

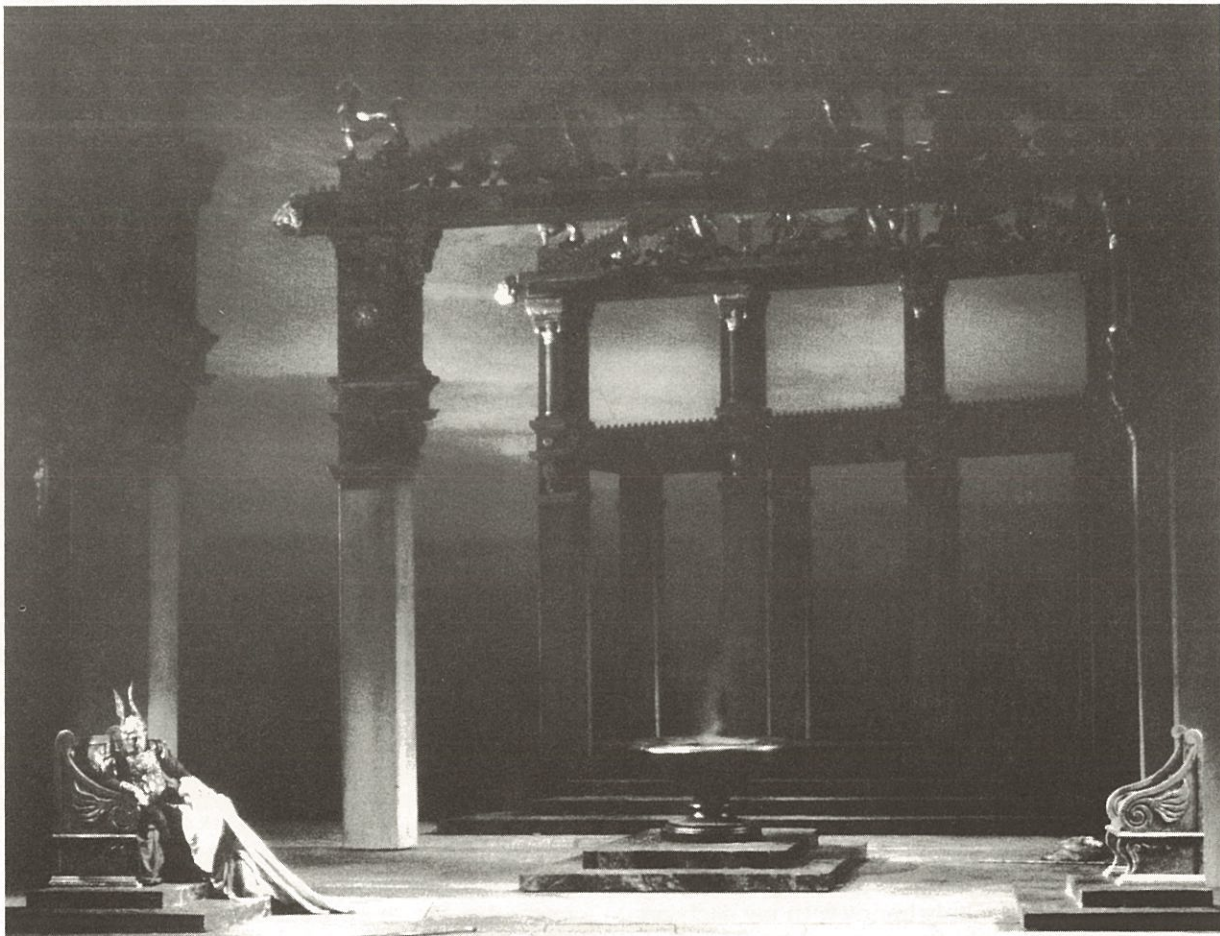
LEITMOTIVE

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SAN FRANCISCO OPERA: *THE RING*, 1990



This issue of *Leitmotive* presents four different commentaries on the 1990 San Francisco Opera production of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Lisa Burkett writes about the experience of seeing all four cycles presented this past June. Forrest Schofield writes about seeing Wagner, and opera, for the first time ever. Paul Schofield (Forrest's brother) compares the San Francisco production to other recent productions currently on the scene. And Robert S. Fisher comments on the wealth of related events that surrounded the *Ring* performances.

I DON'T RECOMMEND THIS FOR EVERYONE

or

Four *Rings* in Twenty-Six Days

by Lisa Burkett

When I received my order form from San Francisco Opera for its revival of *The Ring*, it was without hesitation that I ordered a ticket for each of the four cycles. I assumed several other people had done the same.

I learned shortly thereafter that not only was I incorrect in my assumption, but what I was planning to undertake was an incomprehensible, or at least amazing, feat to many, Wagnerian and non-Wagnerian alike. When asked which cycle I was planning to attend, my original answer was, "All four. Aren't you?" Since no one responded with a "yes," and looks of bewilderment were much more common, I changed my answer to, "All four. Can you believe that?" My favorite reaction came from my boss (a non-Wagnerian): "What's the matter? Don't you get it the first time?"

My reasons for attending all four cycles were simple. Apart from fanaticism, which I know my compatriots in the Wagner Society share, my principal reason was that *The Ring* was here this year. I didn't have to travel to Seattle or to Bayreuth, as in past years. And the chance to experience the work of three different Brünnhildes, two Siegfrieds, two Wotans, two Alberichs, and two conductors was an opportunity I couldn't imagine passing up.

I was often asked if I found the overlapping cycles disconcerting. While I definitely would have preferred concluding one cycle before beginning another, I somehow managed to shift gears and jump back in time and action to *Das Rheingold* before seeing the previous cycle's *Götterdämmerung*.

I must admit that the closer time drew to *The Ring*, the more I began to question my decision. Being new at my job, I didn't have vacation time, which meant late nights and early mornings would be the rule for the month of June. I began to wonder how I would endure. And, the *Ring* festival meant not only sixteen performances at the Opera House, but also many one-of-a-kind events sponsored by the Wagner Society on non-performance evenings which I just couldn't imagine missing.

Looking back, I'm not only happy with my decision, but I think of what I would have missed if I hadn't attended all four cycles. For example, had I skipped even a single performance, I might have missed:

Cycle 1 *Die Walküre*, which was among the greatest performances I have ever seen. Dame Gwyneth Jones as Brünnhilde, from her first "Ho-jo-to-ho" which the

audience greeted with spontaneous applause, delivered a thrilling performance, both vocally and dramatically. Her Wotan, James Morris, was in equally superb form, and together they performed an unforgettable Act III. Morris, as expected by those of us who saw his 1985 performances, proved himself throughout three cycles to be among the great Wotans of all time, displaying a powerful but beautiful legato line and an exquisite subtlety in his singing.

Cycle 1 *Götterdämmerung*, with Dame Gwyneth at her usual level of dramatic intensity and, especially in Act II, vocally exhilarating. Her conveyance of Brünnhilde's shame and then vengefulness was without parallel.

Cycle 2, which presented the Brünnhilde of Janis Martin. Here was a singer from whom I wasn't sure what to expect, but it was a pleasure to hear her rich, weighty voice in this role.

In Cycle 3, Robert Hale's Wotan. A much different vocal type than Morris, he has, as some WSNC members observed, more "bite." A prime example of this was his explosion of the word "Geh!" as he waved Hunding dead.

René Kollo's Siegfried, particularly the young Siegfried in Cycle 4. Here his voice was as powerful and fresh as ever, and his youthful characterization and interaction with Helmut Pampuch's Mime topped even the best of their performances in 1984 or 1985.

Hildegard Behrens' Brünnhilde in Cycle 4 — a much lighter voice and different characterization than her two predecessors. Hers was a very youthful portrayal of the Valkyrie daughter, who made a radiant transformation to mortal woman during the Awakening Scene. Although she was experiencing some vocal difficulty, Behrens' Immolation Scene was thoroughly captivating as she imparted Brünnhilde's discernment of the final outcome of the drama.

Having witnessed such incredible performances and totally immersed myself in Wagner's work nearly every day for an entire month, I can only say that if I had it to do over again, yes, I would do it. Well, maybe not right away. I must confess, it will be a while before I'm ready to listen to *The Ring*, and I have yet to watch my videotape of the Met telecast.

But next August Seattle Opera revives its *Ring*, and I'm planning to be there!

THE RING FOR MY FIRST OPERA

by Forrest Schofield

(Forrest Schofield works for the Marin-based rock group the Grateful Dead.
He attended Cycle 2, seeing Wagner, and opera, for the first time.)

The night after seeing *Götterdämmerung*, I was back near the Opera House, meeting some friends at City Hall for a walk to Chinatown. While walking on Sutter Street we passed two elderly women, and one was saying to the other, "I liked the costumes and the temples and the songs, but most of all I liked the people." I wasn't sure if she meant the characters in the story or the people in the audience. It occurred to me that whichever way she meant it, I agreed with her. A good deal of the enjoyment at the performances came from the rest of the audience. I had been somewhat aware of their legendary dedication to the *Ring* operas, traveling around the country and the world to witness new interpretations, certain performers, or just to see their friends in the common experience. It was a pleasure to be among them, and to see many similarities with my own audience experiences in the rock 'n' roll portion of the music world.

I also developed a fondness for many of the characters. Certainly there is much devious behavior throughout the story, and instances of menace, betrayal, and murder, but somehow even the most nefarious characters seemed worthy of understanding. Other characters were so caught up in the inevitable fate of their situation that one's heart could go out to them instantly. When Waltraute begs her sister to reconcile with their father and return the ring, I found myself thinking, "Give your sister the ring!" Of course that was not to be, for the weight of the entire world was in motion and events must play themselves out.

Much of this identification with the characters and their predicaments and emotions came from the quality of the performances. Never having seen opera before, I had no previous experience for comparison. Perhaps a well-traveled critic would have a different opinion, but I found most performances to be exhilarating. I knew beforehand that this would be a world-class production, but that did nothing to lessen the enjoyment of the experience. Having previously seen Vladimir Horowitz and Isaac Stern at the Opera House (in the Seventies), I had found that particular venue to be conducive to appreciation of fine performances, so perhaps that was part of my frame of mind going in. Witnessing James Morris' Wotan was a completely captivating experience, so much so that I felt let down in *Götterdämmerung* because I knew I would not see him that night. His last scene with Janis Martin as Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* left me speechless and in awe of both their performances. I went home that night certain that I had just seen the finest performance of any show in any medium that I had ever seen. Morris at times dominated the stage while sitting perfectly still as someone else sang, and it

seemed possible that Wotan himself was actually in the Opera House as his story unfolded.

All of this came at a time of near saturation with *The Ring* throughout many communities. I heard people on the bus to San Francisco speaking German and English with equal eloquence. Newspapers were full of stories and reviews, and the Metropolitan Opera's *Ring* was broadcast on television. People on the street spoke of it, and nearly everyone was aware of it. In the midst of this came some warnings from some people, a little vague and tentatively ominous, that maybe a different type of opera would be better for the first time. After all, these shows were long, and there were four of them, and they were dealing with the fate of the world! One man was heard to comment that parts of the music shouldn't be performed at all because it gave no chance for an aria by the singer. These tidings only made it all the more attractive for me, for if the Cycle and its music could stir up such emotions, there must be opportunities for creative triumphs as well. I had certainly had many experiences with dedicated, perhaps eccentric, audiences and long and difficult musical passages at Grateful Dead concerts, so that was nothing new. (Although sitting in my seat throughout was different.) I had also been interested in mythology from a young age, so to see musical adaptations of these tales was intriguing as well. Obviously Wagner was making an effort at something unusual, and that held an attraction that no ordinary story would have held.

That is what came across during those four nights in San Francisco, an attempt at creating something unusual. Even if lofty goals are not always attained, the attempt has been made and many people have an experience that is not ordinary. When those lofty goals are attained, the experience can become ecstatic, and the audience and performers alike transformed because of it. Listening to a singer, and especially a fine singer, is quite enjoyable, and music written to accommodate that singer is fine. The listeners can appreciate both the performer and composer, as well as the accompanying musicians. However, when that music is written to stretch the abilities of any singer, and to test the musicians fully, and to test the audience's endurance as well, the opportunity is there for appreciation, but also for much more. Then the chance for a transcendent experience comes about, not excluding appreciation, but moving past it. When I saw Vladimir Horowitz many years ago at the Opera House, there was a portion of the evening when he played Liszt's Sonata in B Minor that I became almost transfixed by his long and elegant fingers and thought not of the performer, but of the composer a century earlier. Time seemed to be

suspended as the music of a man long dead thrilled the full house.

During *The Ring*, it seemed entirely possible that long ago the gods and giants struggled, that dwarves and mortals laid claims to their parts of the world, and that everyone dealt with emotions and situations that, despite their grandeur, are common to all of us today. Perhaps it is just a long-winded story with music too difficult to play or sing. But to witness the genuine affection between the singers and musicians, all tested to the utmost, was a heartwarming and enlivening experience. A great deal of work by many people had obviously gone into it, and to see the beaming performers bowing at the end of an act, or the ladies rushing up the

aisle to show their appreciation and support at the end of a show, or the smiling and happy faces of the audience as they walked — perhaps a little stiffly! — from the Opera House at the end of the evening, was to know it was certainly worth it. I'm sure I was not alone in the audience in experiencing many remarkable moments or meeting new and friendly people. Whether or not I now begin traveling to see other *Rings* is uncertain, but also beside the point. It was long and loud and also tender and beautiful, a mixture of performance and human contact that all of us could take out of the building and into the world waiting before us, hopefully a world made new by our experience.

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA'S 1990 *RING*

by Paul Schofield

After the Cycle 4 *Götterdämmerung*, six of us from various parts of the country, who had all traveled to see *The Ring* in different places, had dinner at The Inn at the Opera. One person asked, "Aren't we always in search of the perfect *Ring*?" I answered, "We'll never find a perfect *Ring*, but those moments in the various productions we see that do attain perfection, or greatness, are the moments that we're looking for."

The question then arises, what constitutes greatness in a *Ring* production?

Everyone, of course, will have different ideas and standards for this, but attending cycles 2, 3, and 4 of the recent San Francisco production made me think about the various productions many of us have seen in recent years, and about how often and in what ways this greatness has been attained.

Of all the different productions I have seen myself, none was the best in every way. Each had different virtues and different failings, but the two that stand out for me are Harry Kupfer's 1988 Bayreuth production and this recent San Francisco one.

That these two productions made the biggest impact on me is interesting, because no two productions could be more different, either in style or accomplishment. The directing and the overriding concept of the Kupfer production, with its modern and futuristic setting, were its greatest strengths, while Lehnhoff's overriding concept, attempting to provide new insights within the context of a traditional setting, constituted the greatest failure in the S.F. production. And the vocal and conducting quality, often deficient in Kupfer's production, provided S.F. with one of its greatest strengths.

In the last fifteen years, we have had the chance to see productions of *The Ring* all the way from Harry Kupfer on one hand to the current Met production on the other, with just about everything else in between. And one of the most interesting aspects for me has been watching how *The Ring* itself reacts to these various approaches.

William Mann, interviewed during the filming of the Chéreau *Ring*, said, "*The Ring* is so big that it is susceptible to an endless number of interpretations." It is also so big that no one production or interpretation can ever encompass the whole work, nor can any one approach ever be considered definitive. Chéreau's *Ring*, attempting, in Mann's words, to "highlight one particular, relevant aspect of its universality," did so at the expense of other aspects of the work. This is not to say that Chéreau's approach is wrong, only that even a production as consistent and well-conceived as his cannot come close to capturing everything *The Ring* has to offer. And a production such as the Met's, traditional to the letter, more often than not ended up with little more than a few good stage effects in place of any truly insightful or original view of the work. This also is not to say that the Met's approach is wrong, only that *The Ring* cannot be fully contained in any one production.

The idea of "containment" is what struck me about the San Francisco production. The greatness of *The Ring* itself escaped the confines of Lehnhoff's concept, not just *in spite* of his failure, but largely *because* of that failure. Because of the strengths of other aspects of the production, which I will discuss in detail shortly, the weakness of the overall concept actually allowed the power of the work itself to shine through. As unlikely as this may sound at first, there is a truth to it. Let's examine this idea in the context of some of the other recent productions.

By far the most successful of the "concept" productions I have seen are the Chéreau and Kupfer *Rings*. (For a full review and analysis of the Kupfer production, see Volume 2, Number 3 of *Leitmotive*.) While I preferred Kupfer's because I felt that he captured more of the mythical quality of the work, I have to say that both succeeded in their aims. Here we have examples of strong and unified concepts carrying the productions all the way through this vast masterpiece. The interpretations of the directors are so strong that the audience is made to see the work from their viewpoints. And because

their interpretations and direction are profound and original, a way into the greatness of the work is opened up. Members of the audience then follow according to their own capabilities.

Götz Friedrich's Berlin *Ring* is also a "concept" production, but one less consistently successful than Kupfer's or Chéreau's. There are major virtues, but also major flaws. Here again, while this production highlighted certain aspects of the work, and afforded some genuine insights, it did so at the expense of restricting *The Ring* and drawing confines that the work itself does not possess. (For a detailed review and description of this production, please see Volume 3, Number 2 of *Leitmotive*.)

While Kupfer and Chéreau opened up avenues into the work through the strength of their overall concepts, Friedrich sometimes blocked such avenues. Because his concept was strong and original, the work itself fell prey to Friedrich's own success and failure. When he hit it right, the greatness of the work shone through. When he missed, that greatness was blocked.

Some will say at this point, "Well, then, let's just forget about 'concepts' and do *The Ring* the way it was written." Well, that's what the Met did, and that wasn't completely successful either. Because Otto Schenk had no view of the work to communicate, his production vacillated between moments of beauty on one hand (due to the inherent greatness of the work itself) to periods of incredible boredom on the other (due to Schenk's inability to bring that greatness consistently into focus). This certainly is not fulfilling the potential of a work of this magnitude. No work of music (much less *The Ring!*) exists entirely on the written page. Of course the performers must bring it to life. Otherwise there would be no reason to go to the theatre. We could all stay home and read the scores.

Perhaps the key phrase is "bringing the greatness and essence of *The Ring* into focus." This is the job of the director. Kupfer and Chéreau accomplished this admirably, if not perfectly. Friedrich accomplished this partially, and Schenk seemed to abdicate before this ever had a chance to be accomplished. How well did Lehnhoff fulfill his command?

Lehnhoff's *Ring* is also a "concept" production. Though it borrows a number of Chéreau's ideas and details, the overall look and concept itself is original to Lehnhoff and designer John Conklin. The costuming and setting are traditional in the sense that a mythical era is evoked, but Lehnhoff definitely laid his own ideas and emphasis underneath this traditional veneer.

Much has already been said and written about the failure of Lehnhoff's concept, both in 1985 and 1990. The most obvious aspect of this concept is Lehnhoff's idea of equating each of the four operas with a season: *Das Rheingold* with spring, *Die Walküre* with summer, *Siegfried* with fall, and *Götterdämmerung* with winter. There's nothing wrong with this in itself, but Lehnhoff gets the seasons wrong. *Die Walküre* is clearly set in spring, as the *Winterstürme* indicates. *Siegfried*, with its references to nature and to the heat of the sun after Siegfried's battle with the dragon, evokes summer more predominantly than any other season. Certainly the

awakening of Brünnhilde and the burgeoning of her love with Siegfried does not evoke fall. Even if *Götterdämmerung* can be seen as a kind of winter in the sense of winter representing death before rebirth, too much has already been lost for us to take this seasonal concept seriously, much less to have it lend us any new insights into the work itself.

The misplaced seasons are not all that is wrong with Lehnhoff's concept. Having the sword come from the Rhinegold is a mistake, as anyone with any knowledge of metallurgy will know. Gold is much too soft a metal to be used for weapons. For decoration on weapons, yes. But not for the blade of a sword.

Some may say, "Oh come on, this is opera." But the point is that this is *not* opera, this is Wagner. And Wagner was extremely careful and fastidious about details like this. Witness Siegfried's forging scene. Consider the accuracy of Wagner's mythological references. In the world of Wagner, making a sword from gold is a mistake.

A major aspect of Lehnhoff's interpretation is having Loge appear at the end. While this is thought-provoking to a certain extent, in the end it seems merely another mistake. While we hear the "redemption" theme, associated with Sieglinde and Brünnhilde, we see Loge. Loge represents, at least among other things, trickery and intellect. Sieglinde's theme, if I may call it that, is purely emotional and spiritual. Even if one can invent a reason for Loge to appear at this point (he has just been seen quite prolifically as fire), no great insight impresses us. We do not leave the theatre more enlightened about *The Ring* because of this final tableau.

If Lehnhoff's concept was such a failure, why did I find the experience as a whole moving enough to equate it with Kupfer's?

As I mentioned before, because Götz Friedrich's concept was essentially strong and unified, *The Ring* itself became confined within that concept. But because Lehnhoff's concept was so weak, *The Ring* burst those bounds easily, at times becoming stronger for having made the effort. This could not have been the case had other aspects of the production not been so strong. But before I talk about some of those, I must mention one more aspect of the directing.

I have talked mainly about the success or failure of overriding concepts, but there is much more to directing than this alone. When I said that Kupfer and Chéreau had successful concepts, I also stressed that the directing throughout the cycle was strong and unified. Each scene was conceived and carried out in the context of the overall conception, and this unity was responsible for the success as a whole. To consider an opposite example, let's look at François Rochaix's 1986 Seattle production.

Let me emphasize here that my comments are about the 1986 version, not the much-improved 1987 performance. Those of you who saw only the '87 *Ring* may wonder what I'm talking about, but suffice it to say that '86 had a lot of rough edges, and it is to Seattle's credit that they were able to perceive these failings and make changes. My comments here are therefore in no way intended to slight the Seattle production, but instead to

illustrate how bad execution can spoil an otherwise strong concept.

Rochaix's production is set in the nineteenth century, and one aspect of the production has Wotan as Wagner rehearsing Brünnhilde. Throughout the cycle there are many symbols on stage, and the audience is made to examine the meaning of these various symbols as the action takes place. There is obviously no room here to go into a complete description or analysis of Rochaix's production, but suffice it to say that it was very intricate and definitely unified from an intellectual point of view.

But it failed as cohesive stage drama because, in spite of the unity in Rochaix's own mind, the execution of individual scenes was so lacking that Rochaix's concept never had a chance to make its full impression. Fricka suspended in a basket with a little ram's head on the front at the end of *Rheingold* (the singer was afraid to climb the ladder the others had ascended into Valhalla), plastic birds and deer for the *Winterstürme* scene, a giant crab claw for the dragon, and, worst of all, a completely failed attempt at imitating Chinese opera in the immolation scene (girls in gray overalls ran around the stage draping red ribbons over everything), and many similar scenes, made it impossible for Rochaix's concept, or for the grandness of the work itself, to come through.

If this production was an example of a good concept rendered impotent by faulty execution of individual scenes, then the San Francisco production was the opposite, a production where a faulty concept was overcome by excellent execution of important scenes. There isn't space here to analyze every scene of the work, but I will describe a few of the most important, and successful, ones to illustrate my point.

One of the key scenes in *Rheingold*, both dramatically and emotionally, is Alberich's summoning and dismissal of the Nibelungs in Scene 4. The way this scene was staged, the Nibelungs, carrying armaments forged from the gold as they crawl toward Alberich, look like giant spiders all converging on the bound and helpless Alberich. More and more appear, like an infestation, and at the exact moment that the closest of them appear to swarm over Alberich, he raises his fist and the ring, banishing the terrified Nibelungs to the accompaniment of their screams and the overpowering orchestral crescendo. It is Alberich's last act of power, a great defiant cry, and one of the emotional peaks of the cycle. The look of pure agony on Franz Mazura's face in both of his performances captured perfectly not only the anguish of this particular moment, but also the anguish and suffering still to be played out in the course of the following operas.

In Act II of *Die Walküre*, the first scene opens in Valhalla, with Wotan sending the Valkyries off to war. The set is a grand palace, befitting the king of the gods. But as the scene with Fricka develops, we begin to realize that the palace is not so grand after all, but actually pretty tacky. Our first impression of grandeur gives way to one of hollowness and pretension. This, of course, is exactly the point. The grandeur of the gods is an illusion, one that Wotan eventually comes to perceive.

The final scene of Act III, with Morris and Janis Martin in Cycle 2, was one of the best and most moving performances I have seen of anything, not just opera. Everything that night worked, from the vocal performances to the orchestral, from the lighting and costuming and staging to the emotional impact of the scene as a whole. When Morris, summoning Loge, raised his spear from the rock and caught the red light above his head with the tip, all intellectual analysis of Lehnhoff's overriding concept was absent. What was present was the full emotional power of one of the greatest scenes in world drama, and when this scene was over, no one was analyzing concepts. The emotion had taken over, and this is what I believe Wagner was after first and foremost. For example, we all know of Deryck Cooke's naming and categorizing of the numerous motifs in *The Ring*, but Cooke himself says that Wagner did not expect, or even *want*, anyone to sit in the theatre during a *Ring* performance analyzing and pigeonholing each theme. The primary purpose of these motifs was to provide each scene with an emotional backdrop. The analyzing, important as it is, comes second.

The Cycle 4 performance, with Morris and Behrens, was less vocally assured, but still very moving. Cycle 3, with Hale and Jones, was staged somewhat differently (there was no raising of the spear, for example), and didn't strike me as profoundly as Cycle 2 had. But perhaps I was still under the influence of that previous performance, one I will remember as long as I hear and see opera.

Many may say that the final scene of *Walküre* is the emotional high point of *The Ring*, and that we are never again moved as deeply by what follows, but I found many things to admire in *Siegfried*. The first act was staged very well, the action fitting the music and the text, and Act II followed in suit. I will give three examples. Perhaps these examples do not in themselves constitute essential aspects of *The Ring*, but they illustrate my point of how good staging in individual scenes can overcome the flaws of an overall concept.

Having seen the outright disasters of the dragon in Seattle in '86 and the recent Met production, I appreciated the well-done dragon scene here. It was theatrically exciting and believable, something other current productions seem to have forgotten how to accomplish. (Götz Friedrich's Berlin mechanical dragon was very good also.) Also well-done was René Kollo's tasting of the dragon's blood. He pulled the sword out of Fafner, and immediately showed his hand burning from the blood. The timing was perfect. If this seems too small a moment to mention, witness Siegfried Jerusalem's recent Met performance, where he drew out the sword, sang the line about the blood burning, then very quickly touched the blade with his fingers before putting them to his mouth. What? Whoever goofed here, director or singer, doesn't matter. What matters is that the dramatic tension of the performance is lessened by such a gaffe, whereas this tension and believability is sustained and heightened by a rendering such as Kollo's.

The third example is the short scene between Mime and Alberich after Siegfried has gone into Fafner's cave.

First Mime, then Alberich, appeared and began to tear at the body of Fafner like hyenas desperately searching for the ring. Then the two of them argued and threatened each other, and the comic-tragic quality of this scene was brought out perfectly. Here were two examples of humanity at its lowest level, two pitiful creatures searching in the midst of death for gold, the very gold that brought about that death in the first place.

Another success in *Siegfried* was the first part of Act III. The singing, staging, and set design all combined to give the first two scenes the grandeur and scope that Wagner imbued them with. Both the mythical quality and the profundity of the human emotions involved were elicited. Wotan was truly the guardian of the gate and the rock, the guardian and sacred king that Siegfried had to remove and replace, passing through the gate of awakening. The staging, both with Erda and then with Siegfried, portrayed Wotan's last stand, his grandeur and defeat, with power and beauty. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* was achieved here, another example of how the failure of the overall concept was not in evidence. The power and greatness of the scene came through on their own.

I found *Götterdämmerung* less successful overall than the other three operas, but one scene was excellently done, the opening scene of Act III. I will use New York again for comparison, not to denigrate the Met production, but to show how a literal following of Wagner's original directions will by no means necessarily give us the best illumination of a particular scene, or of the work as a whole.

In the New York production the Rhinemaidens are seen from the waist up in the river. Siegfried comes down to the river and converses with them, and they spend the whole time either disappearing or waving their arms around in the rushes. This is about as imaginative as a sleeping cat, and as dramatically exciting. Worse, such a staging throws no interpretive light on the scene itself; in fact, no light at all.

In the San Francisco production the choreography of the Rhinemaidens throughout the scene is continually evocative of the text. The taunting, the seducing, the threatening of Siegfried, all is played out in the motions and movements of the maidens. Theatre here is truly wed to the music and text, far better than in most of the current productions.

It is certainly true that the success of the scenes I have mentioned could not have been accomplished without the excellence of the individual performers involved. I won't review every performer here, as that has been done many times by now, but a few stand out for special mention. Franz Mazura, Alberich in cycles 2 and 4, was exceptional in his acting. While Tom Fox may have had a stronger voice, Mazura made the character of Alberich come alive in a way that was perhaps the best I have seen in this role.

Helga Dernesch was not as good vocally as we have heard her in the past, but she is still the best Fricka dramatically that I have seen. Hanna Schwarz and Christa Ludwig are better vocally, but Dernesch's entrance in *Walküre* alone lets you know she still has it theatrically.

Gary Lakes was more impressive to me live than he was on Levine's recent *Walküre* recording. In the Cycle 3 Act I *Walküre*, both the orchestra and Rebecca Blankenship were having acute troubles, but Lakes not only held firm, he seemed at one point to take charge consciously and say, "Damn it, we're going to get through this." The act recovered and ended in a blaze of glory, and Act II came out on fire. Lakes showed his mettle on that one. I have seen other performances where an act was in trouble and no one came to the rescue.

René Kollo can be criticized for vocal inconsistency, but I have yet to see any current Siegfried do the role as well as he does overall. When Kollo is on, he is genuinely exciting. Jerusalem and Goldberg have a long way to go before they replace him. They may never achieve that. If Kollo retires from the role in the next few years, we may have a vacuum for a while. Lakes? Time will tell.

When I saw Robert Hale in Washington last year in the Berlin production, he was excellent. But I wondered at the time how he would sound in a big house, as the Kennedy Center Opera House is small (about 2200 seats). My question was answered. He sounds just as good in a big house. Dramatically, he was better this year than last. He was more dynamic and assured, as though the role of Wotan was now deeper inside him.

All three Brünnhildes had their virtues and weaknesses. One of the strengths of this production was to have all three. The only improvement would have been to have had Eva Marton take one of Jones's cycles so that we could have had all four.

Of the three we did have, Janis Martin was the most consistent vocally, Gwyneth Jones the most exciting in the high notes, and Hildegard Behrens the most natural in her acting. One of the great moments in this production was Behrens' awakening in Act III of *Siegfried*. I will quickly forget much of her vocal performance here, but the beauty and brilliance of that awakening will remain permanently. How often do you see an opera diva and remember the part where she was silent?

Jones gave the best "Ho-jo-to-ho" since Nilsson. Her immolation scene was also a high point, and she can always be counted on to hurl herself into whatever role she is playing. Unfortunately, her voice is simply not suited to certain parts of the Brünnhilde role. Weakest of all is her *Siegfried* Brünnhilde. She needs to know, apparently, that she doesn't have to sing so hard all the time. The result is that we get fantastic high notes, and poor soft, lyric notes. A rough, raspy quality often invades her voice just as the score calls for a smooth, creamy tone.

This is exactly what Martin gave us. Of the three, she was the best in terms of negotiating the entirety of the Brünnhilde role, all three operas taken together. There was no doubt that she had the power, as she proved in Act III of *Siegfried*. Her immolation scene also was a triumph. And, as mentioned before, her Act III of *Walküre* was sensational.

But no one, I believe, will argue if I say that the dominant performer in this production was James Morris. To borrow from Shakespeare, he bestrode these

performances like a colossus. This is what Wotan must do. We must be riveted by him. He must command the stage even when another character is singing. This Morris has accomplished. Will Crutchfield, in a recent *Opera News* article on Morris, wrote, "He is no longer singing Wotan, he has become Wotan." This is not to say that there is no room for improvement, for with a role like this there is always more to learn, even if you are Hans Hotter. But Morris is without a doubt the reigning Wotan of our time, and much of the emotional power of these performances that I have been speaking about was due to him. He already has one of the great Wotan voices of all time. As he continues to gather experience in the subtle aspects of the role, particularly in portraying the Wanderer, there is nothing to stop him from being as good a Wotan as anyone has been. Some have already mentioned that if he does too many Wotans he may burn out his voice. But he seems to be taking care of that. His contracts now call for opera companies to engage him in a variety of roles if they want him for Wagner. I'm not worried about him.

Singers are not the only performers to be reckoned with. The success of any opera production, but especially Wagner, depends largely on the conductor. This year we had a definite improvement over '85. This is not meant to slight de Waart, but simply to compliment Peter Schneider and Donald Runnicles. Schneider is an experienced Wagner conductor, and I found him eliciting wonderful tones and colors out of the orchestra, while always supporting the singers rather than competing with them. The singers could be heard, and this is something that some current conductors (no names right now) are either unable or unwilling to allow.

Schneider had a great moment in the Cycle 2 *Götterdämmerung*. During the funeral march, the volume slowly built, threatening never to attain the full grandeur. This provided a tension and expectation so that when Schneider finally did take it all the way up, in the two glorious crescendos leading to the solo trombone and trumpet enunciations of Siegfried's theme, there was an emotional release you seemed to have been waiting for the whole night. It was another example of how great moments were attained in this production despite the concept failure I have mentioned before.

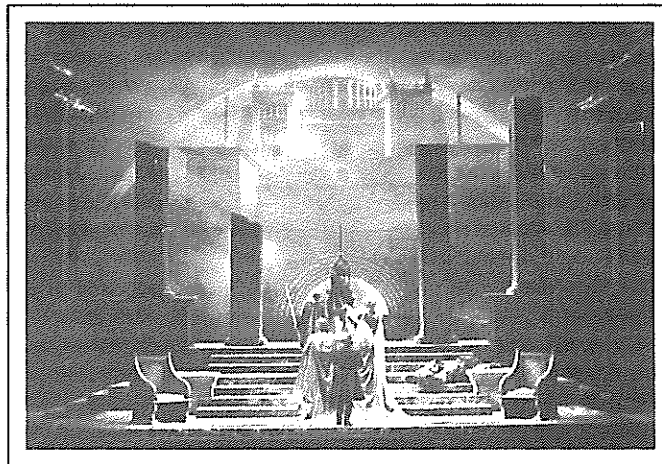
In Cycle 3, Runnicles' first cycle, things in the pit

seemed less assured and controlled than with Schneider. Sometimes the volume of the orchestra seemed to strain the singers, and there were more orchestral gaffes than are acceptable for a company of this stature. The brass particularly were to blame. But Runnicles improved greatly in Cycle 4, and before the final act of *Götterdämmerung* he was given a sustained and enthusiastic full-house standing ovation. James Morris did his first Wotan here in 1985, and now has become famous for the role. If Runnicles, who was conducting his first full *Ring* here, goes on to become a well-know Wagnerian conductor, he will similarly trace his start to this production.

One final thought must be mentioned.

Those of us who by now have seen many *Ring* performances always have something to criticize, always find fault somewhere. So it is sometimes instructive to view a performance or production from the point of view of first-timers, or, as Steve Sokolow calls them, virgins. I had the chance to witness the reactions of four different "virgins," either by talking directly with them or by hearing of their responses (one from each cycle). The reactions were, "My life is changed from this"; "I've never seen anything like it, it was incredible"; "Overwhelming"; and, after a half-hour car ride in complete silence, "Wow!"

Of course the main ingredient that these people were responding to was the greatness of the work itself. But if that greatness was coming through so powerfully, the production and the performances had to be doing something right. I didn't, for example, hear such responses at every *Ring* I have seen. While these four people do not represent a definitive critical analysis, they are an indication that the emotional power of *The Ring* itself was coming through these performances, and to me, this is the primary virtue of any *Ring* production. Of course one would like to have both the emotional power and a successful intellectual concept, as I felt we had with Kupfer. But if we can't have both, and we rarely do, then I will take the emotion. Lehnhoff failed to give us the great interpretation that Chéreau and Kupfer gave us. But this San Francisco production, both in '85 and this summer, provided an emotional gateway into the greatness of *The Ring*. I, for one, was willing to follow.



BEST WAGNER SCHEDULE EVER

by Robert S. Fisher

We witnessed this past Spring the greatest collection of Wagner-related intellectual events that has ever occurred at any place on Earth (including Bayreuth) in all history!

Surrounding San Francisco Opera's 1990 production of *The Ring*, this enormous number of events included lectures, films, symposia, concerts, panel discussions, and even an exhibition of Wagner-inspired paintings. Although there have been numerous instances when courses or seminars have been given on *The Ring*, nothing like the volume and quality seen in San Francisco this past Spring has ever previously occurred.

There is not space here to review each event in detail, but a listing, together with some brief comments, seems in order to memorialize this remarkable series of occasions.

1. One of the first events was a pair of five-part seminars given by Michael Barclay on *The Ring*. These began March 15 in San Francisco and March 19 in Berkeley, with successive meetings each week. Barclay presented his unique understanding of *The Ring* with great enthusiasm and perception.

2. On April 26, The Wagner Society of Northern California and the Goethe Institute jointly sponsored Hartmut Zelinsky (Professor from the University of Munich) speaking on "Anti-Semitism in Wagner." Many of us understood the professor to say that (1) there was substantial evidence of anti-Semitism in Wagner [no one argued that], and (2) that he felt Wagner's works should therefore not be performed [here we had some disagreement].

3. May 4 and 5 saw the first of the two mega-events, the Humanities West presentation "Wagner in His Century." Held at Herbst Theater, the first session included a lecture by Stanford Professor Emeritus Gordon Craig on "Art and Revolution in the Work of Richard Wagner." Next was a series of musical performances by young members of the San Francisco Opera Center, all followed by an elaborate reception hosted by the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The next day started at 10:00 A.M. and featured lectures as follows: Stanford Professor Thomas Grey on "The Music Wagner Admired"; UC Berkeley Professor Anthony Newcomb on "How Is the Drama in Music Drama Musical?"; Smith College Professor Hans Vaegt on "Wagner and the Written Word"; and the well-known British Wagnerian, Barry Millington, on "Staging *The Ring*: The First Century." A second musical performance followed.

4. The San Francisco Opera Guild offered Bryan Magee in a lecture on *The Ring* which he gave at five different chapter meetings of the Guild and at various

locations. Mr. Magee is well-known internationally, particularly for his *Aspects of Wagner*, a small but penetrating book that is often called the best short book available on Wagner.

5. The second mega-event, and of Wagnerian proportions, was the University of California, San Francisco Department of Psychiatry's one-and-a-half day blockbuster, "The Threat to the Cosmic Order: Psychological, Social and Health Implications of Wagner's *Ring*." Psychiatry Professor Peter Ostwald (a member of the Wagner Society), MD, organized this incredibly varied and stimulating program which gave us no fewer than seventeen presentations, each of which deserves a page or two of commentary; alas, there is not enough space here for that. But even the lecture titles will give an idea of the fascinating and exciting character of the event.

a. Leonard S. Zegans, MD began with "Richard Wagner's Cosmology: Self Deception, Self Realization, and the Destruction of Nature." Zegans is a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco.

b. Robert W. Gutman, PhD spoke on "A Passion to Command and Demand: An Overview of Wagner's Personality." Professor Gutman, well-known for his biography of Wagner, often focused here, as in his book, on negative elements in Wagner. Gutman, although he obviously is drawn to Wagner's work like a moth to a flame, wants us never to forget the composer's anti-Semitism and the other unpleasant elements of his personality.

c. "The Visual Wagner: Environments, Icons, and Images" was presented by Alessandra Comini, PhD, University Distinguished Professor of Art at Southern Methodist University. Dr. Comini explored the symbolic visual elements in Wagner's life, especially those relating to the *Nibelungenlied*.

d. Professor David C. Large of Montana State University told us of "Richard Wagner and the Problem of German Identity." Like Gutman before him, Dr. Large often seemed interested in the negative aspects of Wagner, including the perplexing role Hitler now plays in our perception of Wagner and history.

e. "The Archetypal Meaning of Gods and Goddesses in Wagner's *Ring*" was a spellbinding paper by psychiatry Professor Jean Shinoda Bolen, MD, of UCSF.

Seemingly an entrenched Jungian, she spoke of the powerful meanings that we all intuit as being fundamental in *The Ring*, but rarely understand. She compared the mythology of *The Ring* with that

of the Ancient Greeks; her all-too-brief analyses of several key components of *The Ring* were stunning!

f. Psychiatry Professor George H. Pollock, MD, PhD, of Northwestern University spoke eloquently about "Aging, Immortality, and Death," topics most of us find important in Wagner. He sought to grasp better the meaning of Wagner's works through an analysis of Wagner's psychic life, in particular the role of death, mourning, destruction, Oedipal, and incest themes. Professor Pollock chose to focus on comprehending Wagner's character, both the positive and negative sides. He happily avoided both mindless adulation as well as the uselessness of mere recitations of prejudices displayed by Wagner — or those of some of his more notorious followers. Although not excusing the negative in Wagner, Pollock showed us how remarkable it is that Wagner was not even more extreme; he told us of the mysterious in the beauty of Wagner's creations; he told us of Wagner's major anxieties about the fundamentals of existence and continuity in life.

g. "Dwarfs, Giants, Dragons, and Other Body Distortions" was the topic of Professor Eric Plaut, MD, also of the Northwestern Department of Psychiatry. This was another interesting relating of Wagner's personal experiences and how they affected his works.

h. Mezzo-soprano Herta Glaz, Adjunct Professor at the University of Southern California and a famous singer of Wagnerian roles, spoke of "The Women in Wagner's Operas."

i. Sherwin H. Sloan, MD, Professor of Ophthalmology at the UCLA Medical School, Founding Editor of *Opera Quarterly* and President of the Wagner Society in Los Angeles told us of the meaning of eyes: "Wotan's Loss of An Eye: The Symbolic Manifestations of the Eye" was his paper's title. Sloan's notions of how our inner psyche regards the eyes were most revealing and useful in understanding *The Ring*: some of the slides he showed of mutilated eyes were quite upsetting, but important, particularly in gaining an understanding of Oedipal issues.

j. Professor Guenter B. Risse, PhD, MD, of UCSF spoke of the currents of intellectual medical thought and history during Wagner's life, especially those relating to eugenics. The title of his interesting paper was "Health, Race, and Medicine: Wagner's Germany 1850-1890."

k. "Wagner's Impact on Adolf Hitler" was the subject of Emeritus Psychiatry Professor F.C. Redlich, MD, of Yale University and UCLA. Redlich is thoughtful, and although he is clearly disturbed by Wagner's anti-Semitism, he does not find that this concern blinds him to the positive elements in the composer.

l. "Taking a Stab at the Truth: Violence and Betrayal in Freud and Wagner" was the topic of PhD candidate David Levin of UC Berkeley. Mr. Levin ex-

plored the relation of certain aspects of Freud's dream theory to similar aspects in *The Ring*.

m. Thomas S. Grey, PhD, of Stanford University spoke of "Sickness or Redemption: 'Wagnerism' and Its Consequences." Professor Grey did not attempt to provide definitive conclusions to the myriad complex questions suggested by his title: raising the issues was quite enough.

n. Anthony Newcomb, PhD, UC Berkeley, told us of "Music, Drama, Repetition, and Problems of Perception in the Music of *The Ring*." Professor Newcomb explained the brilliance of Wagner's theories put into practice, among others that of avoiding the expected closures in his music — at least until the end of the work. Many found Newcomb's comments startling, but true.

o. Nora Norden, Language Coach, San Francisco Opera, talked of "The Power and Beauty of the Words" in *The Ring*, giving numerous examples that are often found to be puzzling to most listeners.

p. Lise Deschamps Ostwald presented a live performance of an elementary school production of a section of *The Ring* using both adult and child performers. The purpose of this project is to develop an interest and appreciation among young students of aesthetic experiences. The result was perhaps also to further comprehension by the adults present of what is really happening in *The Ring*.

q. Finally, Dr. Ostwald's huge happening of two days concluded with a panel discussion led by Professor David Littlejohn, UC Berkeley, that included Laurie Feldman (SF Opera *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* Director), Herta Glaz, Hans Hotter, Janis Martin, Franz Mazura, Donald Runnicles (who was conducting his first complete *Ring* cycles), and Wagner Society President Steve Sokolow. The subject of the discussion was "Performance, Interpretation, Staging, and Audience Reaction to *The Ring*." Many topics were covered, including that of Deviationist productions (those that deviate from Wagner's instructions). It is fair to conclude that a majority had serious reservations about much of the presently modish and frequently ineffectual changes made by the Deviationist directors — including some of those on the San Francisco Opera stage.

This monumental conference was some ways like an over-rich chocolate dessert: it was almost impossible to digest so much in such a short time. One left this symposium reeling — excited and grateful, but wishing there had been less almost simultaneous material on which one wanted to be properly reflective. Some important matters were inevitably lost, but the brain was stimulated as never before (and probably never again). Therefore these efforts can only be called a success!

6. The Wagner Society opened its many and varied contributions to the festival with an unusual major art exhibition of many large canvases by noted painter Cal Pedranti — all inspired by various scenes from *The Ring* and other Wagner works. This show

opened with a reception for the artist on June 4th and continued through June 29th at the Hall in the Western Merchandise Mart.

7. On June 9 the Wagner Society presented the film *Magic Fire* with Alan Badel as Wagner and Yvonne de Carlo as Minna.

8. Bryan Magee spoke of "Wagner and Schopenhauer" on June 11 at the Ballet Building to a crowd of over 200 people. Some persons without tickets had to be turned away when even standing room was sold out. Mr. Magee is the author of more than a dozen books, one of which is *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, a lengthy volume that explains the complexities of the philosopher's ideas in the clear, lucid style for which Magee is famous. Although Magee did not attempt to describe in detail Schopenhauer's philosophy, he did make clear those salient points that so touched Wagner — to the extent that in one year he read Schopenhauer's magnum opus four times! Only after coming to understand Schopenhauer did Wagner truly understand his *Ring*. Mr. Magee's remarks were followed by a lengthy question and answer period, after which he generously continued to speak with small groups from the audience. Needless to say, this lecture was very well received and regarded by many as one of the highest points in the festival.

9. *Ludwig*, a film by Luchino Visconti, was presented by the Wagner Society on June 15. Trevor Howard played Wagner.

10. On June 17, the Wagner Society heard Professor David Breckbill (University of Indiana) discuss early Wagnerian singers and their styles. His comments were illustrated with ancient recordings. Following this, there was a panel consisting of Blanche Thebom, Jess Thomas, Philip Eisenberg (SFO and Met prompter), Thalia Moore (SFO cello), Zack Spellman (SFO tuba), and Bill Klingelhoffer (SFO horn) with moderator Michael Mitchell (Seattle Opera). The discussions were about performing style, and it is a pity the often brilliant remarks (from every panelist) were not preserved for later publication.

11. A musicale of Wagner and Wagner-related music was performed on June 22 by members of the Opera Center including Craig Estep, Maria Fortuna, Micah Graber, Catherine Keen, Hong-Shen Li, Mary Mills, and Patricia Racette, all led by Patrick Summers, Music Director of the Center. Performed at the Ballet Building, the singing was particularly beautiful that evening.

12. Immediately following the fourth cycle *Rheingold*, the Wagner Society held an artists' reception, again in the Ballet Building. It was a sell-out and attended by just about every singer and much of the staff from *The Ring*. It was great fun seeing two Brünnhildes (Dame Gwyneth Jones and Hildegard Behrens) enjoying each other's company; Lotfi Mansouri enjoying his Rhine daughters; James Morris enjoying everyone; and everyone there excited and grateful at the chance to talk with so many great Wagner singers!

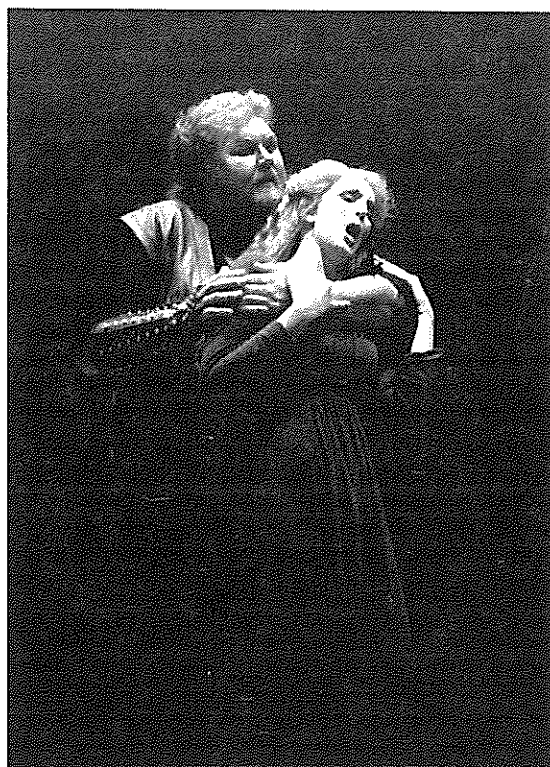
13. On June 28 the Wagner Society screened Syberberg's film, *Ludwig, Requiem for a Virgin King*.

14. The final Wagner Society presentation was an all day symposium focusing on the mythology of *The Ring*. Professor Mara Keller (California State University) spoke on the prehistory and history of the worship of female deities; member Judy Bogart gave a well-organized paper entitled "A Feminist Approach to *The Ring*"; and finally, member Professor William O. Cord delved into a number of key myths in *The Ring* and their historic background in other mythologies. The first two volumes (of a projected four volumes) of Professor Cord's lengthy work on this subject have recently been published.

15. The San Francisco Pocket Opera, as part of the celebration, performed Wagner's very early opera, *Das Liebesverbot*, which title Director Donald Phippen translated as "The Ban on Love." This was a partially-mounted, charming production, sung in English, and performed with a small orchestra.

16. The Goethe Institute had an extensive exhibit of the history of the Bayreuth Festival, and presented films of *Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Meistersinger*. Also, the Institute provided support for most of the other presenting organizations.

All told, this was an incredible experience. It is doubtful that any one person actually attended every event, but many were at most. Creating these events was a monumental task. The energy that was expended by so many people over such a wide variety of events was a handsome tribute to the fundamental and ever-increasing value placed by our age on the great work of Richard Wagner, *The Ring*.



NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Next Meeting

The next meeting of The Wagner Society will be held on Wednesday, October 24 at 6:30 P.M. at the Goethe Institute, 530 Bush Street in San Francisco. Professor Dunbar Ogden of U.C. Berkeley will speak on the staging of Wagner's operas, with special attention given to the work of Adolphe Appia.

Note

In the last issue of *Leitmotive*, a follow-up article to "Tragedy as Mysticism: The Influence of Greek Tragedy on *The Ring* and *Parsifal*" was promised. Because this current issue is devoted to articles on SFO's *Ring* production, the promised follow-up article will appear in the next issue of *Leitmotive*. That issue will be mailed by the end of the year.

New Mailing

In order to save money on our mailings, we have acquired a Bulk Rate permit, and we will be doing the

majority of our mailings using Bulk Rate. If anyone encounters a problem receiving our mailings, please let us know.

LEITMOTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY
OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Paul Schofield, Editor

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