs's metamorphosis becomes evident: he strips off his 'existentialist' black clothes and slips into the conventional dress of the masters.

The third act is, without any doubt, the most problematic in this staging. The sequence of 'duet' situations (Sachs–David, Sachs–Walther, Sachs–Beckmesser), a challenge for every producer, is not very inventively handled. Things change with Sachs's 'Wahn-Monolog' when Katharina Wagner again places emphasis on images: during the monologue we see huge swollen heads – familiar in

<sup>3</sup> This is an important source of early printing from 1493, including city views, of major centres such as Vienna, Cologne and Florence.

<sup>4</sup> Among her other Wagner stagings are *Der fliegende Holländer* (Würzburg 2002), *Lohengrin* (Budapest 2004) and *Tannhäuser* (Las Palmas 2009).

Rhine area carnival – representing the masters of German art, including Wagner. In the end of that scene, a virtual production team – including a blonde young woman – is acknowledged by applause, but in the next moment thrown into a huge bin and set alight by workers. This imaginary auto-da-fé is an absolutely horrifying moment within this staging. Sachs monologue resolves into a German nightmare, which finds its continuation in the following fairground scene.

The 'Festwiese' is an act of exorcism. Katharina Wagner mobilizes all devices to go against the tradition of this opera. Admittedly, *Meistersinger* has a *longue durée* in conventional *mises-en-scène* at Bayreuth. The opera has been untouched so far by the so-called – and better untranslated – concept of *Regietheater*, in contrast to *Parsifal*, which had already undergone its revolution at the beginning of the millennium with Christoph Schlingensiefel's staging.<sup>5</sup> This perspective apparently leads the production team to create the strongest possible counterpoint. Again, the swollen-headed puppets, inevitably equipped with huge penises, appear dancing a macabre Can-Can with some naked maids from Fürth. The vain Walther von Stolzing presents his song in the manner of a casting show, Beckmesser, for his part, grubs in tipped earth in order to create his performance/art. Here too, his (diegetic) music remains in the background of the action.

This 'Festwiese' scene is certainly hard stuff for Wagner traditionalists. But the overabundance of ideas and gags makes this staging somewhat strange for partisans of the *Regietheater* as well. The final scene stands in a way *pars pro toto*: interesting ideas are often realized in a coarse manner, focussing too strongly on an iconoclast aspect. In the end, one feels curiously exhausted and empty rather than enriched. Certainly, Katharina Wagner and her team are aware of the overwhelming musical strategies in the score, especially in Act III, and they intended to produce a scenic counterpoint. But this ambition results more often in doubling rather than counterpointing.

The production's best moments are undoubtedly those in which Katharina Wagner develops her ideas out of the music. Moreover, she has a great sensitivity for timing (e.g. in the slow-motion pantomimic applause of the people during the final contest).

It must be emphasized that this is the very first recorded live performance from the Bayreuth Festspielhaus; earlier recordings were filmed without audience. The recording has been achieved with several remote-controlled cameras, avoiding any disturbance of the audience; some shots were made by three on-stage cameras. The result is a vivid document, though with some shortcomings due to a six-hour running time, which is especially challenging for the singer in the role of Hans Sachs. These circumstances – as well as the limits of television – must be taken into consideration when assessing the musical quality.

Franz Hawlata as Hans Sachs is certainly not the most subtle singer for this highly demanding role, and at the 2007 premiere he was even booed. But we have to be fair: although his voice does not have an extensive palette, it has in contrast a high profile. And as an actor Hawlata is outstanding, he is the

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<sup>5</sup> The reception was likewise extraordinary; see Patti Smith's report on the 2005 performance of *Parsifal* in *Die Zeit*, August 11 2005 (online: [http://www.zeit.de/2005/33/Patti\\_Smith](http://www.zeit.de/2005/33/Patti_Smith)).

pivotal character in this production. The camera is frequently focused on his face, which mirrors perfectly the ambivalent feelings of the cobbler/ artist.

The most distinguished singers are Klaus Florian Vogt (Walther von Stolzing) and Michael Volle (Sixtus Beckmesser). Vogt creates the upper vocal lines, with beauty and almost light-footedness, though his middle register is less characteristic. Volle's Beckmesser is excellent, in singing and acting alike. Although the cast is predominantly German, this does not assure a perfect articulation of the text; notably Michaela Kaune (Eva) lacks ability in this respect.

Sebastian Weigle's conducting emphasized transparency, but the various lines sometimes trail off. In the overture, the winds are not always perfectly together, particularly in fast passages. On the other hand, Weigle outlines clear accentuations of the strings, which allows a structural view of the various dynamic progressions of the overture. Weigle is best at producing the conversational tone [Konversationston] of later nineteenth-century German opera, for example in David's music, excellently performed and sung by Norbert Ernst. It cannot be overlooked that the musical interpretation decreases in the course of the performance. Whereas in the second act there could be still found longer passages of high musical tension, the third act lacks musical variety nearly throughout.

Although we can neither compare nor bring together the two reviewed DVD productions, it cannot be overseen that they share a common policy: they stand, without any doubt, for a 'New Bayreuth' paving the festival a way into the twenty-first century. Howsoever we might evaluate Katharina Wagner's *Meistersinger* production in terms of staging, scenery or directing, it carves out a new path for producing this opera and the festival (idea), respectively. On the other hand, for the most prestigious festivals such as Salzburg and Bayreuth I see no alternative than to present the very highest quality musical interpretation. There seems to be no way out: for Bayreuth, Wagner's basic idea of 'Musteraufführungen' (model performances) is still valid today, in terms of outstanding musical performance *and* innovative staging.

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