

The 'Ring' begins -- Pittsburgh Festival Opera opens Wagner's cycle with 'Rhinegold'

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By Robert Croan / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Festival Opera comes to life every summer with repertory not likely to be tackled by mainstream-oriented Pittsburgh Opera. This city's smaller company's ongoing projects include lesser known works by Richard Strauss – this season the Pennsylvania premiere of “Arabella” (July 20 and 22) – and the revival of its pared-down version of “The Ring of the Nibelung,” Wagner's monumental four-opera parable depicting the rise and fall of civilization as we know it. Saturday evening in Winchester Thurston School's commodious Falk Auditorium, Festival Opera opened its “Rhinegold,” the first of four annual installments that will culminate with the entire cycle in 2021.

English composer Jonathan Dove created this mini-“Ring” for the City of Birmingham Touring Opera, trimming Wagner's 15-hours of music by approximately one-third, reducing the orchestration and adapting the vocal lines to Andrew Porter's excellent English translation. Festival Opera first produced the entire cycle at the Byham Theater in 2006, but the intimacy of the present smaller venue in Shadyside makes it a personal experience, allowing ever-inventive director Jonathan Eaton to bring out details – including Wagner's dark humor – often lost in full-scale productions.

Scenery and costume designs by Danila Korogodsky are the same as before, but directorially, and especially in the quality of the singers, this year's effort is far superior to the previous. Mr. Eaton has made this into a totally watchable show. Musically, Walter Morales held a tight rein on opening night, with the orchestra of about 40 –notwithstanding some bloopers from the brasses – holding up valiantly in this difficult score. Notable as well, was the precision and intonational accuracy of the Rhinemaidens (Hanna Brammer, Emily Hopkins, Kathleen Shelton), whose important trios can be painful when not perfectly on the mark.

In the single act of “Rhinegold,” the Nibelung (dwarf-race) Alberich renounces love to steal gold from the Rhine River and forge a ring that will make him master of the universe. Alberich and Wotan are “Rhinegold's” main protagonists (antagonists, actually), who represent evil and greed in post-Industrial Revolution society. Alberich was brilliantly sung and enacted by Barrington Lee, whose commanding bass voice and superb stage presence enhanced every scene in which he appeared. Mr. Eaton gives the dwarf additional prominence by bringing him back to dominate the final scene – the entrance of the gods into Valhalla – where the Nibelung's presence reminds us that this apparently happy ending is not

meant to last. As Wotan, baritone Kenneth Shaw was no less imposing, exuding authority in voice and demeanor, delivering his majestic lines extolling Valhalla with clarion force.

This “Rhinégold” is strong on the low male voices. Alexander Charles Boyd’s lyrical baritone served well for the would-be-macho thunder god Donner, whose counterpart Froh (God of Spring) is trimmed out of this edition. Basses Adam Cioffari and Andrew Potter embodied the giants Fasolt and Fafner with relish. Robert Frankenberry may not have the Heldentenor voice to sing Loge, but he conveyed cannily the fire god’s malice and fun in trickery.

Opulent-voiced mezzo Mary Phillips was dominant and domineering as Wotan’s beleaguered wife Fricka, while Demareus Naomi Cooper’s massive voice and presence made Earth goddess Erda frightening and formidable in her warning aria. As Freia (with her essential apples of eternal youth) Brooke Dirks revealed a penetrating soprano of genuine Wagnerian potential.