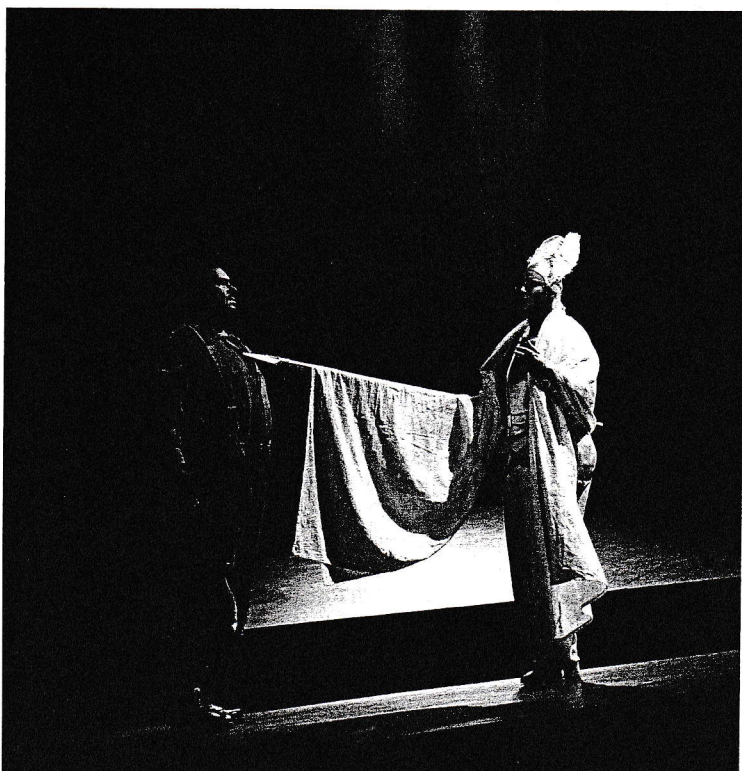
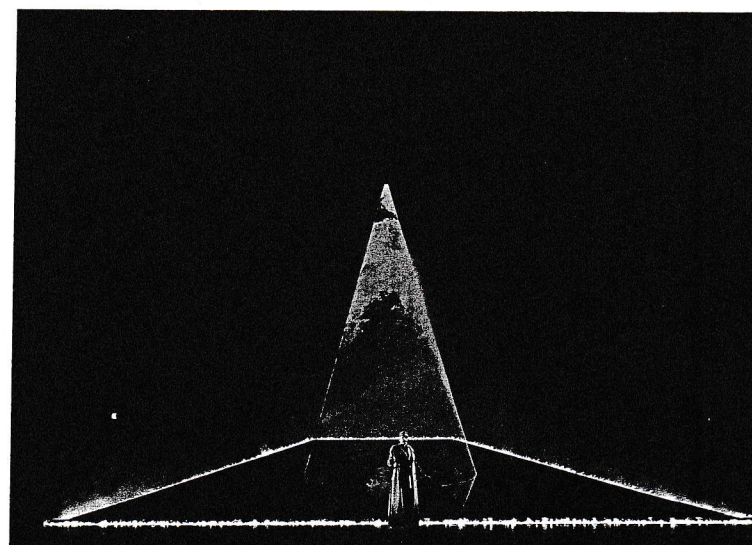


Tokyo: „DIE WALKÜRE“ – October 2016

Götz Friedrich's third *Ring* production, which began in Helsinki in 1996, is now coming to Tokyo at the rate of an opera a year. Presentations are at the **New National Theatre Tokyo** (NNTT), Japan's national opera company, in its 1,800-seat, strikingly handsome state-of-the-art facility. NNTT generally hires foreign stars for principal roles and assigns smaller roles to Japanese; such was the case for *Die Walküre*. Kazuko Xenia-dis reviewed *Das Rheingold* with mixed feelings in these pages (November 2015). I too saw that production and likewise was not greatly impressed,



Die Todverkündigung: Irène Theorin als Brünnhilde und Stephen Gould als Siegmund



Der Feuerzauber (beide © Masahiko Terashi)

neither musically nor visually. Matters were far different for *Die Walküre*, seen on October 8. In fact, it was one of the finest performances of this opera I have seen in half a century of opera-going.

Stephen Gould, one of the few standouts in *Das Rheingold* as Loge, returned as Siegmund. He is without question one of the great Siegmunds in the world today, and certainly the best I've heard in a very long time. The voice is generous, rich, well-focused, and powerful enough to cut through walls of sound coming from the pit. His *Wälse's* were absolutely thrilling – not quite as long as Melchior's, but just as generous in volume and seemingly effortless. In the same league was the Wotan of **Greer Grimsley**, whose masterful command of the role brought back memories of Hotter – a fully-developed psychological portrait combining the warmth and emotional range of a human with the regal bearing of a god. The way he cradled the dead Siegmund in his arms was heartbreaking, while his stormy entrance in Act III, accompanied by a dazzling sound and light show, left one gasping in terror. Grimsley met his match in the Fricka of **Elena Zhidkova**, dressed to kill and possessing a voice of opulent beauty totally at odds with her malicious mindset. **Josefine Weber's** Sieglinde featured gleaming high notes (*"O hehrstes Wunder!"*) soared gloriously over the orchestra), and a wide range of expressive nuance, though the mid-range lacked polish. There was also much to enjoy in **Irène Theorin's** Brünnhilde. She looked the part (aside from the silly winged headdress that made her appear more like the Roman god Mercury than a Valkyrie), moved well, and sang with great energy and conviction, but the voice lacked warmth, and one felt she needs to grow more into the role; next to Grimsley, her portrayal seemed somewhat shallow. And the "Hoyotohos" definitely need work. **Albert Pesendorfer** was a memorably black-voiced, evil-sounding Hunding. A bevy of exhilarating Japanese Valkyries rounded out the cast. On a par with Gould and Grimsley was the superb **Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra** (TPO) led by **Taijiro Iimori**, who brought the full measure of Wagnerian ethos to his interpretation – noble and spacious, with masterly control of dynamics and phrase structure, all in the best tradition of the great German maestros. The TPO, with its full 60-member string section, played with stunning power, embracing warmth, and technical precision. I cannot imagine any European orchestra more suited to playing Wagner. The low brass were positively awesome, and the principal trumpet heroically carried over the huge orchestra in the big climaxes.

Gottfried Pilz's set designs consisted of large, simple, geometric forms, a concept retained from *Das Rheingold* and for the most part more successfully realized. Act I consisted of a large rectangular box bathed in lavender light and tilted at an angle of about 15 degrees, which must have wreaked havoc on singers' ankles. The purpose was unclear, but it was beauti-

ful to look at and at least did no violence to the story. A snowstorm raged outside – a nice antecedent to the *Winterstürme*, but rather than any sign of spring arriving at this moment, the back wall turned into what looked like ice pellets. Explanation, please! The Act III set could have come from a *Star Wars* film (the imminent leap into hyperspace), and there was no stinting on the magic fire. **Kimmo Ruskela's** imaginative, intelligent, color-filled lighting design added a good measure of pleasure to the production.

Robert Markow

Japan is seemingly awash with Ringaholics. Those who don't get their fix in Bayreuth have plenty to choose from right at home. All six performances of *Die Walküre* at the NNTT were either sold out or nearly so, as were last year's six *Rheingold* performances, even those held on weekday afternoons. Japanese who can't wait for the NNTT's *Siegfried*, scheduled for next June (1-17) could attend another *Walküre* by the visiting Wiener Staatsoper in early November and a *Rheingold* later in the month by the Dresden Staatskapelle as part of Suntory Hall's "Hall Opera" series. The NHK orchestra is offering two performances of *Götterdämmerung* in concert form in April, and the Japan Philharmonic two of *Rheingold* in May. Home-grown cycles are underway as well: one in Nagoya, which began with *Rheingold* in September and continues with *Walküre* in June; the other at Biwako Hall in Ōtsu (near Kyoto) featuring computer mapping technology that combines live opera with the spellbinding realism of a Steven Spielberg film. (*Rheingold* opens the cycle on March 4 & 5). Price would seem to be no object to diehard Wagnerians. Top-price tickets for the Suntory Hall *Rheingold* are ¥43,000 (380 euros). Seats for the Wiener Staatsoper's *Walküre* only start at ¥33,000 (290 euros) and climb to a breathtaking ¥73,000 (640 euros). Hoyotoho!

Seats cost considerably less for NNTT productions. With Gould and Grimsley returning for *Siegfried* in June, along with Thomas Gazheli, star of last year's *Rheingold* as a viciously malevolent Alberich, a trip to Japan is definitely worth considering. Tickets can be obtained online at the English-language web site.

Robert Markow