

Detached Observations

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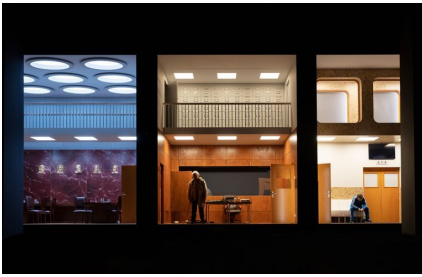
In the first two instalments of the new *Ring* cycle at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Dmitri Tcherniakov's fascinating, unpredictable staging was very much the dominant factor. Despite the assembled vocal riches – including Michael Volle's consistently incandescent Wotan – and the quietly superlative musical direction of Christian Thielemann, both *Rheingold* and *Walküre* were extended exercises in universe-building, in which the governing logic of the E.S.C.H.E. institute (the fictional behavioral research facility in which the cycle is set) was established. For *Siegfried*, which had its première a mere three days after *Walküre*, Mr. Tcherniakov took a graceful step back to allow the music to occupy centre stage. Although the individual scenes remained meticulously directed and the mysteries of the institute continued to accumulate around the edges, it was the first evening of the cycle that succeeded far more through musical performances than stage action.

Even on our third visit to the E.S.C.H.E. institute, its activities remained somewhat shadowy (the acronym itself remains a mystery, except to anyone who happened to attend the pre-performance talk). The aging Wotan is still nominally in charge, although the well-dressed businessman-scientist of the earlier operas could now be found lumbering around his own institute in a baggy parka, casting a benign gaze on the simulations and long-term experiments. One of those experiments concerns the young Siegfried, who has apparently been brought up in a simulation room not dissimilar from Hunding's 'house' in *Walküre* (although not identical: the shower had been replaced by a bath and the bedroom was full of toys and oversized lego-esque constructions).

The staging follows Siegfried as he leaves the isolated safety of the simulation house – where he is fed and clothed by the fussy bureaucrat-scientist Mime – and participates in another experiment in which he is supposed to learn fear (the fact that this 'experiment' ends in the death of both Fafner and Mime almost certainly violates some fairly major standards of scientific practice). An aging Alberich is still hanging out in the crawl-spaces



Tcherniakov, Siegfried © 2022 by Staatsoper Unter den Linden
Berlin, jueves, 6 de octubre de 2022.
Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Wagner: Siegfried. Dmitri Tcherniakov, director. Andreas Schager (Siegfried), Stephan Rügamer (Mime), Michael Volle (Wanderer), Johannes Martin Kränzle (Alberich), Peter Rose (Fafner), Anna Kissjudit (Erda), Anja Kampe (Brünnhilde), and Victoria Randem (Wood-bird). Staatskapelle Berlin. Christian Thielemann, conductor



Wagner: Siegfried. Christian Thielemann, conductor. Dmitri Tcherniakov, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2022. © 2022 by Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

of the institute making life difficult for Wotan; and there is a lab assistant with an animatronic bird who guides Siegfried to Brünnhilde who, despite being exiled from the institute at the end of *Walküre*, is now participating in a sleep study under Wotan's guidance. Unlike Wotan, however, she has not seemingly aged since her last appearance.

If that all sounds a bit vague, it is perhaps because this evening was the first time in the cycle where one was not entirely convinced that all the components of the staging fit into a rigorously conceived whole. Admittedly, *Siegfried* often causes problems for directors attempting to do anything unconventional with the Ring; while straightforwardly heroic readings can be tedious, it is also the opera most resistant to being dragged outside of its own mythological milieu. In the course of the three acts we revisited several key locations from the earlier operas, and while there was something genuinely unsettling about the second act – in which four familiar rooms of the institute, now arranged in an ever-repeating loop, were stripped of their furniture and seemingly abandoned – much of the action seemed somewhat detached from its surroundings. The staging succeeded in bringing Siegfried out of his youthful isolation and uniting him with Brünnhilde, but it seemed less concerned with clarifying its own parallel narrative.

If the individual scenes seemed not as tightly bound to the surrounding concept, they were nonetheless directed with and a vitality that could either distill their emotional essence or provide an unexpected gloss on Wagner's scenario. While there were – unsurprisingly – no swords reforged in the final twenty minutes of the first act, there was something considerably more satisfying about the sight of Siegfried setting fire to his toys and smashing the final vestiges of his childhood to pieces. Even the Wanderer's visit to Mime in the first act and his conversation with Alberich in the second – background recaps that can seem unnecessary to anyone who has seen *Walküre* and *Rheingold* within the past five days – possessed an engagement with the fine details of the characters that kept them swift and entertaining.

The evening, however, was first and foremost a musical triumph, with high-quality performances from all of the soloists. Michael Volle's Wanderer was, once again, one of the evening's obvious highlights: although the character had aged considerably since *Walküre* – Mr. Volle was so convincingly infirm that, when he hobbled to his meeting with Mime, one wanted to rush onstage and help him to a chair – his voice remained as vital as ever. Backed by beautifully concentrated Wagner tubas he offered a majestic evocation of the race who lives above the clouds, and his sparring with Alberich in the second act was edged with benevolent warmth. If he had allowed hints of resignation to creep into the earlier acts, his wonderful scene with Erda at the beginning of the third was a final desperate rage against the



Wagner: Siegfried. Christian Thielemann, conductor. Dmitri Tcherniakov, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2022. © 2022 by Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

inevitable.

Since his last *Siegfried* for the Staatsoper in 2019, Andreas Schager's reading has grown more refined without sacrificing any of the vocal power that made his earlier performances so exciting. Although he showed no signs of fatigue at the end of the evening – indeed the presence of Brünnhilde (both sleeping and awake) inspired some of his most impassioned passages – his penchant for playing every scene at maximum energy seemed to have mellowed, allowing expressions of Siegfried's youthful vigour to alternate with moments of greater emotional subtlety. The description of seeing his reflection and his reaction to learning of the death of his mother were high points in an act that also featured a gleefully full-bodied sword-reforging; and if Mr. Schager was still able to summon bratty impetuosity for his meeting with Wotan in the third act, the forest murmurs scene of the second was notable for its relative serenity.



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Anja Kampe, whose Brünnhilde seemed to grow more engaging in each scene of *Walküre*, was better still on this evening; there was a freshness in the awakening scene that soon gave way to the complexities of conflicted emotions. If other Brünnhildes have stressed the indignity of being reduced to the status of a mere mortal, Ms. Kampe approached the final scene with a vulnerability and reluctance that rendered the character's newfound humanity all the more plausible. If she and Mr. Schager brought the evening to a suitably joyous conclusion, it was her moments of doubt that made the greatest impression.

Stephan Rügamer's Mime offered a perfectly-balanced package of manic physical ticks and thoughtful phrasing that maintained a distinctive personality without veering into eccentricity; and Johannes Martin Kränzle, whose incisive phrasing and vocal charisma established Alberich as the dangerously unhinged outsider in *Rheingold*, maintained similar levels of intensity and focus in his second act scenes with the Wanderer and Mime. Anna Kissjudit possessed the right mixture of weariness and urgency to help turn the opening of the third act into one of the evening's highlights, Peter Rose brought elegant gravitas to Fafner's final moments and Victoria Randem provided the evening with a wood-bird of attractively full tone.

It has been easy, in the past two evenings, to take Christian Thielemann's presence for granted: his choice of tempi, his command of orchestral texture, and his ability to give dramatic shape to even the longest scenes have been so consistently just – and so naturally attuned to the action on stage – that they have rarely drawn attention to themselves. Yet on this evening, perhaps the most perfectly-realised performance of the cycle so far, one had to marvel at the level of discipline necessary to make *Siegfried* sound so effortless. If there were few surprises in the score's most obvious moments of orchestral splendour – the 'accursed light' of the first act was dazzling, Siegfried's journey through the magic fire was thrilling, and the quiet expanse of high strings on the other side of the fire was breathtaking – there were also no moments that failed to live up to their potential. Yet it was Mr. Thielemann's ability to tailor the pace and dynamic of the music to the strengths of the

different singers – sometimes on a line-by-line basis – that was perhaps the evening’s greatest asset; he seemed to enjoy an especially strong rapport with Ms. Kampe’s Brünnhilde, ensuring the orchestra was finely moulded to the shape of her every phrase. If Mr. Tcherniakov’s *Siegfried* wasn’t yet prepared to resolve the questions and uncertainties of the previous instalments, Mr. Thielemann ensured the evening remained enthralling on the strength of its music alone.