

Ring Cycle: Legend reborn

From Bugs Bunny to magic lanterns, the Royal Opera House has enlisted some unusual helpers in promoting its latest Ring Cycle. Jessica Duchen reports

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Next week, the Royal Opera House opens its doors for its first complete Ring Cycle of the 21st century. But this time Wagner's four operas won't stand alone. At one time, a prospective audience member would have been expected to swot up alone on the story, music, characters, leitmotifs, symbolism, orchestration, Schopenhauer and the rest of it. No longer. Now putting on the Ring can mean beginning with Elmer Fudd singing "Kill the Wabbit" to the tune of "The Ride of the Valkyries".

The 1957 Bugs Bunny cartoon *What's Opera, Doc?* is part of a series of Wagner-related screenings at the BFI Southbank this autumn. The films are just one of the special events being presented around the Royal Opera's Ring. There's something to inform and enjoy for listeners at every level – just as well, because the cycle itself has been sold out for months. You can queue for a day seat or a return, but now, with so many associated events to choose from, those who can't get into the operas need not feel totally left out.

At one extreme, because Wagner operates on such a superhuman scale – and took himself and his music so seriously – he has always been fair game for send-ups. In the 1880s, two young French composers, Gabriel Fauré and André Messager, travelled to Wagner's theatre in Bayreuth to see the Ring; their joint response, a set of quadrilles for piano duet entitled *Souvenirs de Bayreuth*, pilloried Wagner's open-ended leitmotifs by giving them oompah accompaniments and thumping cadences.

As for Bugs Bunny, *What's Opera, Doc?* is such a clever spoof on operatic mores, in 1992 it was even declared "culturally significant" by the United States Library of Congress. In just seven minutes, the cartoon hoovers up some of Wagner's best tunes, while Bugs and Elmer engage in vocal jousts, a balletic pas de deux and a loopy love duet. There's a twist in the tail as well: for once, the "wabbit" is conquered, squashed flat by a thunderbolt and carried away into the sunset by a weeping Elmer. Or so it seems until Bugs lifts his head and says, "Well, whadidya expect in opera? A happy ending?"

Tony Palmer's biopic *Wagner* (1983) is at the opposite end of the spectrum – an expansive account of the composer's life story, lasting nearly eight hours. But even this contains a modicum of satire. Richard Burton portrays Wagner as a crashing bore, holding forth about his music and philosophies to bemused party guests, while his father-in-law, Franz Liszt, is seen as a supreme self-promoter. The film will take its place at the NFT alongside Carl Frölich's *Richard Wagner* (1912) and two Fritz Lang interpretations of the Ring legends from 1924, besides Palmer's own *Parsifal*, made in 1998.

Wagner's melodramatic mélange of theatre, philosophy, legend and ground-breaking musical techniques has always been a magnet for academics, and it's no surprise that the ROH's day-long symposium should have been the first satellite event to sell out. But the opera house has also joined forces with the British Library to marshal some of the UK's finest Wagner scholars for a series of talks taking place every Monday until the end of October. Topics include *Wagner and Philosophical Sources*, *Wagner and Film*, *Wagner in London* and even *Wagner and the Wagners*, in which Jonathan Carr, author of a new book about the strife-ridden Wagner dynasty at Bayreuth, will speak about a real-life family saga compared to which the Ring's dragons, demigods and Valkyries can look like – well, Bugs Bunny.

Meanwhile, those wanting to learn more about Wagner at "entry level" can experience an ROH day of total immersion, from an exploration of the myths that inspired the composer to the chance to sample "suitably Wagnerian food" – they haven't said exactly what's on the menu, but Bayreuth is famous for its beer and sausages. There'll be an hour-long performance by The Mastersingers, presenting Wagnerian highlights alongside extracts from his letters, and a public coaching session for singers on the ROH's Jette Parker Young Artists programme.

The night before, the Southbank Sinfonia gives a concert of rarities, among them extracts from *Die Hochzeit*, Wagner's earliest surviving operatic work, and *Man's Cunning Greater than Woman's*, which was unearthed in Bayreuth 13 years ago. The title isn't the only piece of Wagnerian philosophy that could be called questionable, but it might be an early pointer towards the fact that humour and Wagner didn't always mix at source.

Perhaps the most unusual event, though, is the Magic Lantern Spectacular, in the Linbury Studio over four nights early next month. Magic lanterns – involving the projection of images painted on glass – were the forerunners of silent movies. They date back to the 17th century and were immensely popular at the end of the 19th century. The ROH has drafted in the German company *Illuminago* to present a Ring Cycle show based on one created in the 1880s by the German magic lanternist Paul Hoffman. The show condenses the tetralogy into 70 minutes of illustrations, based on the original designs by Josef Hoffman, with piano accompaniment and an actress reciting from the text.

Its purpose is several-fold. One wouldn't necessarily want "authenticity" on stage in the Ring, since it can benefit enormously from state-of-the-art

technology – the first production was, by all accounts, a tad clunky. Still, it's fascinating to imagine how it must have looked, and the magic lantern may give a hint of this, at least in terms of design.

Satellite events may whet the appetite, but what if you can't get in to, let alone afford, the actual operas? Here, too, there's help at hand – albeit only for students. The ROH is putting on an extra performance of the opening work, *Das Rheingold*, exclusively for those who have signed up to its student standby scheme. Booking is at short notice and the tickets range from a top price of £37.50 down to £3.

This is, arguably, the most valuable addition to the entire roster of events. For however many there are, the point of it all is to illuminate the works themselves. There aren't many worries about finding a Wagner audience for today, but if there's to be an audience for tomorrow, young people have to be able to experience the operas. Bugs Bunny is great fun, but there's really no alternative to the real thing.

The Wagner season at the Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020-7304 4000 ; www.roh.org.uk) runs from 2 October to 21 December;

Wagner on Screen is showing at the BFI Southbank, London SE1 (020-7928 3232) from 1 to 17 October; talks on Wagner at the British Library, London NW1 (www.bl.uk) will be taking place throughout October