

Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*:

The greatest test in opera for singers,
conductor, orchestra – and audience

Jessica Duchen gets ready for Sunday's epic Prom

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It lasts nearly seven hours; its subject is the end of the world. No composer ever achieved immortality by failing to think big, but few concepts could be more awe-inspiring than Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (The Twilight of the Gods), the climax of the Ring cycle tetralogy, which comes to the Proms next week. It is arguably Wagner's greatest opera, the one in which the composer's blend of seamless music and drama hits home most strongly. And its message about greed, corruption and the power of love is as relevant now as it was in Wagner's time.

One of the Ring operas has been performed during each of the past three Proms seasons, and their reception has been phenomenal. With "concert stagings" that are gimmick-free and immediate, the setting has proved ideal. After all, how does anyone convincingly stage an opera twice as long as most such works and full of enchanted mountains, panoramic river journeys, invisibility helmets and conflagrating mythical empires?

The composer Edvard Grieg attended *Götterdämmerung*'s 1876 premiere at Bayreuth and declared, in view of the crude production, that it would be best to let the audience "use its imagination to create devils and demons within its own mind". The philosopher Nietzsche described the cycle in performance, its subtleties grounded by horned helmets, horses and artificial rocks, as "fantasy in chains".

Thrilling though the other Ring Proms have been, *Götterdämmerung* could top the lot. The evening features the American soprano Christine Brewer as Brünnhilde (hers is one of today's great Wagnerian voices), and the Danish tenor Stig Andersen, who has sung Siegfried at the Met in New York and other top venues. Sir John Tomlinson is Hagen, the adversary who ultimately kills Siegfried; he dominates Wagner's bass roles, to glorious effect. The conductor Donald Runnicles wields an expert baton over the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and this British-born maestro, music director of the San Francisco Opera since 1992, has the respect and admiration of Wagner fanatics everywhere.

The Proms offer another plus: Promenaders can turn up on the day and hear *Götterdämmerung* for £5. Normally, you can't get in to a Wagner opera for love or money. Covent Garden's forthcoming Ring cycle is long sold out. When the Mariinsky Theatre performed the tetralogy in Cardiff last year, all tickets were snapped up within four hours of going on sale. The annual festival in Wagner's theatre at Bayreuth has a waiting list for tickets of more than a decade.

What is so special about this stuff? Well, if it were a drug, it would probably be banned. It's the closest thing opera offers to an acid trip. Wagner can force the listener into a kind of superconsciousness – a relationship with time, space and sound that's far removed from everyday experience. He weaves a spell of uninterrupted musical intensity so overwhelming that, for those who surrender to it – and it's hard not to – it can become almost addictive. Nothing else matches its impact: therefore you simply have to go back for more.

And the Ring cycle's scale is unprecedented. Despite its length, every moment is laden with significance in the unfolding story. The whole thing surges onward with an inevitability that doesn't require the suspension of disbelief as much as the suspension of outside life for its duration.

"You are a god-man, the true artist by God's grace who has brought the sacred fire from heaven to earth to cleanse, sanctify and redeem it!" wrote the original Wagnerman to the composer after hearing *Götterdämmerung* for the first time – the infatuated King Ludwig II of Bavaria. "Never before have I been transported into such a state of inebriation, such unprecedented sanctity, so filled with such an unprecedented enthusiastic sense of joy..." The young king's sanity was shaky to say the least; nevertheless, most of those who have been bitten by the Wagner bug would acknowledge sharing at least a couple of those sentiments.

Götterdämmerung is the most human of the Ring's four operas about gods and families, love, corruption and greed. Its central character is Brünnhilde, the former warrior-goddess or Valkyrie. In the story so far, she has been punished at the end of opera number two, *Die Walküre*, for disobedience to her father, the god Wotan; he had put her to sleep inside a circle of fire, to await awakening by a man brave enough to reach her. Siegfried duly arrived at the end of opera No 3 to carry her off in a flood of erotic rapture.

Charting the progress of the cursed Ring that has sparked off the whole cycle, *Götterdämmerung* takes Brünnhilde on a devastating journey through the depths of humiliation. Siegfried departs on new adventures and is tricked by the Gibichung siblings, Gunther and Gutrune, under the control of the evil Hagen, who wants the Ring's power for himself. They feed Siegfried a potion that makes him lose his memory of Brünnhilde, and induces him to force her into marriage with Gunther while Siegfried himself marries Gutrune.

Eventually, Hagen murders Siegfried, and finally Brünnhilde takes back her dignity to redeem both herself and the world. She makes the ultimate sacrifice by riding into Siegfried's funeral pyre, asserting true love's triumph over lust

for power. The Ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens from whom its gold was stolen at the beginning of the cycle; and Wotan's corrupt empire collapses in flames.

This extreme music presents its performers with extreme challenges. For a soprano, the role of Brünnhilde is opera's ultimate roller-coaster. The physical and emotional effort required is staggering, particularly in the final Immolation Scene; Brünnhilde is a semi-god and warrior, and her power needs to seem superhuman. Sopranos who have hit the stratospheric heights make it that much harder for those following in their footsteps.

How, for example, to match up to Kirsten Flagstad? For the record producer John Culshaw, this great Wagnerian from Norway had such terrifying and unwavering command that "it was impossible to believe that the same tempestuous quality was not part of her own character". Yet even she had difficulty living up to the charisma of Frida Leider, who took Covent Garden by storm in the role in the 1920s. With predecessors possessing the vocal glory of Birgit Nilsson, or the radiance of Gwyneth Jones, or, more recently, Lisa Gasteen's mingling of compelling power with a kind of transcendental tenderness, any Brünnhilde finds herself in opera's most intense spotlight.

The conductor's task is just as great: he has to control the giant structure, woven out of leitmotifs – symbolic themes V C whose transformations chart the action in detail through the orchestral fabric. It's no accident that some of the opera's most memorable moments – Siegfried's Rhine Journey, his Funeral Music and the cataclysmic end of the opera after the Immolation Scene – are purely orchestral. With podium forerunners of the calibre of the legendary Hans Richter, the over-idealistic German genius Wilhelm Furtwängler, the fierce Hungarian-born Georg Solti, and more recently the lyrical Bernard Haitink, standards and expectations are astronomical. Solti's account of the Ring has been called "the greatest recording project ever undertaken". As for the sizeable orchestra, it must never let its concentration lapse or its technique falter.

And the audience has to work hard, too: the opera may be intoxicating, but it's also intense, complicated and very long. "With the last chords of *Götterdämmerung*, I had a feeling of liberation from captivity... In the past, music was supposed to delight people, and now we are tormented and exhausted by it," wrote one perplexed punter after the opera's premiere. It was Tchaikovsky, actually.

Wagner's Festspielhaus in Bayreuth still subjects its patrons to wooden seats and doors locked upon curtain-up. Nobody's going to lock in the Promenaders, but they would be well advised to limit their intake of caffeine and alcohol before the show and note the location of the nearest loos for quick reference in the intervals.

The Bayreuth Festspielhaus, designed by the composer, could scarcely be more different from the Proms venue, the Royal Albert Hall. At Bayreuth, the orchestra sits, invisible, under a canopy that disembodies their sound and

keeps it distanced so that the singers can project over the top. The audience is kept in a state of immobilised reverence, in the dark. The Albert Hall, though, liberates the orchestra and puts the audience literally at the soloists' feet. Although it adds an extra challenge for the singers, such immediacy could be the key to creating Wagner performance for the 21st century.

And there's much to be said for leaving the visuals to the imagination. It's hard to find a Ring cycle production that isn't "controversial". Every Wagner fanatic believes that he or she knows exactly how the operas should look, so whatever a director does, somebody will hate it. Even the first performance couldn't pull it off: with the transformations of the Immolation Scene depending on steam tinted by coloured light, scenery shifting wasn't successfully obscured. Even worse, the orchestra had to slow down to match the music to the creaking action. The Ring cycle as a whole, and *Götterdämmerung* especially, is an artistic minefield that can easily become a graveyard when the reviews come in.

Wagner's descendants still dominate Bayreuth. The succession is currently a race between several family members, and it's a thorny issue, much in the news. Since the Second World War, the approaches of the various Wagners have differed considerably from their ancestor's; those who direct, as well as running the opera house, have produced some radical and much criticised versions. In 1960, a staging by the composer's grandson Wolfgang featured a plate-like set that symbolised the Ring, the universe and more, but was widely compared to a giant crumpet.

Patrice Chéreau's 1976 Bayreuth version, a politicised account that was serialised on TV, sparked objections when the Rhinemaidens appeared from a power station and Hagen's attendants wielded sub-machine guns. The Observer's critic reported that the furious audience caused "a pandemonium that twice nearly brought the performance to a halt".

Even traditional approaches can founder on that old blockage, suspension of disbelief. Of Otto Schenk's 1993 production at the Met, the New York Times critic wrote: "Watching the collapse of the Gibichung castle... is a little like watching Peter Pan fly in a summer-stock production: you can't miss the strings and the machinery."

Some directors overload the apocalyptic *Götterdämmerung* with contemporary political significance. Phyllida Lloyd's production for English National Opera in 2005 portrayed Brünnhilde as a suicide bomber, while the 2004 cycle in Adelaide, Australia, was criticised for heavy hinting about the Iraq conflict. Directors have been known to demur before even beginning the Ring, notably the Danish film-maker Lars Von Trier, who bottled out of Bayreuth in 2004.

Yet another radical trend is, oddly, to observe Wagner's instructions, which directors have long seen fit to ignore. The Seattle Opera House's recent production by Stephen Wadsworth featured Rhinemaidens swimming on a trapeze, a naturalistic forest and a real horse for Brünnhilde. "The production follows every one of Wagner's stage directions," commented the astonished

Michael Portillo in the New Statesman. "Having endured many impenetrable interpretations around the world, opera-goers heave a sigh of relief that here is a Ring as Wagner intended it."

But directorial unwillingness to take Wagner too literally could have resulted from squeamishness over the composer's extra-musical attitudes. Wagner came under the impact of everything from Marxist revolution (he was exiled for his political activism in Dresden in 1848) to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which induced him to transform *Götterdämmerung* into an apotheosis to the destructive nature of corrupt power and doomed love.

But it is Wagner's anti-Semitism that has dominated views of him ever since Hitler's enthusiasm made his music synonymous with Nazi ideology. Some still refuse to attend the Ring operas because of this, and tomes have been written about whether or not anti-Semitism permeates the symbolism of the cycle. Wagner's diatribe "Judaism in Music" has been considered a forerunner to the ghastly tracts of the Third Reich; and Hitler himself frequented Bayreuth from the mid-1920s, where Wagner's Welsh daughter-in-law, Winifred, wife of the homosexual Siegfried Wagner, used to welcome him with open arms. AN Wilson's novel *Winnie and Wolf*, to be published next week, is set to explore the relationship of Mrs S Wagner and the Führer in a whole new way.

Another new book, Jonathan Carr's *The Wagner Clan*, reveals that most of Hitler's henchmen simply couldn't stand Wagner. Remarkably, they preferred *Carmen*, a French opera about an irresistible Gypsy. But it is Hitler's personal passion for Wagner's music, and the way he harnessed its cult-like power to put across his own message, that underlies the continuing association. The controversy is so pervasive that it has even found its way into TV sitcoms; in an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the Jewish star of the series, Larry David, is accosted for whistling Wagner.

Commentators have written endlessly about the necessity of separating an artist's work from his personality. Still, everyone has to decide for themselves whether they're willing to comply with that in Wagner's undoubtedly rather extreme case. I used to avoid Wagner myself – until a colleague dragged me along to *Götterdämmerung*. We floated out afterwards, consciousness duly bent.

Richard Wagner might not be my first choice for a dinner date, but to deny the thrills of his music began to seem self-defeating. Why should Hitler have all the fun? Besides, if one had to exclude every anti-Semitic composer from acceptable listening, among those lost would be Chopin, Schumann and his wife Clara (who would make snide remarks together behind their "friend" Mendelssohn's back), and Liszt, whose views on race were reputedly more extreme than his son-in-law Wagner's.

For some, the polarities of response to Wagner – political revulsion on the one hand, obsessive adoration on the other – plus tickets that are scarce and expensive are as daunting as the operas themselves. But Wagner envisaged none of that. Alongside less palatable philosophies, he espoused some high

ideals. He declared that opera should represent the ultimate in egalitarian art. "I believe that through Art, all men are saved," he wrote. Furthermore, "True Drama is only conceivable as proceeding from a common urgency of every art towards the most direct appeal to a common public."

His music still hits home in the opera house – and outside it. Three summers ago, ENO took the last act of *Die Walküre*, the Ring's second opera, to the Glastonbury Festival, performing to a riveted audience of 30,000. When the Royal Opera presented that opera complete at the Proms that year, it was one of the most exciting evenings there anyone could remember. The music, as we noted in these pages, was transfixing and creating a new generation of Wagnermaniacs.

With pretentious concepts minimised, the music marvellously performed and tickets affordable, Wagner reaches ecstatic heights and huge audiences of which other composers can only dream. No artist could think bigger than salvation for all through art. And no composer could have come closer to achieving it.

'Götterdämmerung' is at the BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 on Sunday, starting at 4pm (020-7589 8212). The Proms continue to 8 September