

melbourne
opera

Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle is coming to Bendigo in 2023

Critics rave about *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*

*“the finished product is
proudly world-class”*



Ring cycle a tourism boon

BY DAVID CHAPMAN

THE arrival of the four-opera Ring cycle in Bendigo next year will provide a massive economic boost to the region in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The \$5 million Melbourne Opera production of German composer Richard Wagner's epic recreation of Norse mythology is set to bring opera buffs from around Australia - and the world - to Bendigo for the event.

City of Greater Bendigo mayor Andrea Metcalf said the month-long festival would spark off a tourism boom for central Victoria.

"It is fantastic news for our hotel accommodation, retail and hospitality sectors," the mayor said.

The four operas that make up the Ring cycle run more than 16 hours in total which will see the production being staged over a period of 10 days at the Ulumbarra Theatre on three separate occasions in the space of a month.

"This is the biggest production ever staged by Bendigo Venues and Events (BVE)



EPIC: Wagner's Ring cycle will be a feast for the eyes and ears, as well as the tourism economy. Picture: SUPPLIED

staff and we've secured this exclusive opportunity thanks to our incredible investment in world-class facilities," Cr Metcalf said.

"This production will be top of the bucket list for op-

era fans and 'Ring-nuts' who travel the world to see this pinnacle of opera

"Greater Bendigo enjoys an enviable reputation on Australia's cultural map and this will no doubt drive

tourism and attract significant visitors from around Australia and overseas.

"Not only (is it) one of the most ambitious opera productions ever seen in Australia, but also rarely

performed internationally because of its complexities and mammoth size in production terms."

Cr Metcalf said Bendigo's "magnificent 900-seat Ulumbarra Theatre" was

chosen because it was big enough to hold the show's immense scenery set featuring gods, giants, dragons and a 130-piece orchestra.

Bendigo Symphony Orchestra's vice-president and Ulumbarra Foundation board member Nigel McGuckian was hopeful the presence of top-class singers and musicians in Bendigo could have a flow-on effect to local talented artists.

He said the Ring cycle would have spin-offs to local people, just like this year's Elvis Presley exhibition at the Bendigo Art Gallery would.

"It's amazing, incredible," Mr McGuckian said of the Ring cycle coming to Bendigo.

"I remember when it was held in Adelaide and it blew everyone away.

"People were saying 'fancy doing the whole Ring cycle'.

"This (hosting the Ring cycle) means our theatre is good enough to hold this type of show rather than having to go to Melbourne.

"People will be flying in from Sydney to spend a week here for this. It's a fantastic opportunity for us."

OPERA AROUND THE WORLD

by Michael Shmith

Reviews of
Die Walkure and Das Rheingold

A year after MELBOURNE OPERA's admirable Das Rheingold, the company's Ring-forging continues apace with an even finer Die Walkure (February 9). It is interesting how a change of theatre-shifting a few blocks from the barn-like former-picture-palace Regent to the more intimate HER MAJESTY'S-can make all the difference. Next year, the company's first full Rings will be given not in Melbourne (no theatres available, it seems) but in Bendigo, a handsome and historic city 80 miles to the north-east which found its fortune from the goldfields of the 1850s.

Her Majesty's, which dates from the mid 1880s, holds a proud place in Melbourne's operatic history. On this stage, in 1911, Nellie Melba made her Australian opera debut in La traviata and, in 1928, her final operatic appearance, in La Bobème. This gloriously restored art deco theatre, which can seat 1,700, is eminently suited to Wagner: the sightlines are good and the pit (originally expanded for the Sutherland season) can accommodate the players required, with no apparent loss of sound or clarity.

The performance was magnificent. The benefits that come about only through long and scrupulous rehearsal were obvious from the first bars of the stormy prelude to Act 1 to the final phrases. Anthony Negus, whose Wagner tablets were long ago passed down to him by Reginald Goodall, conducted with the same attentiveness as his mentor, but with largely swifter tempos, allowing his singers some flexibility when required. One noticed new, exciting details; and, as with Rheingold last year, Negus made the score flow as naturally as breathing. Suzanne Chaundy's direction, as with the Vorabend, was straightforward and simply achieved. Die Walkure, though, has its own momentum, which must be maintained over its three acts. The series of human encounters and conversations can often lead to onstage stasis. Not so here: Chaundy matched Negus in the art of keeping things moving, but also in preserving the essential extended narratives. She was not afraid to add a few touches, including several extras: two henchmen for Hunding; several slain warriors destined for Valhalla; two extra Valkyries on Opera, April 2022 equine-tipped circus sway poles--a nod to the additional, acrobatic Rhinemaidens of a year ago.

Andrew Bailey's ingenious set-a moveable, drawbridge-like platform the width of the stage, with a circular hole at its centre--was a character in itself. Raised, the platform served as the roof of Hunding's hut and the mountain summit of Act 3; lowered, it formed a plateau, as distinct from Wagner's prescribed wild and rocky place'. This all formed the ideal canvas for Rob Sowinski's adroit and vivid lighting. Harriet Oxley's inspiring costumes, more thematic than they were for Rheingold, included a marvellous impasto cloak for Wotan and witty deco-style dresses for the Valkyries.

Warwick Fyfe was an outstanding, compelling and tireless Wotan. Big of voice and commanding of gesture, he was never blustery; indeed, one was always aware of Wotan's vulnerabilities just below his grand surface.

His Brünnhilde, Zara Barrett, was lithe and lyrical, if initially a little light of voice. She gained in strength and majesty as the night progressed. The Siegmund and Sieglinde of Bradley Daley and Lee Abrahmsen were both lustrous and powerful. Daley already has Siegfried in his repertoire; Abrahmsen should consider Brünnhilde. Sarah Sweeting's Fricka was a flawless essay in hauteur and chilling self-righteousness, while Steven Gallop's menacing, deep-voiced Hunding was an expert portrayal. The eight Valkyries were all equally strong, completing the all-Australian cast. This Walkure was that rare and wonderful thing: a genuine company effort. That Melbourne Opera has weathered the storm of Covid restrictions to create something so artistically strong and cohesive is nothing short of a triumph. It marks a pivotal point in the company's work and reputation.



Das Rheingold. Photography Robin Halls

REVIEW OF DAS RHEINGOLD

An almost year-long live-opera hiatus came to an end with a new production of *Das Rheingold* from the ever-enterprising MELBOURNE OPERA (February 3, 2021). There was certainly much to relish in this welcome emergence from the Covid chrysalis into Wagner's world of giants and dwarves, serpents and toads, gods and apples; but of course, this is only the beginning of a new Ring, with the rest to come in successive seasons. The golden company already has a substantial Wagnerian track record, with productions of *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde*. Still, the forging of a new Ring is a bold commitment that ushers Melbourne Opera into a new realm.

The Ring has also necessitated a shift of theatre, from the Athenaeum (the company's traditional home) across the road to the more capacious REGENT THEATRE — an illustrious former picture palace whose splendid architecture frames the stage with a dignified opulence incorporating more gold than Alberich would ever be able to pocket. The company Wagner here before, but the Regent has since been structurally improved, an expanded dress circle bringing the audience closer to the action, with a distinct improvement in the once-socially-distanced acoustic.

Musically, the performance was swift, focused and straightforward in the expert hands of Anthony Negus, whose

long affinity with Wagner (especially at Longborough and Glyndebourne, but also with MO) showed through in the clarity of phrasing and respectful balancing between pit and stage. (David Kram conducted two other performances.) The augmented Melbourne Opera Orchestra, overflowing Rhine-like into the sides of the front stalls, played heroically, although the percussion, positioned too high, was often overly obtrusive. There was appropriate raucousness from the 14 offstage anvil players.

Suzanne Chaundy's production generally sticks to the story without too many unnecessary diversions or too much abstruse symbolism. In a programme note she describes it as 'a poetic and suggestive performance space', as indeed it proves. Andrew Bailey's set, a handsome moveable platform with a circular cut-out at its centre, acts as a sort of drawbridge between upper reaches and lower depths. The polo-mint hole, though, is awkwardly placed for the singers, who have to work round it, so to speak. Rob Sowinski's lighting, always adroit, reflects the music's shifting moods with grace and subtlety. Harriet Oxley's costumes are a mixture of traditional/contemporary and gauzy-florid, with cute touches, such as a ram's-horn headpiece for Fricka, a silver-foil suit for Donner, virulent red and black stripes for Loge, and shaggy yeti-style garb for the giants.

The singing on opening night was mostly fine, if occasionally a little tentative. Eddie Muliaumaseali'i, a

distinguished, tall and authoritative presence, certainly looked the part as Wotan, but his soft-grained bass lacked steel. Simon Meadows's Alberich was forthright and neatly essayed, but needed more of the essential insidious, squirming malevolence: the Curse was more of a threat than a portent. Michael Lapina's excellent, pointed Mime avoided the usual hysteria in favour of clarity. Jason Wasley and Darcy Carroll were incisive as Froh and Donner respectively. Adrian Tamburini and Steven Gallop as Fasolt and Fafner were dramatically effective but with too much stick-banging (spear-banging, too, from Wotan) for my taste.

Sarah Sweeting and Lee Abrahmsen, whose voices were strong and true, easily filling the theatre, were first-rate as Fricka and Freia, while Roxane Hislop's majestic Erda needed more vocal heft. There was a notable trio of Rhinemaidens from Rebecca Rashleigh, Louise Keast and Karen Van Spall—actually, make that a quintet, with the addition of two mute maidens, bending and weaving on circus sway-poles high above the depths of the Rhine.

This cycle should grow in structure and cogency; in confidence, too. But it is certainly off to an encouraging start. Melbourne last saw a complete Ring only a few years ago, from the national company, Opera Australia. There's always demand for a new one. This *Rheingold*, Melbourne-instigated and sung entirely by artists from the state of Victoria, is something in which Melbourne Opera should take pride.

A marvellous Walküre from Melbourne Opera

By Brian Angus

A preliminary opera has set the stage, key characters have been introduced and events have unfolded which prefigure the remaining three operas. Gold, stolen from the maidens of the Rhine and forged into a ring would blight the future of everyone who handled it, until it eventually found its way back to the Rhine. The story of its return commences in *Die Walküre*, beginning on a dark and stormy night in a forest somewhere to the east, in a hut with a large ash tree as its centrepiece, and ends with a child conceived and a Valkyrie emerging who will return the ring to the Rhine.

Suzanne Chaundy's production of this saga for Melbourne Opera is outstanding. Magnificent singers, effective sets by Andrew Bailey and some thrilling moments from the 90-piece Melbourne Opera Orchestra brilliantly conducted by experienced Wagnerian Anthony Negus.

It all started with a glass of water. At once a chemistry of voice and body became evident as Brad Daley (battle wearied Siegmund) and Lee Abrahmsen (desperate housewife Sieglinde) begin the discovery they are twin children of Wotan, and whose love for each other becomes incestuous. But they do it so gloriously, Abrahmsen with a beautifully sweet soprano voice, clear diction and great control, Daley a rich colourful tenor with baritone overtones conveying his emotion by his timbre. As they warmed to each other, their body language and Wagner's evocative music expressively underscored the silences as they gazed into each others eyes, conveying magical intimacy. Light pouring down through the circle above (a signature part of Bailey's unifying design for the

tetralogy) focused on them, enhancing the richness of Daley's Spring Song. They contrasted with the rich bass of Steven Gallop the bold Hunding (the lower the note, the richer he sounded), offering a night of accommodation to Siegmund before a threatened showdown in the morning. Cleverly he had placed his spear on the ash tree (the biggest tree I have ever seen) in close proximity to the sword *Nothing*.

As the orchestra summoned our attention and the ash tree lifted through the circle above, Act 2 introduced us to three more key characters. The mighty Wotan was brilliantly portrayed by Warwick Fyfe, a baritone with many Wagnerian roles under his belt, capable of showing gentle tenderness and forceful anger with his favourite Brünnhilde, humiliating defeat to his wife Fricka's defence of marriage and resignation to a diminished future. Fyfe was always in control of his voice, and is an accomplished actor. A clever little act was to remove his eyepatch as he reminisced on all that had been lost, leaving his damaged eye socket exposed.

Sarah Sweeting, equally commanding as the Fricka she first sang in last year's *Rheingold*, had a clear, strong mezzo which forcefully conveyed her arguments – even the sky darkened with storm clouds as she entered – and demanded to be heard. Poor Wotan really had no chance! As Brünnhilde, Zara Barrett was remarkable. Her closeness to her father Wotan, her confidence then surprise when rejected by Siegmund, her tenderness towards Sieglinde, her pain at Wotan's anger and her persuasiveness to bargain for a ring of fire were all told through the versatility of her voice. The vibrato of her initial "Hojotohos" thrilled me, and assured us that we were on to a good thing.

In *Rheingold* two Rhinemaidens opened the action by swinging above the stage on inverted pendulums; here, two Valkyries on horses repeat that act. Quality Valkyries, fronted by renowned soprano Rosamund Illing then took over, their enthralling, chilling greeting cries filling the 1700-seat theatre with excitement – Covid times clearly allow for a better class of Valkyrie voices to become available. It was here that Fyfe let vent his voracious anger, the Valkyries cowered under its venom, and Brünnhilde meekly submitted... but not before some of the tenderest singing I have heard in a long time. The act was

set among grey geometrical rocks, over which the returning Valkyries threw bodies of heroes destined for Valhalla with a central platform on which Wotan raged forth as he listed Brünnhilde's sins. It ultimately became Brünnhilde's resting place, Wotan folding her hands over her chest and left her lying at rest, as if in a cathedral chapel. Red lighting and smoke then rose up, a reasonable substitute for fire, while the orchestra gently, reflectively, calmingly, brought the opera to an end.

I would be surprised if this production hasn't exceeded even Melbourne Opera expectations. They had even persuaded the theatre to remove the back wall of the pit to allow for the full orchestra to fit. They had brought Anthony Negus out from the UK to conduct.

They had assembled a cast of some the best Australian singers. It has resulted in a remarkable success.



Warwick Fyfe (Wotan) and Sarah Sweeting (Fricka). Photography Robin Halls

Die Walküre A triumphant performance from Melbourne Opera

By Michael Shmith

Richard Wagner's famous pronouncement, 'Kinder, schafft Neues!' ('Children, create something new!'), has often been the inspiration to take daring creative risks, particularly (but not exclusively) with productions of his works. Using *The Ring* as a starting point, directorial licence has been extended in all sorts of intriguing ways that have, over the years, seen Valkyries roaring around on motorcycles, Rhinemaidens as strutting Victorian doxies, the dragon Fafner at the turret of an army tank, Wotan as a Texan oligarch, Siegfried as a hippie, and Gunther and the Gibichungs as Nazis.

How refreshing – how unusual – then to see Suzanne Chaundy's new production of Die Walküre.

No cycles, other than the one usually attached to the word 'Ring', and no confusing ad libitum subplots or backstories. In a word: traditional. But not completely so. Mahler's equally famous statement, 'Tradition ist Schlamperei!' ('Tradition is sloppiness') certainly does not apply to Chaundy's staging, which, although a straightforward storytelling, has an edginess and quiriness all of its own. It is also energetic and enthralling. Chaundy achieved as much a year ago with *Das Rheingold*, the *Vorabend* to *The Ring*. But in the vast reaches of the Regent Theatre, not a natural place for opera, there was a lack of intimacy between stage and audience.

The *Walküre* was a different story from a different, more preferable venue: the smaller, more intimate Her Majesty's, which holds its own distinguished operatic history. Any fears the theatre might prove too compact were banished immediately. If anything, the production fitted the stage perfectly, with Andrew Bailey's ingenious and stylish set blending, as if by design (so to speak), with the warm décor of the auditorium and embracing the audience. Between stage and auditorium, the Melbourne Opera Orchestra (all ninety musicians, including four harps) were snugly accommodated in the pit.

In the event, the result, in visual and sonic terms, was a faithful realisation of Wagner's vision of *Gesamtkunstwerk*: to meld music, text, and production values into a seamless entity. At the heart of this was conductor Anthony Negus, whose fluid and sensitive account of the score emerged with distinction and clarity; never bombastic or prosaic, but always attentive to the balance between individual instruments and the performers on stage.

Although Negus, a disciple of the great Reginald Goodall, shares that legendary Wagnerian's knowledge and scrupulous attention to detail, achieved through long rehearsals. Negus does not (thank heavens) share Goodall's famous predilection for slow tempi. Instead, it was clear, right from the first jagged, stormy bars of the Act I prelude, that the music would indeed draw one into each act, as if into a vortex, and maintain its elasticity and power. The orchestra's playing was simply superb, with an inner strength to the strings and remarkable breath control from wind, brass, horns, and (of course) Wagner tubas.

Die Walküre is, in essence, a series of encounters and conversations that determines the subsequent operas in *The Ring*. The momentum towards the twilight of the gods is driven by a combination of contradictions: between love and hate, life and death, morality and immorality, invincibility and vulnerability.

Sometimes, though, there is so much going on in *Walküre* that it is hard for an audience to grasp the dramatic significance of what is happening in the music. Chaundy's particular skill is in depicting the directness of the human relationships from which the tale develops. For example, the key narrations of Siegmund and Sieglinde in Act I; Wotan's long unravelling in Act II; the Brünnhilde–Wotan excoriations of Act III. Also, quite often, Chaundy goes back to the source, by observing Wagner's own detailed stage directions, as noted in his scores. Chaundy also adds a few supernumeraries (two henchmen for Hunding; two extra Valkyries on sway poles; a few deceased warriors destined for Valhalla), but these are more helpful than gratuitous.

Bailey's set is almost another character in itself, and is hardly inanimate. A

huge platform with a Ring-like hole in the middle, centres the action, as well as serving as a sort of drawbridge between the darkness of Hunding's hut, the wild and rocky place of Act II, and the mountain summit of Act III. Rob Sowinski's lighting, underwriting the action, was respectful, telling, and vivid. The costumes, by Harriet Oxley, were inspiring and fetching – especially Wotan's impasto cloak, which could easily be framed and hung on a wall, and Brünnhilde's slinky, art-deco dress.

The cast could barely be faulted in terms of musicianship and dramatic qualities.

Warwick Fyfe, long an acclaimed Alberich, was equally compelling as the dwarf's nemesis. Fyfe, a strong-voiced, tireless, magnificent Wotan, adroitly portrayed a god at the end of his tether, but whose own human frailties are just below the surface of his grandeur.

Zara Barrett's lithe and lyrical Brünnhilde, a little underpowered at the beginning, gained in power as the evening went on. She is a performer to watch. Likewise, Sarah Sweeting's Fricka, embodied all her character's hauteur and chilly sense of self-righteousness.

The excellent Siegmund of Bradley Daley, already a significant Siegfried in international opera houses, was lustrous and powerful. His equally matched Sieglinde, Lee Abrahmsen, should, I hope, in time consider Brünnhilde. Steven Gallop, a saturnine Hunding, was expertly portrayed.

The eight spear-waving Walküren (Rosamund Illing, Eleanor Greenwood, Jordan Kahler, Olivia Cranwell, Naomi Flatman, Caroline Vercoe, Sally-Anne Russell, and Dimity Shepherd) sang with gusto, penetrating accuracy, and more than proved themselves worthy members of the closest Wagner ever got to a chorus line.

By the end, as Brünnhilde lay in her ring of fire and Wotan ruefully trudged off the stage, it seemed to me that the performance encapsulated all the magical qualities of *Die Walküre*. It is a hard opera to bring off, and Wagner's



Warwick Fyfe (Wotan) and Zara Barrett (Brünnhilde). Photography Robin Halls

Curse (whatever goes wrong, will go wrong in spades), thankfully, was not invoked. Instead, this was one of those rare nights when everything seemed right with the world. This triumphant performance must be regarded as a glory for Melbourne Opera. It augurs well for the rest of its Ring.

Anthony Negus and his remarkable cast excel in Suzanne Chaundy's gimmick-free Melbourne Opera Die Walküre

By Jim Pritchard

After two rather blighted attempts at Die Walküre in 2021, the wonderful Wagnerian Anthony Negus has struck (Rhine)gold with this production by Melbourne Opera that was livestreamed by the Australian Digital Concert Hall on its first night. Negus himself was blameless at Longborough (where he is music director) because Covid required a socially distanced semi-staging and also at English National Opera recently. The single performance of Richard Jones's new The Valkyrie he was allotted (for all his coaching) was initially taken away from him before he was rapidly reinstated. No explanation for this was ever forthcoming but I was at his performance (sung in a dreadful English translation) and I totally believe what others told me that the orchestra and some of the singers were at their best in this Negus-led evening. Of course, the conductor probably could not believe what he was watching on – an essentially bare – stage as Jones was probably exploring some environmental themes with Wotan dressed as a lumberjack and living in a log cabin and the Valkyries as eco-warriors with their risible pantomime horses (at least the head ends). Worse came at the end of the opera and because the local council's health and safety concerns had kiboshed any real flames to accompany Wagner Magic Fire Music, Brünnhilde was left – unimaginatively – hoisted on ropes above where the fire should have been!

The best ENO and the Met – who are their partners in this new Ring – could do is put it out of its misery immediately and learn from what Melbourne Opera have done with a staging that serves Wagner's opera rather than any directorial Konzept. Also they show how important it is to use singers (here all Australian!) with solid Wagnerian pedigrees.

Yes, I know the argument about how will any younger singers learn to sing Wagner if they are not given any opportunities but there has to be a better balance of those with the relevant experience and those without it.

In a programme note director Suzanne Chaundy admirably explained: 'My challenge is to portray this epic work in a truly affecting way. Too often I feel the real and raw emotions are overlooked in the storytelling for the sake of a concept. Wagner is presenting a massive world of ideas that I embrace, rather than reduce to the world we live in. Our scale of design is epic and we have adopted a deeply detailed performance style to interrogate every dramatic moment. I am blessed to be working alongside collaborators who have helped shape this nuance, Anthony Negus and David Kram plus my wonderful creative team and our extraordinary cast of singing actors.'

Last year's Das Rheingold made me write how 'I was reminded of past Rings I have been fortunate to see right from the opening scene, and there is nothing wrong in that of course ... and how certain moments here recalled Glen Byam Shaw and John Blatchley's famous The Rhinegold at the London Coliseum

in the 1970s.' This Die Walküre reinforced an ongoing connection between what we are seeing and the joint work of Byam Shaw and Blatchley for Sadler's Wells/ENO as well as, that of Götz Friedrich for his Ring at Covent Garden (with Josef Svoboda's set design) also in the 1970s as I mentioned last time too.

Andrew Bailey's Act I set is a familiar looking hut strewn with fallen leaves and at the centre on a dias there is an extravagantly gnarled tree (with its too-obvious sword, Nothung, jutting out the bottom of it) rising through a large circle (ring?) in the roof. We recognise something here from Das Rheingold and presumably it will unify all four parts of Chaundy's Ring which is supposed to be seen in its entirety next year. (At the start of the second act it will lower and provide a platform for Wagner's 'wild rocky place' with some thick branches emerging through the hole at the centre.) Everything you need for the opening of Die Walküre is there for the long-parted twins Siegmund and Sieglinde to reunite and begin their incestuous relationship and for Siegmund's confrontation with her knife-wielding husband, Hunding. There is a hearth, a large table and chairs for the meal and a stand where Sieglinde prepares it and shows how she drugs Hunding's drink. Good use of video (from Chris Hocking) is another feature of Chaundy's staging and angry clouds (which will reappear throughout the opera) accompany the opening bars – always a visceral moment with Negus conducting – depicting Siegmund's desperate flight.

Throughout this Die Walküre Wagner's intentions are almost scrupulously adhered to, one suspects; the sword's hilt glows, light shines in as Siegmund and Sieglinde – who look alike here more than is usual – express their love for each other; and the curtain falls just before they consummate it. Harriet Oxley's costumes also have a cosy familiarity to them and Siegmund even has his wolfskin! There is an odd exception but overall there is a naturalness to the acting that you do not always see.

Act II sees Wotan with straggly hair and greying beard and a patch over his missing left eye. His daughter, Brünnhilde, even has a hint of a breastplate and a helmet alongside the shield and spear she wields. Fricka who demands the twins be punished for

their adultery and incest has a Norma Desmond look about her and coiled Medusa-like snakes on a turban. When Hunding catches up with Siegmund there is a credible fight between the two of them and before Siegmund can apply the coup de grâce, Wotan make him drop his sword and Hunding stabs him. He reaches out and appears to recognise Wotan as his father, Wälse.

Warwick Fyfe (Wotan) © Robin Halls
For the final act, we have Negus inspiring an exciting 'Ride of the Valkyries' and we watch two aerial artists (Emily Ryan and Ashlee Grunberg) rocking back and forth on sway poles as their 'horses' gallop through the clouds. The Valkyries – who look, well, like Valkyries – gather and prove themselves to be a spirited octet with several exciting voices. The platform rises and we see three outcrops of Basalt columns over which the odd not-so-dead 'hero' is thrown. There is lightning on stage (and from the crackling accompaniment from a 90-strong orchestra) as a vengeful Wotan arrives to challenge Brünnhilde about her betrayal when she disobeyed him and tried to save Siegmund. Wotan passes his sentence but while Brünnhilde will lie asleep clutching Siegmund's wolfskin on the volcanic rock, he has agreed to her wish to be surrounded with a circle of fire that will protect her from all but the bravest of heroes (Siegfried, the child Sieglinde is carrying). Chaundy and Bailey conjure up a brilliantly realistic conflagration with dry ice and coloured lighting and it puts ENO to shame.

It must be admitted that I was listening to this through loudspeakers, but I suspect it faithfully reproduced what was heard in the theatre. All the principal singers carry their experience lightly and once again it was good to be reminded of the legendary Alberto Remedios's portrayal of Siegmund in the open-faced, occasionally smiling, countenance of Bradley Daley whose refulgent, strong and lyrical tenor did not disappoint in his big moments 'Wälse! Wälse! Wo ist dein Schwert?' and a radiant 'Winterstürme'. That he resorted on occasions to some stock operatic gestures does not detract from the overall excellence of his performance. It was interesting to see he is listed as singing Siegfried soon for Longborough Festival Opera. Daley was well-matched by Lee Abrahmsen as an impressively sung, fervent and passionate Sieglinde. Abrahmsen's

'Rettet die Mutter!' ('Save the mother!') and climactic 'O hehrstes Wunder!' were notably exultant. Steven Gallop was a suitably glowering – and prone to violence – Hunding though I was not sure his bass voice was dark enough for the role.

Sarah Sweeting's shrewish and domineering Fricka gave Wotan no chance to win their argument, it was imperiously sung and that she appeared a little overwrought must be down to Chaundy. Zara Barrett as Brünnhilde launched fearlessly into her 'Hojotoho!' entrance and sang throughout with great musicality, total dramatic conviction and explicit attention to the text, especially during the Act II Todesverkündigung (Annunciation of Death) and 'War es so schmachlich' towards the end as Brünnhilde insists she doesn't want to be demeaned.

He began his monologue with Brünnhilde reflectively and it all gradually built before he gave full value to his despair at 'das Ende'. Rarely have I heard Hunding dismissed at the end of the second act with such a chillingly hushed 'Geh!'. In the final scene Fyfe brought out the sternness and sadness of Wotan's banishment of Brünnhilde, yet there was a palpable sense – as there must be – of forgiveness in his farewell ('Leb wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind!'). Fyfe was also prone to some of those 'stock operatic gestures' though this might be excused because the role is so demanding.

Finally to the man to whom Melbourne Opera owes a great debt for what looks to be developing into a memorable Ring cycle, Anthony Negus. Few conductors today (if any?) really know the Die Walküre score as well as Negus or have his grasp of Wagner's innate dramatic throughline whilst he can still highlight arresting details you don't remember hearing before. The music had a real radiance, and the Melbourne Opera Orchestra sounded resplendent and astonishingly well-disciplined. The arc to the flickering flames at the end of this Die Walküre had true cathartic power.

Die Walküre

By Peter Craven

Chesterton said – and the poet Peter Porter loved to repeat – that if a thing was worth doing it was worth doing badly. It's a truth that bad Shakespeare can sometimes defy and the prospect of Melbourne Opera undertaking Die Walküre, the very core of Wagner's Ring cycle, raised fears that only a dutiful mediocrity could result but this is not the case. No, you're not seeing Jon Vickers as Siegmund or Birgit Nilsson as Brünnhilde, let alone a genius of directorial illumination or a conductor to rival Furtwängler but you do feel that you are seeing Walküre. Anthony Negus's conducting creates a powerful density of sound as well as a very coherent syntactical logic.

Suzanne Chaundy's production is classical and watchable and would have been intelligible to Wagner. And, on top of that, transfiguring everything, Warwick Fyfe is a distinguished Wotan who is not only secure of voice but creates a powerful and moving sense of the conflicts that ravage the Lord of Valhalla.

It was a packed house at Her Majesty's on first night and you could glimpse a great troupe of Australians who had come out to defy the virus in order to honour and cherish the grandeur of one of the supreme works of drama in any medium as well as what is arguably the greatest work of later nineteenth century Gothic: the Ring as a whole –and Walküre in particular– is the instantiation of the Victorian dream of a primeval medievalism, a mythic whirlwind of mighty and terrible forces.

This is the work of art that dwarfs all those pallid idylls of kings and it also

shatters them because of the power of what is, beyond all the grandeur, a tragic vision.

And it is also, for all the pictorial lushness of its late romanticism, the music out of which Mahler and Bruckner, Richard Strauss and Shostakovich come.

If you want the beginning of the end of traditional 'classical music' Wagner is it. But he represents it with Shakespearean amplitude however Miltonic his vertiginous sublimities can seem. In any case, the theatre which had housed Joan Sutherland and the young Pavarotti back in the early Sixties before we had a national opera was full of familiar faces. Kate Durham (though not her QC husband, Julian Burnside), Mary-Ruth Sindrey, minus her husband Peter McLennan, Geoffrey Robertson, that very lordly lawyer was there, and so apparently was Speccie columnist Bruce Beresford – not an enthusiast for Wagner though he directed Verdi's Macbeth for Melbourne Opera last year and many years ago in Adelaide did Richard Strauss's Elektra – one of those quasi-modernist works that comes out of the shadows of Wagner – with a breathtaking elan. All the metropolitan theatre critics were there and so was a large slice of arts-hungry Melbourne.

Does Wagner inevitably provoke the invocation of curses? Die Walküre seemed like a brave choice for a world where Omicron is a spectral possibility for people old enough to have drunk deep of Wagner.

The Ring is, of course, the Gesamtkunstwerk, the total work of art, in which spectacle and sound come together and it's a pity – even if it's a pipe dream – that someone like Kubrick (or even Spielberg who's been busy re-animating West Side Story) didn't film it. There are transcriptions of productions such as the one Patrice Chéreau did at Bayreuth with Boulez conducting and Donald McIntyre, the New Zealander as Wotan, the first Anglo-Saxon to do it there. And there's the Met Ring by Lepage with the extraordinary water machine and a cast led by Deborah Voigt and Bryn Terfel.

Die Walküre is a work that pushes at its own limits. The first act where Siegmund meets and becomes enraptured with his twin Sieglinde would almost be self-contained though it leads to everything else. It's followed by the extraordinary

'Ride of the Valkyries' (it was Karajan's version with its soaring sound which Coppola used in Apocalypse Now.) Brünnhilde disobeys her father for the sake of Siegmund. The opera ends with him stripping her of her goddess immortality and placing her under the spell from which some comers can awaken her.

Anthony Negus's conducting is considered and very fine ... He believes in the coherence of the longer paragraph rather than the fireworks of the Soltian local effect and this works richly and with a consistent tempered grandeur in the Melbourne Opera Die Walküre.

Bradley Daley's Siegmund is bold and masculine with a baritone depth to his tenor and Lee Abrahmsen has a lovely beauty of line as Sieglinde. Was Stephen Gallop's Hunding a bit bug-eyed and conventional? Well, the voice was rich and growling enough. Sarah Sweeting's Fricka had a natural authority. Zara Barrett is neither a stupendous force of nature as Brünnhilde in the manner of Flagstad and Nilsson nor a many-shaded actress/singer like Astrid Varnay, but she has vibrancy and beauty of tone and dramatically she is perfectly credible.

The highlight of the evening however is Warwick Fyfe. He brought Alberich to flaming life in the Opera Australia Ring and he is a better Wotan than the Melbourne Opera has any right to dream of. He has a surging authority which is inseparable from his capacity to convey tension and self-division, so that his 'Leb wohl' is full of a subtle minimalist movement as the mist of flames surrounds the hushed body of his beloved daughter.

There are times in Suzanne Chaundy's production where it is positively statuesque as the singers gaze out motionless at the audience but this is refreshing in a world of newfangled nonsense. Andrew Bailey's set, with an aperture like a ring, has its own quiet

coherence and thematic insinuation.

It's true that we sometimes hunger to see the kind of co-ordination of movement and dramatic rhythms the music itself might dictate in the manner of a director like Peter Stein who directs with the score in one hand but the traditionalism of this production has its own power and in a world of fads as well as visual furies its own novelty.



Bradley Daley (Siegmund) and Lee Abrahmsen (Sieglinde). Photography Robin Halls

Melbourne
Opera
triumphantly
presents
the keenly
anticipated
second
instalment of
their ever-so-
patiently crafted
Ring Cycle, Die
Walküre

By Simon Parris



Bradley Daley (Siegfried) and Steven Gallop (Hunding). Photography Robin Halls

Staging an epic masterwork without government funding is miraculous enough, all the more miraculous at this seemingly never-ending time of much-needed but patience-frazzling health restrictions. For a third miracle, throw in an exceptionally talented all-Australian cast. The fact that the finished product is proudly world-class is the culmination of all of these miracles, with the stellar standard coming as no surprise to devoted operagoers who have steadfastly followed as Melbourne Opera has scaled the heights of the potentially indomitable Wagner canon with an ever increasing abundance of skill and flair. Coming just over a year since *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* (which is episode two of four, to use limited prestige series lingo) plays the sumptuous space of Her Majesty's Theatre, a grand yet still relatively intimate operatic space with mostly excellent sight-lines and wonderful acoustics.

Seen at a size never even approached by the commercial musicals that usually play at the Maj, the capacious orchestra pit grandly holds some 80 members of the Melbourne Opera Orchestra. The musicians are heard at their best as they tirelessly bring out the luscious, highly expressive beauty of Wagner's wondrous score.

At one with the music, Maestro Anthony Negus coaxes an excellent performance from the musicians.

Generally keeping volumes at sympathetic levels to support the singers, Negus nonetheless lets loose for mighty moments of power. The sterling

quality of instrumental and vocal music allows the audience to simply relax and thoroughly enjoy the whole experience.

Director Suzanne Chaundy oversees a clear conceptual continuum from Das Rheingold, again wisely giving key attention to the sheer scale of emotion required to capture and maintain audience engagement and for the climactic moments to land with full force. The impact of the drama can only be described as a success, the characters holding firm against the necessary focus on the music.

Andrew Bailey's generously proportioned, solidly constructed settings begin by showcasing the tree of ash framed by a clear ring motif, all set beneath a sloping roof that conjures an underworld province. Rob Sowinski's bold lighting conveys the gloom of bitter winter in act one without sacrificing sufficiently clear facial light for the singers.

Act two opens on the underground ash tree before an early coup de theatre sees the tree fly out and the ceiling tilt all the way down to the floor to reveal the gods in their radiant heavens.

Costume designer Harriet Oxley continues a glimmering metallic theme for the gods, a concept seen at its best in the glossy set of individual outfits for the Valkyries.

Lee Abrahmsen and Bradley Daley are a sweetly matched pair as long separated twin gods, Sieglinde and Siegmund. Abrahmsen deftly balances vulnerability with burgeoning resilience, singing the role with tender focus and lush, silvery tone. In act three, as Sieglinde buffets from despair to blazing hope, Abrahmsen summons palpable emotion as she pours forth with what is arguably her greatest singing performance to date, and that is really saying something.

With apparent ease, Daley provides Siegmund's clarion heldentenor vocals, his voice ringing forth with heroic notes that are never overly projected.

The most reliable of opera veterans, Steven Gallop delivers another neatly judged performance, bringing an odious sense of entitlement to Hunding with nary a hint of moustache-twirling villainy. His warmly burnished bass voice in strong, supple condition, Gallop's fine control and nimble

expression leave the audience wanting more.

A breakout star of Opera Australia's 2013 Melbourne Ring Cycle, Warwick Fyfe graduates from the grasping Alberich to the mighty Wotan. Stymied by border restrictions last year, Fyfe's appearance in Die Walküre is the jewel in the (very shiny) crown of this highly capable all-Australian cast. Winning the audience with a cheeky wink, so to speak, from Wotan's one good eye, Fyfe swiftly goes on to establish the patriarchal god's authority and wrath, along with his deep affection for his dear daughter, Brünnhilde. Fyfe commands attention as he sings with wonderfully sumptuous tone and compelling dynamics and expression.

*Sporting Fricka's
snake-like headdress,
Sarah Sweeting
channels her inner
Joan Collins to
spit out Fricka's
jealous venom. A
solid match for Fyfe,
Sweeting sings up a
veritable storm as the
dysfunctional partners
bicker and bitch.*

As Brünnhilde, soprano Zara Barrett begins a little stridently before quickly settling into a lovely characterisation of the determined young woman. Barrett's work is particularly alluring when Brünnhilde sings above the sleeping twin gods, going on to reach further heights as the centre of attention of the Valkyries and then of her angry yet loving father Wotan in act three.

In everyone's favourite sequence, the act three entrance of the valiant Valkyries begins with Emily Ryan and Ashlee Grunberg on sway poles, giving the vivid appearance of galloping wildly on silvery steeds.

Of the nine excellent singers playing Valkyries, living legend Rosamund

Illing, as Gerhilde, is first on stage, earning a warm round of entrance applause from the opening night audience. Harmonies are at a premium as the Valkyries build in number, each performer a leading lady in their own right. In the only ensemble scene of the night, Chaundy makes the most of the chance to dress the stage with dynamic divas.

With one more terrific effect up their sleeves, Bailey and Sowinski provide a spectacular climax, as Wotan leaves his beloved Brünnhilde asleep in a ring of fire. Thankfully, Melbourne Opera has set the dates for Siegfried, leaving us all with hope in our hearts for the eventual rescue of dear Brünnhilde.

In the meantime, attendance at Die Walküre is an absolute for Melbourne's legion opera lovers.

Melbourne's opera year begins with an impressive second instalment of Wagner's Ring Cycle

By Patricia Maunder

There was a sense of déjà vu as the audience gathered for the second part of Melbourne Opera's Ring Cycle, almost exactly a year after part one, Das Rheingold, broke Melbourne's pandemic-induced opera drought last February. The city's opera lovers were once again thirsty for a live experience as, after a welcome gush of productions in May 2021, there has been nothing but a brief reprise of Victorian Opera's operatic cabaret, Lorelei, in June.

Warwick Fyfe Wotan

Warwick Fyfe is outstanding as Wotan in Die Walküre, Melbourne Opera, 2022. Photo © Robin Halls

We were also keen for another taste of director Suzanne Chaundy's multi-year Ring Cycle that had begun so well, and confirmed Melbourne Opera's growing artistry and confidence. Die Walküre doesn't disappoint. Indeed, it's probably a tad better than last year's Das Rheingold, with even more impressive production design and all-Australian cast, led by an outstanding Warwick Fyfe.

After excerpts were performed in Vienna in 1862, Die Walküre premiered in Munich in 1870. It opens with the unexpected arrival of Siegmund into the unhappy home of Hunding and Sieglinde, who runs off with this stranger. In the realm of the gods, Wotan charges his daughter, Brünnhilde, with the protection of Siegmund and Sieglinde, who are actually his illegitimate twin children. When Wotan's wife, Fricka, insists the pair be punished for adultery and incest, conflicting loyalties cause much trouble and strife as Siegmund is killed, the pregnant Sieglinde flees and Brünnhilde is cast out.

After missing his chance to play Wotan in Das Rheingold due to quarantine complications, baritone Warwick Fyfe finally steps into those big boots. He has often shown his charming comic talents before, but here he conveys the frustration and sorrow of a mighty figure whose mastery is waning.

*Even in Wotan's
lengthy Act II
exposition of the Das
Rheingold backstory,
Fyfe demands the
audience's attention
with his voice's power,
rich tone and nuance,
and assurance as an
actor. His performance
is particularly
moving in the final
scene, when Wotan
reluctantly punishes
and parts from
Brünnhilde.*

Die Walküre Melbourne Opera
Zara Barrett, Lee Abrahmsen and the
Valkyries in Die Walküre, Melbourne
Opera, 2022. Photo © Robin Halls
In that demanding dramatic-soprano
role, Zara Barrett doesn't quite have
the vocal force and ringing clarity
one would hope for Brünnhilde.
Her performance becomes more
confident, however, including some
lovely, expressive phrasing in Act III.
The rest of the principal cast is very
accomplished. Bradley Daley expresses
Siegmund's heroism and grief with an
assured, agile tenor. As Sieglinde, Lee
Abrahmsen reveals both the delicacy
and strength of her soprano. Sarah
Sweeting neatly captures Fricka's
mood with her controlled mezzo and
formal gestures, while bass Steven
Gallop's Hunding has plenty of menace.



Warwick Fyfe (Wotan). Photography Robin Halls

This epic opera is as shocking and cruel as when it was first staged

By Elizabeth Flux

It would be reasonable to assume that the most twisted love story in Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* is the romantic attachment that forms between a pair of long-lost twins, but it's not. Instead, at the core of the sweeping opera is the tortuous relationship between father and child, as Wotan, god of war, deludes himself that he is prisoner of fate and duty as he systematically betrays three of his children.

Wotan (Warwick Fyfe) essentially loses a philosophical debate with his wife Fricka (Sarah Sweeting), goddess of marriage, about free will – and the fallout ripples through his children, mortal twins Siegmund (Bradley Daley) and Sieglinde (Lee Abrahmsen), and Valkyrie Brunnhilde (Zara Barrett).

The characters are murky and contradictory in their motivations and actions, and Melbourne Opera's staging successfully takes a less-is-more approach, letting the strength of the text stand for itself. Director Suzanne Chaundy is clearly aware that the fantastical story doesn't need to be jazzed up or given new context – it is just as shocking and cruel as when it was first staged in 1870.

For the first two acts the cast doesn't move very much, forming a limited series of beautiful tableaux, with the score carrying much of the drama and emotion. This stasis, however, makes the dramatic changes in set even more striking – the transition between the world of the gods and the world of the mortals is a highlight. Act 3 opens with an impressive visual effect, though its impact fades as it continues for a bit too long. That is quickly forgotten as the ensemble of Valkyries – in particular soprano Rosamund Illing – command the stage for *Ride of the Valkyries*.

Chaundy focuses on the large impact small details can have. Much is said between the libretto; in lingering glances, in the malevolent glint in an eye. Fricka (Sweeting) especially is skilled at saying one thing while her face belies her true feelings. Her words declare duty but her eyes say vengeance.

Wagner's focus on story over action allows each member of the cast the opportunity to showcase their vocal skill. Soprano Lee Abrahmsen infuses every note with the innocence and tragedy of Sieglinde, switching from soft and broken with grief to newfound strength without ever compromising on volume or quality.

The pairing of Fyfe and Barrett makes for some of the most poignant and emotive scenes in the opera as they provide the perfect balance for one another, baritone to soprano, father to daughter. Take away the surtitles, and the ebb and flow of their relationship would come through just as clearly.

Die Walküre is a good entry point into the four-part Ring Cycle, and stands alone. In this part of the cycle the story of the actual ring of power happens off stage in passing comments (wait, who killed his brother for the ring? What do you mean he's a dragon now?) with a recap in act 2.

Over the course of five hours, *Die Walküre* opens up some hefty conversations about love – about what it is, about when it should be elevated above all else, and what happens when it is twisted and used as an excuse for horrifying behaviour.



Bradley Daley (Sigmund) and Zara Barrett (Brünnhilde). Photography Robin Halls

Die Walküre

By Patricia De Risio

The cultural importance of Wagner's Ring Cycle cannot be underestimated, and staging this work is always an admirable exercise. Melbourne Opera has approached this production with grandeur and on most accounts succeeds in conveying the magnificence of this work. The stage combines a modernist brutalist set design which also houses a naturalistic looking Ash tree. This seems at odds with the scenery and is an example of some of the less cohesive aspects of the directorial vision. The rock, which acts as Brunnhilde (Zara Barrett) prison or bridal bed, has a less naturalistic design and blends into the set in a more seamless manner. The emphasis on the symbolism of the ring is particularly well exploited in the stage design and there are extremely inventive set changes which produce highly dramatic imagery. The intensity of mood is clearly a priority in the overall set and lighting design, and this echoes the beautifully executed and powerful performance of the music by the orchestra.

The approach to the costuming is also somewhat uneven. Fricka (Sarah Sweeting) wears a solid and impressive gown with fabric and tones that match the set while standing out in its movement and sway, almost amplifying the performer's gestures and actions. Brunnhilde's costume is more modest and seems to undermine her position as the protagonist. It is not until she gathers with her goddess sisters that it is clear her outfit is almost a uniform where, collectively, it makes an impression. However, the fabric does play with light exceptionally well as she lies on the rock surrounded by flames in the closing moments of the final act.

Wotan (Warwick Fyfe) is undoubtedly the star of the show. His majestic presence is asserted from the moment he enters the stage. This is also conveyed through the power of his voice which infiltrates the entire auditorium and sometimes overshadows other performers. The love or lust felt between Siegmund (Bradley Daly) and Sieglinde (Lee Abrahmsen) has a great beginning with well measured tension in their

forbidden attraction. Although, this soon gives way to a more tactile connection which results in a tendency to diffuse this attraction. Hundung (Steven Gallop) has a wonderfully menacing presence which he deploys with the force of his voice and gestures. His threatening demeanour is aptly depicted as a natural response to the questionable bond that develops between his wife and her brother.

In the final act Barrett and Fyfe really own the stage together and they bring the performance to an electrifying conclusion, with the support of some astonishing visual effects.

The subtlety in their battle for reciprocal respect and authority is displayed with candour and the depth of their emotion is visibly moving. This is a captivating production which provides many exceptional elements which effectively portray the characteristic glory intrinsic to this legendary story.



Zara Barrett, with spear (Brünnhilde), Bradley Daley (Sigmund) and Lee Abrahmsen (Sieglinde). Photography Robin Halls

Torment of the Gods

by Gregory Pritchard

Melbourne Opera (MO) continue their triumphant return to the stage with the second instalment of Wagner's Ring Cycle. Building on the success of Das Rheingold in 2021, they are buoyant with self-assurance and dedication to the realisation of this ambitious plan for delivering a complete Wagner tetralogy in little over two years. Siegfried will be given in concert format later in 2022, with full Ring Cycles in early 2023. This is an opera company in no doubt about its ambitions and with skills to match.

In the cavernous Art déco splendour of Her Majesty's Theatre, we are transported from the depths and privations of the primordial forest to the swirling summit clouds of Walhalla with its all-pervasive view of the world and the minutiae of human endeavour.

The stage is dominated by skyscapes of clouds, thunderheads and dazzling bursts of sunlight as the gods play out their self-indulgent amusements toying with the mortals below. Andrew Bailey and his team have placed the ring itself at the centre of the design for the opera.

The brutal architecture of the first opera returns as does the ocular, now hovering over the ancient tree and reflected in a circular dais surrounding its base. Through the ocular, we mortals have a limited view of the world beyond our immediate surroundings. The gods however, view all from the opulence of their eyrie and license themselves to intercede and interfere in the lives of the ostensibly free-born on the Earth below.

Director Suzanne Chaundy has an extensive history of experience in staging Wagner's operas. She drew out the rejection of love in Das Rheingold as a central theme and now offers another facet to our understanding of

humanity's driving force when we see the power of love to motivate our actions. Again, it is the text and the music which are foremost. Her unfussy staging allows focus on the clarity of the text and the implications each has for the propulsion of the drama. The heat of physical attraction is juxtaposed against imperious, distanced manipulation by the gods in a way almost reflective of classical Greek tragedy. Ms Chaundy's control and pacing of the massive text brings to light many minute nuances and encourages the performers to respond to each other in ways which contrast the enormity of life and death decisions they are taking.

Continuing his collaboration with MO, British conductor Anthony Negus returns to Australia, to build upon the success of Das Rheingold. The enormity of Die Walküre becomes clear even considering only the orchestra: Wagner's extravagant demands for four harps and his self-designed tubas add to the sheer size of the band, requiring alterations to the pit and stalls. Maestro Negus brings all this magnitude into a controllable and disciplined team. At no time in the more than four hours of score, was there a sense of the orchestra dominating the singing cast. Yet, there are so many instances where the orchestra carries the drama and emotions and this ensemble delivered a memorable performance which drew immense appreciation from the audience.

Warwick Fyfe's professional biography reads like a definitive list of opera performance in this country. His repertoire extends from Wagner to Rossini and encompasses appearances in Australia, Asia and Europe. From the moment of his vocal entry, Mr Fyfe commands the stage. Yes, Wotan is written to dominate, it is his purpose, but here we have glimpses into the mind of the man, snatches of "humanity" where he tears himself apart coming to terms with the loves and losses of his eternal life. Wotan under Mr Fyfe's interpretation becomes a tired and care-worn father, husband, creator who can foresee the end for all of the gods and is almost accepting of the fact that his creations have spiralled out of his control. This is a resonant and compelling performance.

Lee Abrahmsen's performance as Sieglinde was a stellar achievement. She grew and nurtured this character



Valkyries (from left) Jordan-Kahler, Dimity Shepherd, Sally-Anne Russell, Rosamund Illing, Naomi Flatman, Olivia Cranwell, Caroline Vercoe and Eleanor Greenwood. Photography Robin Halls

throughout the opera so we witnessed the belittled and beaten wife to tormentor Hunding from Act 1 grow into the powerful and decisive mother of humanity even when fleeing the wrath of Wotan at the conclusion of Act 3. Ms Abrahmsen's formidable soprano had no difficulty in conquering the vastness of the auditorium and drew rapt attention in the pianissimo passages. In the final Act however, the full beauty of her voice and stage power was unleashed and she soared over the vigorous chorus of Valkyries and mighty forces of the orchestra.

Bradley Daley has great experience as Siegmund both in Australia and abroad. His heroic tenor was a glorious foil to Sieglinde and striking contrast to the threatening bass of Hunding. He is an agile performer who brings an endearing quality to Siegmund as he struggles to come to terms with his imminent death and his commitment to his sister/wife.

Zara Barrett's Brünnhilde is a tortured and tormented creature. She feels deeply the power and influence of being Wotan's will and is simultaneously an emotional and dutiful daughter who cannot help but be touched by the sincerity of conviction and the power of love. Ms Barrett gave a robust performance of this character

culminating as it must in the divided loyalties and broken promises of the final Act.

As Fricka, Sarah Sweeting was immensely potent. Her mezzo-soprano is a volatile instrument which commands the stage and accepted no excuses from her husband. She portrayed the all-knowing, imperious goddess superbly, matching Warwick Fyfe's power and energy to make a magical vocal duo.

This production is a rewarding and worthy contributor to the realisation of the complete Ring Cycle. It bodes well for the forth-coming shows and helps cement Melbourne Opera's place as a major performance company.



Warwick Fyfe (Wotan) and Zara Barrett (Brünnhilde). Photography Robin Halls

**Melbourne Opera presents
Richard Wagner's Ring cycle
Ulumbarra Theatre, Bendigo 2023**

Cycle 1

Das Rheingold	March 24
Die Walküre	March 26
Siegfried	March 31
Götterdämmerung	April 2



Cycle 2

Das Rheingold	April 7
Die Walküre	April 9
Siegfried	April 14
Götterdämmerung	April 16

Cycle 3

Das Rheingold	April 21
Die Walküre	April 23
Siegfried	April 28
Götterdämmerung	April 30