

ON HEARING THE FIRST CALL TO THE PIT

Preparing for Wagner's Ring Cycle

by Nigel Bates

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At 7.25pm on Monday 24 September 2012 a stage manager for The Royal Opera will lean forward on the chair in the 'mission control' point of the Prompt Corner on stage right and key a small switch before announcing to the backstage areas of the Royal Opera House that it is time for Das Rheingold beginners to make their way to the stage and for the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Orchestra to make their way to the pit. After dozens of rehearsal hours during a short four weeks, the first of the four Ring cycle performances will shortly commence, with the final musical moments way off into the November distance – an undertaking that is universally agreed to be the Olympian heights of challenge for any opera house orchestra. It has been an eye-watering preparation period of two full rehearsals almost every day. Das Rheingold is perhaps the bronze medallist with a mere 24 hours in total, Die Walküre and Siegfried take joint silver with 27 and Götterdämmerung takes the gold as it weighs in with a impressive 36 hours before a single note is heard by a paying audience.

The second orchestra call to the pit is given a couple of minutes after the first. In truth, many of the ninety or so musicians take their places early, the better to establish space and comfort for the next two hours and twenty minutes of uninterrupted performance, easily the longest 'sit' known to the players.

Horror stories linger on in ROH orchestral folklore of vital players being stuck in trains outside Charing Cross station ten minutes before a performance is due to start, so inevitably it's a safe and early arrival into London WC2 for everyone. Checking his reeds throughout the day, principal oboe David Thomas won't have taken anything more than sips of water since 2pm and certainly no tea or coffee. With moisture lost from the body through the constant expulsion of air, getting the proper balance between dehydration and personal comfort is a careful process for each wind and brass player alike. Trombonist Michael Hext plans his day thoughtfully, pacing himself much as he imagines the audience do, with no teaching or anything that requires blowing of significant duration.

Third horn Richard Kennedy also plans his Rheingold pre-performance schedule with special care as the opening minutes of the piece will include his 'moment', and one of the biggest challenges of his career. Seconds after the auditorium lights fade to black, the pit lights also dim and go out. Even the night-goggle green of the pit exit signs are temporarily covered up

following director Keith Warner's request for total darkness (in keeping with Wagner's wishes, the symbolism of which has been much discussed elsewhere). Antonio Pappano has already made his discreet way to the podium and raises a covered flashlight to cue the lowest string instruments. Before the lights finally went out, double-bass player and veteran Ring cyclist Keith Hartley had, along with his other section colleagues, already placed his bow onto his instrument and found the correct place for the fingers of his left hand at the other end of the string to respond to the illuminated signal to commence the long low held note.

And now Richard has 16 bars to count before he plays his solo, all in utter darkness. Forgoing the customary lip tension needed, he must relax his mouth to produce the tricky low notes that Wagner has given him. Any solo is difficult in its own way and he must keep his place with only the torch dead ahead as a guide and the knowledge that the whole piece, indeed the whole cycle, unfolds from his solo. He recalls that on one occasion an obstruction between his position and the podium caused the conducting beam to be interrupted, not unlike an Aldis signal lamp at sea, further adding to the tension of the moment. Around him other members of the horn section soon start to join the flow of Rheinwasser as the pit lights make their very welcome return. Quite what would happen if the lights did not come back up has never been established.

A constant source of wonderment for all orchestral players is how a single human brain could contain so many notes, so many sounds and textures and still be providing challenges to performers more than 130 years after the notes were first put onto the page. Michael Hext always looks forward to the Ring and confirms Wagner as the first great master orchestrator, every aspect of his skill breaking the mould, the register on each instrument properly utilized and giving as much back as is taken out.

David Thomas is always eager to be part of the Ring despite being more than a little nervous of the great gaps interspersed with exposed solos in Walküre and dealing with the problems of orchestral pit 'weather', including the variable humidity, which affects his oboe reeds. For Concert Master Peter Manning, the Ring has never diminished in importance despite all subsequently composed music. He views his participation as a visceral treat and the Ring as the most exciting thing that an opera house does. That excitement naturally includes the audience, who of course play their vital part in witnessing these great pieces in performance.

Principal flute Sarah Brooke dreaded her first Ring experience but is now a convert thanks to the musical direction and conducting of Bernard Haitink. For her, tuning and blending are the biggest worries. She uses a wooden flute, which can go flat more quickly than metal equivalents with the overall pitch of the orchestra rising subtly during a performance despite David giving an 'honest' oboe A beforehand. Finding herself totally immersed in the music, Sarah strives to produce a particular sound for Wagner, who wrote with the rich heavy sound of German flute players in mind, and it's something of a paradox that she has to produce a 'powerful quietness'. Sarah's advice to all Ring conductors is to keep it moving, and let the orchestra get to be familiar with the material that is over the next page as rehearsals proceed. She feels for her piccolo colleagues, who have quite a lean time by comparison to the rest of the woodwind section.

A single page of an orchestra part can last anything from a few seconds, such as the first violins in the 'Ride of the Valkyries', to the many hours of the whole opera for the tam-tam (or large gong) in *Götterdämmerung*. The percussionists have unique timing challenges throughout the Ring with their many long pauses between entries, some lasting several hours, needing careful managing. The high point for the section surely comes with twelve additional players assembled offstage to provide the raw metallic effect of the Nibelung anvils, not surprisingly a much sought-after engagement. Some of the heavy steel bars involved date back to the Solti performances of the Ring in the 1960s, providing a sense of tradition even if the number is scaled back from the eighteen specified in Wagner's score. Until the provision of newly printed orchestral parts in 2006, the inside back cover of the timpani music contained the signatures of players of previous performances, from current section principal Russell Jordan right back to Willem Gezinck, principal for the 1908 Covent Garden cycles conducted by Hans Richter. Historic connections indeed.

The sense of epic scale in the pit is further strengthened by Wagner's expert use of specialist instruments, the single bass trumpet bridging the gap between the normal trumpets and trombones, and Wagner's specially invented tenor tubas bridging the gap between the bass tuba and the French horns. Richard Kennedy admires his colleagues for their musical success on those instruments, perhaps giving the lie to the opinion of Richard Strauss who wrote of 'the rough and clumsy Wagner tubas with their demonic tone'. That description is possibly better suited to the offstage stierhorns, the additional trombonists required using modern versions of the original war bugle instruments specified in the score to produce the not-often-requested nasty razzing tone.

(Diverting for a moment to a brief piece of Ring trivia: the original Bayreuth stierhorns were 'liberated' by a regiment of the US 65th Infantry Division in 1945 and to this day remain undiscovered somewhere in North America.)

Perhaps more than any other piece of music, performing the Ring as a member of an orchestra is all about aspiring to and achieving success in the moment you have been given. Just as a world-class athlete has to make it all work in a few precious seconds, a challenge such as the Siegfried horn call will never become easier, despite a player's wide experience and the development of better quality instruments. Six harpists must sit quietly throughout much of the music awaiting their vital contribution when it comes.

For everyone, keeping in tune and on track throughout each opera, the equivalent of two back-to-back symphony orchestra concerts, could be considered an ordeal – but there will be a great sense of personal satisfaction for each player as their individual journeys conclude with the final Immolation Scene in early November. For Michael Hext and David Thomas, this is their 'tingle' moment, the multi-layered musical resolution to an extraordinary piece of work.

So is it worth all the effort? Without reservation, the answer has to be yes. At the end of the ROH Ring cycle in 2007, and for the first time as far as anyone could recall, Antonio Pappano requested that the Orchestra take their bow on stage. As the curtain went up to reveal the players, several musicians noticed a mature gentleman in the front row cast his walking stick to one side and use the top of the pit rail and some considerable effort to haul himself to his feet to join in the standing ovation. That touching personal endorsement, like the experience of taking part in the Ring, could never be forgotten.