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Domingo shines in a glorious Russian ‘Die Walküre,’ but sets leave much to be desired.

**RICHARD WAGNER
DIE WALKÜRE
THE KIROV OPERA IN CALIF.
OCTOBER 7, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The Kirov Opera’s production of Richard Wagner’s “Die Walküre” on Sat., Oct. 7 was nothing short of stupendous. The production is part of the 17-day Mariinsky Festival at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa, Calif. Wagner-lovers have traveled from all over the world to see this Russian “Ring” make its North American début, and to hear the inimitable Plácido Domingo as Siegmund.

“Der Ring des Nibelungen” is a Wagnerian masterpiece which explores Nibelung and Scandanavian myths and folk tales by making them part of a four-opera musical feast that blends politics and mythology with gods, humans, dwarves and giants while using the theatrical elements of Greek tragedy. It’s all about a power struggle to gain possession of

a chunk of gold acquired by a dwarf from some maidens of the Rhine. The dwarf crafts the metal into a magic ring, then loses it to a god, a giant and a young mortal. It finally lands in the hands of the mortal's widow, who ends the cycle by returning it to its original owners, thus culminating the reign of the gods and their kingdom of Valhalla.

In "Die Walküre," Woton, ruler of the gods, has fathered mortal twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, and nine godly daughters, the Valkyries. The twins are separated when Siegmund finds his mother murdered and sister abducted. When Sieglinde, who is later forced to marry Hunding, shelters Siegmund and hears his story, she realizes that he is her brother, and Hunding concludes that the two are adversaries. Left alone, Siegmund and Sieglinde fall in love, and the two flee from Hunding's lair.

But that's not the end of the story. Woton asks his favorite Valkyrie, Brünnhilde, to watch over Siegmund; but Fricka, his godly wife, wants to see Siegmund's downfall since she opposes his incestuous relationship. Brünnhilde has every intention of carrying out Fricka's wishes until she meets Siegmund and learns that he refuses to leave his beloved, Sieglinde. She then changes her position and offers to protect him. Nevertheless, Hunding kills Siegmund; Woton kills Hunding; and Brünnhilde helps Sieglinde escape. Woton, who is torn between his love for his daughter and loyalty to his wife, strips Brünnhilde of her godly powers and places her in a deep sleep until a mortal hero can awaken her.

This particular production of the "Ring" cycle premiered in St. Petersburg in 2003. One might wonder how effective a completely Russian cast, except for Domingo, might be at capturing Wagner's very Germanic text. On Oct. 7, the orchestral music under the baton of conductor Valery Gergiev was grand and voluminous, often crescendoing to the heights of Kilimajara while still remaining a source of support for the superb singers. It surged during "The Ride of the Valkyries" and reached its climactic beauty at the end of Act 3 when Woton and Brünnhilde said their final farewells and as Brünnhilde began her longlasting sleep.

A SUPERB CAST

As Siegmund, Plácido Domingo's tenor voice rang out into the hall with youthful vigor and passion. Although much more mature than his Sieglinde, he showed a tenderness that was captivating. His "Wälse! Wälse!" was thrilling; his "Spring Song" was beautifully lyrical; and by the time he retrieved his "Nothung" sword, the audience was enraptured by his every sound and move.

What makes Domingo so singular when performing Wagner is that he doesn't have a typical heldentenor sound. His tones are never strained, and they burst forth in a very glorious Italianate Latin way.

In the Wagner of the past, Wagnerian sopranos were always required to have powerful voices, and tonal quality was often sacrificed for volume. In this production of "Die Walküre," each soprano displayed a beauty of timbre that was a joy to the ear. Mezzo-soprano Larisa Diadkova (as Fricka) had the most striking voice. Her high tones were

arresting; her lower tones had just the right mix of chest and head; and her secure stage presence communicated sheer confidence.

Olga Sergeyeva's Brünnhilde also appeared confident and capable of anything. She hit every high note right on center and was very effective when begging Woton for mercy.

On a softer note: Mlada Khudoley was everything a Sieglinde should be. She met the vocal requirements of a Wagnerian soprano, but was sympathetic, feminine and lovely as well. She also sings Mozart and Verdi.

Gennady Bezzubekov as Hunding displayed a wonderfully mellow deep bass, and the Valkyries were collectively enticing.

The only disappointment was Mikhail Kit as Woton. He had a fine-enough voice, yet for some reason, it didn't carry well over the orchestra at times, especially at the beginning. He lacked energy and seemed sluggish. His self-revelation monologue didn't have the needed nuances to draw in the audience, yet with all due respect, he did show more compassion toward the end.

THE PRODUCTION

The production is part of a concept conceived by Gergiev, who is music and general director of the Mariinsky Theatre, and George Tsypin. It incorporates Russian, Caucasian and Scythian folk mythology into the staging and set design. Although extremely creative, the set was troublesome to this reviewer even though others in the audience didn't seem to find much fault with it. Although dragons, dwarves and giants fit nicely into the mythological theme of the "Ring" cycle, and even though everyone understands the role that the giants play in Valhalla, the stage of the Segerstrom Hall simply didn't seem large enough to accommodate the resinous (or fiberglass) giants that Tsypin placed vertically and horizontally around it -- figures which were lifted up on lines just like puppets. I wondered exactly what role these figures were playing. In Act 1, they were headless, but they were later coiffed with mask-like headpieces. One minute I thought I was looking at a giant; the next moment it had turned into a mound for Brünnhilde to lie upon; and when Woton walked on it with trepidation, it creaked and I hoped that he wouldn't fall through. My neighbor told me that the stage was meant to be symbolic like a Rorschach inkblot test. Well, whatever the concept, the set with its gigantic folk representations somehow looked amateurish and took away from the professionalism of the magnificent singers onstage. In addition, the little figures that represented the flames around Brünnhilde failed to create what should have been a significant vision. A more modernistic set with greenery and rock formations would have been far more appealing.

The lights, which were in full view of the audience from above the stage, added very little to the overall look; however, the stark-looking backdrop was nicely lit by lighting designer Gleb Filshtinsky. Tatiana Noginova's costumes were adequate, with Fricka's pure white frock and the Valkyries' black attire and silver tinsel headdresses as highlights.

This is the first “Ring” cycle to grace a Southern California stage – some say, ever. A drastically cut version was seen in Long Beach recently, and Los Angeles Opera has just announced plans for its “Ring” cycle to begin in part during the 2008-09 season. The Gergiev/Tsylin production goes to the Lincoln Center Festival in July. Its “Die Walküre” is a vocal and orchestral masterpiece, but maybe the concept just isn’t Germanic enough.

Conductor, Valery Gergiev

Production Concept, Valery Gergiev and George Tsylin

Set Design, George Tsylin

Costume Design, Tatiana Noginova

Lighting Design, Gleb Filshinsky

Musical Preparation, Marina Mishuk