Wagner

Siegfried

Jon Frederic West (Siegfried) *ten*, Heniz Göhrig (Mime) *ten*, Wolfgang Schöne ('The Wanderer'/Wotan) *bass*, Björn Waag (Alberich) *bass*, Attila Jun (Fafner) *bass*, Lisa Gasteen (Brünnhilde) *sop*

Staatsoper Stuttgart
Staatsorchester Stuttgart
Lothar Zagrosek *cond*

Naxos 8.660175–78 (241 minutes: DDD)
German libretto can be found at www.naxos.com/libretti/660175.htm

Most commentators seem to agree that *Siegfried* is the most difficult of the music dramas from Wagner's *Ring* cycle to bring off in performance; it is certainly the least often performed as a separate musico-dramatic experience. Dramatically, it is perhaps hard to feel the same sympathy for its hero Siegfried as we feel for Siegmund in *Die Walküre* or Brünnhilde in *Die Götterdämmerung*. Memories of the famous 'boy scout' tag almost invariably come to mind. Even Wagner seemed at a loss to find clear words for encouraging interpreters of the role: 'everything [Siegfried] says and does must be presented as the natural expression of an essentially heroic personality who has not yet found an object in life worthy of his superabundant strength'.[1] Strength without focus is hardly a recipe for sympathetic characterization. If comedy, even farce, has to be taken as the key to Siegfried's dramatic treatment, then one wonders how the opera is to gain the weight necessary to portray one of the cycle's most tragic events, the collapse of Wotan's power. The answer comes, surely, in the new musical style of Act 3, which emerged after the composer's experience with the subtle remixing of comedy in *Die Meistersinger*, and of tragedy in *Tristan und Isolde*. From the Prelude to the third act of *Siegfried* a broader momentum establishes itself, harmonically and texturally rich enough to absorb simultaneously both tragic and comic inflexions.

Yet no listener wants to wait though the hours of the first and second acts of *Siegfried*, purely with the consolation 'don't worry Siegfried will turn into Tristan in the end'; performers and listeners cannot sustain their interest on the basis of certain conceptual comparisons, or the promise of eventual stylistic transformation. There is a musico-dramatic hiatus that demands to be addressed, which is where stage directors of *Siegfried* have often come into their own, providing welcome layers of scenic distraction for audiences and virtuosic challenges for performers. The Staatsoper Stuttgart production of *Siegfried*, the production that is represented live in the current Naxos recording, is reported as having been one of the most scenically inventive of recent years (as can be witnessed on the commercially available DVD). One can hear traces of the febrile activity required of the singers in the crashes and bangs that randomly accompany even some of the music's

[1] Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 81.

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more lyrical passages on the audio recording. Interestingly, a different production team was hired for each of the operas in the Stuttgart *Ring* cycle, so that the counterpointing of the visual and aural could be constantly renewed. Even the team of singers was exchanged for each opera.

There remained one constant in this unusual interpretive exercise, the conductor and his orchestra, which is why the issue of an audio-only recording of the Stuttgart experience is perhaps a highly appropriate test. In the part Wagner-induced, part production-induced, flux that is the common experience of *Siegfried*, how can a musical narrative of any integrity be sustained? It is to his credit that the conductor Lothar Zagrosek seems prepared to tackle such a challenge head-on, even if his approach involves some unexpected sacrifices. The most notable of these is the jettisoning of some of the epic weight at the beginning of the opera's third act. Zagrosek's Prelude to Act 3 positively skips through its harmonic paces, as though still taking its rhythmic cue from Siegfried's bounding horn figures at the end of Act 2. The sections of the orchestra, the brass in particular, respond to the accelerated pace with virtuosic *élan*, but there are moments of unease as Wolfgang Schöne, the singer of Wotan, enters the fray and struggles to enunciate his summons to Erda amidst the onrush of harmonically shifting sequences. What are usually heard as resonant statements turn into urgent pleas at such a speed, and neither what Wagner called Wotan's 'heroic resignation' nor his 'exalted sense of the joy of life'[2] gain their full expression. The character's failure to assert his god-like status in this conductor's interpretation is the more noted when his struggling utterances are compared to Erda's more weighty pronouncements. But even Helene Ranada's impressively sonorous tones are not sufficient to establish an epic pace by themselves; one is left wondering whether a realization of the full weight and breadth of Wagner's new style has been delayed, or is to be renounced altogether. Zagrosek's instrumentally propelled momentum forces Wotan to assume a human vulnerability, or even the role of a blustering buffoon. In the second scene of Act 3, where again Schöne suffers some vocal humiliations in his efforts to keep up with the orchestra, it is very noticeable that we end up agreeing with Siegfried's rather demeaning estimation of Wotan as an annoying has-been. Many of the performance instructions (*immer ruhiger*, *sehr mässig*), which Wagner said should keep this second scene operating at a level of god-like indifference, are swept aside by the conductor in the interests of sustaining a humorous take on the encounter between god and hero, grandfather and grandson.

It seems Zagrosek has taken the decision to downplay the tragedy of Wotan's loss of power and the destruction of his spear. In this interpretation, Siegfried does not need to summon up extraordinary powers to destroy Wotan's old order; his spear seems little more than an empty symbol. Zagrosek also mutes the god, if not quite to the same extent, in his encounter with Mime in the second scene of the first act. Wagner said that the performance of this scene 'should combine the forward movement of an andante with the repose of an adagio', recognizing that such a combination might not be easy to achieve and would need to focus on the musical speech of the singers.[3] The question then becomes whose musical speech is considered to be dominant in the scene's following exchange of riddles, Mime's or Wotan's. The expectation would be Wotan's, since the chorale-like chords that indicate the imposing strides of Wotan as 'Wanderer' open the proceedings. Yet

[2] Ibid., 104.
[3] Ibid., 86–7.

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once again Zagrosek offers a faster than usual take on the instruction *Mässig und etwas feierlich*, so that one has the sense of the chorale-like chords being placed in quotation-marks as a motif, rather than being fully inhabited as a mode of self-expression. Wolfgang Schöne seems to fall in with the instruments at this point rather than take the lead vocally. This contrasts with the moment when Mime's characteristic hammering motif emerges to punctuate his thoughtful response to Wotan's challenge. Wagner said this motif should be 'so graphic as to be positively comic'.[4] Zagrosek grasps this figure as more than just a motif; it comes to define the momentum of the scene, as Heinz Göhrig's Mime vocally matches the precision and edge of the orchestra's scherzando rhythms to perfection. Göhrig's mastering of the inner life of Wagner's intricate speech rhythms is one of the main delights of this recording; he finds space within the instrumental *Schwung* for the lyrical expression that Wagner was always demanding, whilst also knowing how to give a kick to the orchestral momentum when it might be in danger of flagging.

In this recording, one would say Mime outstrips Wotan in the battle to control the flow of the riddle scene. Some of this can be attributed to superior vocal prowess; it is true that Schöne often conveys less vocal presence than Göhrig. But, some of the responsibility must lie with Zagrosek and his choice to downplay the opera's epic resonances. One might interpret this negatively as coming from a postmodern nervousness with anything larger than life, or from a fear of being compared with the great conducting tradition of epic Wagnerians. However, if we accept that Wagnerian musical performance always exists on a knife-edge of different possibilities, then a Mime-centred musical approach might make as much sense of *Siegfried*'s dramatic dialogues as a Wotan-centred one. We are certainly aware of an unusual shift in musical power towards Mime in some of Siegfried's run-ins with the dwarf. Jon Frederic West's Siegfried has seemingly inexhaustible vocal resources at his command, whether in terms of strength, warmth or agility; yet in many places Mime matches him tone for tone, so that aurally it is not always immediately clear which tenor is singing. This is partly because Göhrig, much to this writer's relief, eschews the constantly whining sonorities that so many singers adopt for this role. He really *sings* his part for all it's worth, reserving caricature for where it is specifically demanded. Mime's 'Starling song', as Siegfried calls it, is actually delivered as a lyrical song when it first appears in Act 1 Scene 1, and only later becomes exaggerated as a provocative ploy to gain Siegfried's sympathy. Mime's character itself may not grow, but our understanding of him does as we are encouraged to get inside his obviously disturbed mind. Wagner referred to the strange 'psychological processes' that he wished to outline as a portrait of Mime in the Prelude to Act 1, processes that require a 'scrupulous observation of every accent and dynamic marking'.[5] Zagrosek sustains this loving attention to the details of Mime's characterization throughout the first act of the opera, transforming what can seem a pantomime act into a wittily drawn picture of human-like frailties.

Again, Zagrosek's distinctive choices for Act 1 involve elements of sacrifice. West is left high and dry at some of his moments of heroic utterance because of the comic speed that Zagrosek insists upon. Siegfried's climactic call to freedom at the end of the first scene of the act, 'Aus dem Wald fort, in die Welt zieh'n', ends up as a garbled mess through no fault of the singer's. Zagrosek fails to halt the momentum that accompanies Mime's previous cry of terror (indicated

[4] Ibid., 87.
[5] Ibid., 79.

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erschrocken); he does not allow Siegfried and the instruments to gather together at this next point and so mark the moment as one of conscious significance. This particular lack of ensemble might be put down as one of the casualties of live performance. A more striking example of Zagrosek 'de-heroizing' Siegfried comes, perhaps, with his approach to the 'Forging song' from Act 1 Scene 3. Wagner talks of the song needing a 'massive strength' and 'an intensity so powerful that individual expression is raised to the level of the universal'.[6] In Zagrosek's interpretation, the repeated dotted rhythms in the bass that provide the energy for such a monumental outpouring are still skipping to the rhythm of Mime's hammering motif; there is no real shift to a different kind of hammering for Siegfried's efforts. West does his best to compensate for the lack of weight in the orchestral support for the 'Forging song' by giving the utmost vocal energy to his essentially simple melodic line. Unfortunately, this makes him come across as rather overblown and ineffectual, just when he needs to sound at his strongest and most invincible. For all Zagrosek's manifold skill with orchestral pacing and balance, the end of the first act, which should come in a blaze of glory, comes dangerously near to being an anti-climax.

A *Siegfried* interpretation may dispense with a god-like Wotan – after all Wotan has already adopted a 'Wanderer' disguise for this opera, but it cannot do without a heroic Siegfried. If, according to Zagrosek's interpretation, Siegfried is not to gain this through his hammering, his monumental physical strength, then one wonders how he is to acquire his larger-than-life status. The dialogues he has with Mime and Wotan are, for different reasons, made to seem strangely inconclusive as tests of his power. The confirmation of his heroic status has to wait for the opera's final dialogue, the exchange with Brünnhilde that takes place on her rock, high above the previous action. The sense of silence that surrounds Siegfried's arrival on the rocky heights seems truly breathtaking in this performance, partly perhaps as a result of epic resonances being denied at earlier points in the opera. Here, Zagrosek and his orchestra excel in setting out the eloquent instrumental fragments that establish the air of another world, as Wagner expresses it; in the opening part of this scene the conductor allows each motivic gesture the space to find its own pace and rhythm. This much-needed relaxation of the comic pace is anticipated at times during the second act. There Zagrosek lets the members of his orchestra, particularly the woodwind, dwell lovingly on each detail of the famous 'Forest murmurs' music, thus providing luminous interludes for the second act among the hectic exchanges of dwarves, dragon, 'Wanderer' and Siegfried. Most importantly, these interludes allow West's Siegfried to display a whole new vocal palette, an inner intensity that helps one understand why Wagner found himself making sketches for *Tristan* in the midst of working on this second act.

Jon Frederic West is renowned for his resilient performances of the Tristan role, but one still finds oneself wondering how he might meet the expectations of Siegfried's final duets with Brünnhilde, duets that Wagner says must unite love and heroism, restraint and ecstasy, the individual and the universal.[7] Lisa Gasteen's Brünnhilde fills the space that Zagrosek prepares for her with extraordinary ease. As, newly awakened, she rises to greet the world around her, her voice reveals a depth of tone and breadth of line that realign the musical dimensions of the opera decisively towards the epic. The Valkyrie's subsequent

[6] Ibid., 92.
[7] Ibid., 110–14.

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shifts in mood, as she regrets her past life and faces the anxiety of her new one, are eloquently delineated by Gasteen, without any loss of her sure-footed vocal grandeur. Even the notoriously tricky passages based on the *Siegfried Idyll* music, which require the singer to exert an instrumental-style control just when she is on the brink of her most intense emotional realization, are traversed with care and fluency. Here, singer, orchestra and conductor have found the 'new style' that Wagner required, and that eluded them – whether intentionally or not – in the earlier scene with Erda. West follows Gasteen every step of the way, injecting just the right amount of urgency into his more earth-bound pleas to be loved, without disturbing the epic pace and its sense of an inevitable denouement.

Scenically, Wagner said Brünnhilde should delay embracing Siegfried until the last possible moment, and in fact at the musical climax both singers should turn from each other and address the world as an expression of 'sublime joy'.[8] Predictably, perhaps, the Stuttgart production locks the lovers firmly into the physical dimension; instead of visually turning to the gods, they indulge in a distinctly human Sieglinde/Siegmund-style sensual ecstasy. However in aural terms, Zagrosek honours Wagner's call for restraint and stylistic transformation. The composer marks the *Meistersinger*-like ringing fourths of the final horn theme *Lebhaft, doch kräftig und ohne zu eilen* (lively, but powerful and without rushing), but says 'only intuitive feeling – the conductor's as well as the singers' – can achieve the desired result'.[9] Whether one puts it down to Zagrosek's intuition, or his canny manipulation of pace from the beginning of the opera, this theme receives just enough weight to give the impression of the final steadying and turning outwards that Wagner wanted. In particular, West's vocal rendering of the horn theme avoids all the strain that one usually hears at this point, as he confidently pre-empts Brünnhilde's entry and leads the duet onto a new vocal level. Here, finally, West is able to claim heroic status for Siegfried, at the point where power has found its focus in love or, in Wagner's words, where the hero has found 'an object worthy of his superabundant strength'.

Sadly, Gasteen stumbles on the lovers' closing cadence, a victim perhaps of the over-active scenic production. Yet in the essential musico-dramatic terms set out by this performance, I think it is fitting that West's Siegfried should be singled out for triumph. It is his vocal resilience and flexibility that in the end see Zagrosek through the risky paths of his interpretation, hugely supported by the impressive resources of the Staatsorchester Stuttgart. A lesser singer might have fallen by the wayside. Neither Alberich (Björn Waag) nor Fafner (Attila Jun) succeed in finding the space to etch out their dark roles with the expected impact from within the flow of Zagrosek's human-based drama. Even the Woodbird (Gabriela Herrera) seems more uncertain and vulnerable than usual, losing some of her vocal radiance. These three add to the sacrifices experienced in listening to this recording of Zagrosek's interpretation. But there are significant gains on offer too. Perhaps the greatest gain is the stimulus Zagrosek gives to his listeners to reconsider what we might mean by the term epic. Goethe once said that a great performer must take the ingredients of the epic, dramatic and lyric and remix them on every occasion; this Zagrosek certainly does.

Amanda Glauert
Royal Academy of Music

[8] Ibid., 114.
[9] Ibid.

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