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Concert review: OMM pulls off triumphant semi-staging of Das Rheingold



A seamless semi-staging, the Orchestra of the Music Makers' Das Rheingold is an impressive coup. PHOTO: YONG JUNYI

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Wagner's Das Rheingold
Orchestra of the Music Makers

Esplanade Concert Hall
Last Saturday, 7.30pm

Singapore received its second dose of German composer Richard Wagner's monumental operatic tetralogy *The Ring Of The Nibelung* with the Orchestra of the Music Makers' (OMM) semi-staged production of *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold).

The first part, euphemistically referred to as a Prelude or Preliminary Evening, of the 15-hour-long Ring cycle is a whopping 2½ hours of melodrama. This Singapore premiere, conducted by Joshua Tan with stage direction by Tang Xinxin, was an unqualified triumph.

Its sordid tale of greed, lust, fatal curses, murder and mayhem, perpetrated by Nordic gods and mythical beings with disgustingly human traits, was played by an international cast of 13 singers with orchestral support that spared neither effort nor attention to detail.

The 110-strong orchestra placed centre stage (and not cooped up in a pit) revealed Wagner's music in its full glory, including the use of sonorous Wagner tubas and the fabled six harps near its conclusion. All this made for a treat for the senses.

From primal depths of the Rhine, waves of the E flat major triad – a representation of Nature herself – built up its first drama. It was appropriate that this production opened with the voices of Singaporean singers – sopranos Teng Xiang Ting and Victoria Songwei Li – starring as two of three Rhinemaidens.

Joined by Anna Harvey, who also sang the Earth goddess Erda, they were the embodiment of innocence, ignorance and loss.

The opera's principal antagonist was evil dwarf Alberich, imperiously portrayed by Joachim Goltz, who foreswore love for the ultimate power grab of gold. Instead of physical ingots or bars, the Rhinegold was unusually personified in the form of gold-painted soprano Felicia Teo (in a wordless role), an object of obsession, possession and lust. This poetic transformation made for seamless and fluid staging, as opposed to the static stacked plastic crates used in the final scene, reflecting the prize's true worth of misery and death.

The flawed gods were also trenchantly played, Greer Grimsley as the duplicitous Wotan and Caitlin Hulcup, his long-suffering wife Fricka, both dressed in opulent finery. The costumes for the others were workaday clothes, including the giants Fasolt and Fafner – basses Yorck Felix Speer and Lukasz Konieczny respectively – labouring with hard hats and soiled boots after their construction of fortress Valhalla.

Perhaps most remarkable was god of fire Loge's knowing and freewheeling persona, with Tuomas Katajala donning the most exuberant outfit while balancing mostly on roller-skates. Goddess of youth Freia (Anita Watson) as the giants' ransom and her brothers Froh and Donner (Florian Thomas and Michael Lam respectively) completed a fine ensemble that had no obvious weak links.

While the drama was gripping, liberally laced with cynical humour, sumptuous musical moments abounded. The opera's mystical opening Prelude, the striking smithy anvils of subterranean Nibelheim and the gods' faux-triumphant entry into Valhalla in D flat major (literally a deflation from the earlier E flat major), all rendered with a brash confidence bordering on vehemence.



Conducted by Joshua Tan with stage direction by Tang Xinxin, Das Rheingold offered sumptuous musical moments. PHOTO: YONG JUNYI

The real star of this outing had to be Richard Wagner (1813 to 1883). A visionary genius but thoroughly unpleasant human being (narcissist, megalomaniac and anti-Semite were but a few descriptions), he envisioned his creations to be gesamtkunstwerk, the complete and ultimate fusion of the fine arts. He composed the music, scripted the German texts, directed every scene down to the last detail, and even built his own opera house in Bayreuth, tasks which would have daunted the gods themselves.

Ultimate credit goes to OMM and its founder Chan Tze Law for realising this Wagnerian dream by following up on its pre-pandemic success of Die Walkure (The Valkyrie, 2020) with this equally impressive coup. Can one expect the next opera of the cycle, Siegfried, anytime in the near future?

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