

Classica review: Die Walküre, Longborough Festival Opera by Jessica Duchen

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Magic fire is being kindled in the Cotswolds. Its source? The conductor in Longborough Festival Opera's orchestra pit, plus some of the singers on its stage. Longborough – country-house opera at its most bijou – is marking Wagner's bicentenary with the complete Ring cycle, having built it up over the past few years with each of the tetralogy in turn. It may sound overambitious, but it proves you can do anything if you try.

Longborough artistic director Alan Privett's staging of *Die Walküre*, the cycle's second opera, mostly employs simple, striking imagery that focuses attention where it belongs: on the music and the relationships. Add functional, timeless designs by Kjell Torriset, plenty of dry ice and three silent figures slinking around, spinning the rope of time, and that is all the symbolism you need – sometimes, in the form of an oversized goldfish bowl, even too much.

Despite homespun moments and some rough-edged orchestral playing, this was a transporting performance, one that gripped and stirred, grappling the larger-than-life emotions with exceptional humanity. Longborough's secret weapon is its music director, the conductor Anthony Negus. He paces the work's intensity, its darkness, blazing outbursts and moments of stillness, with such expertise that it feels as if there is no other way it could be done. Vast paragraphs breathe and surge, always allowing the driving symbolic motifs to shine through, and he creates a fine balance between orchestra and singers. Negus is a vastly respected Wagner expert among cognoscenti, but Wagnerians should be shouting his name from the rooftops.

Rachel Nicholls's Brünnhilde is a strong, shining, secure sunbeam of a soprano, and a dramatic joy too, progressing from eager demi-goddess to vulnerable woman, transformed by the vision of human love provided by Siegmund. Lee Bissett proved a complex and unforgettable Sieglinde, devastating in her final utterance of the 'redemption' theme. Alison Kettlewell's poised and vivid-toned Fricka won sympathy, reducing her Wotan to humiliated pulp.

If the men did not entirely match up, they had many strengths: Jason Howard energetic and consistent as Wotan, and Andrew Rees as Siegmund displaying a gorgeous middle-register tone, if occasionally short of stamina.

The Valkyries packed a tremendous punch, uttering calls in the 'Ride' high above different corners of the auditorium. Wotan's farewell and the Magic Fire music closed the evening on a scarlet glow, leaving behind a lingering impression of a near-miraculous achievement.