

LYRIC OPERA NEWS

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season in focus...

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FALL
1993

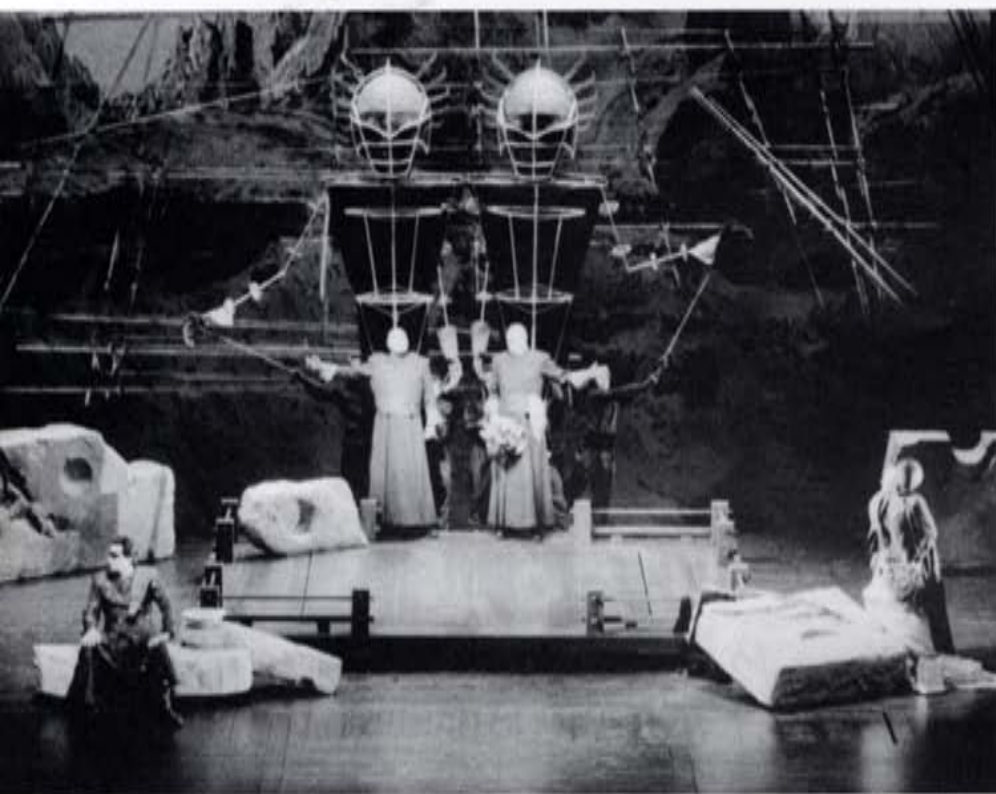
Will Sieglinde's child be saved?

Wagner's

Will Brünnhilde ever awaken to her hero?

Can Wotan escape the curse of the Ring?

Stay tuned to Lyric...



Don Rest



Tony Romano

Lyric's *Das Rheingold*, with superstar James Morris (right), received rave reviews.

Die Walküre, best beloved work of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle, comes to Lyric Opera of Chicago this season, second of four new productions of these operas in Ardis Krainik's "Toward the 21st Century" decade.

Admirers of the entire tale about the Ring of that evil Nibelung named Alberich often admit to a soft spot for the very accessible *Walküre*. The title refers to one particular Valkyrie—the god-king Wotan's favorite war maiden-daughter, Brünnhilde. *Das Rheingold*, Lyric's successful *Ring* prologue of last season, introduced us to all manner of strange creatures, from nether-world gold-grubbers to mermaids to boastful gods. *Siegfried*, yet to come, is an action-adventure, and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*) is a towering edifice, shot through with dark betrayals.

But *Walküre* opens with real human beings seeking their destinies, and is alight with the deep and desperate loves of the hero Siegmund for the tragic Sieglinde, and of the glorious Brünnhilde and burdened Wotan for each other.

Excitements are promised in this installment, with Act III's *Ride of the Valkyries* and the spectacle of the Magic Fire in the finale. But as John Conklin, the production designer, makes clear, those moments "are only a tiny percentage of the whole thing. Long acting scenes—musical acting—that's where it

happens...You should make the Ride as good as possible, but the very heart of the piece exists as a theater experience."

The singing actors for this *Walküre* include Eva Marton as Brünnhilde; Tina Kiberg as Sieglinde and Marjana Lipovšek as Fricka, in their Lyric debuts; James Morris, returning as Wotan; Siegfried Jerusalem in his Lyric debut as Siegmund; and Matthias Hölle (the giant Fasolt in Lyric's *Rheingold*) as Hunding. Maestro Zubin Mehta returns in the pit.

While Lyric's *Rheingold* gave us fantasy within its pared-down look and eastern-fantasy costumes, *Walküre* returns to poetic realism, with a look closer to that of the nineteenth century. "Musically and dramatically, it becomes in a way simpler visually, with more focus on the singers, the costumes much simpler," says Conklin, "...although the physical world remains more abstract." But yes, "the sword will come out of the tree, they'll have plates of food and things to drink" at Hunding's house in the woods.

But director August Everding cautions that, unlike some modern productions, you won't see Wotan "running around in a tuxedo or tails with a spear in his hand. Not in my production, I promise you!"

He and Conklin, both experienced Wagnerians, have many surprises in store. Some hints of their plans:

With the utterly riveting storm music of *Walküre*'s introduction, we'll briefly see the Norns again, those weavers of time,

Cliffhanger

by Jeannie Williams

or at least their webs. You recall they appeared at the beginning of *Rheingold*, because Everding believes strongly that these wise women existed when the *Ring* began, not only in *Götterdämmerung*, and that they write its history.

And Sieglinde will be seen within the same grille-walled set, says Everding, even before Siegmund bursts in from the storm. "We'll know she doesn't like her husband (Hunding) very much. She'll see the tempest, the thunderstorm; she's worried because she knows something in advance, she awaits it."

An erotic triangle is his view of the first act, almost a play of relationships echoed in a stark drama by Ibsen or Strindberg. Sieglinde and her brother slowly recognize one another amid a wintry gloom, with a great burnt-orange tree floating in space. "And suddenly the heavens are torn away, and all turns to spring," says Everding. How closely the Volsung twins will embrace is a question. "In Warsaw when I did it, there was nearly copulation," says Everding, "but I'm not going to do that in Chicago." This decision has nothing to do with the sensibilities of this city: "It's development in my own mind. It's not necessary to do that."

Act II will be presented in two scenes, the first in Valhalla, with mountains and other visions seen outside during the scene between Wotan and Fricka, his wife. In an enclosed space, we'll see six tall black chairs and a globe or pendulum of some kind. "The globe is about controlling the world, or attempting to," says Conklin. "Wotan thinks he is controlling everything, but he is in a kind of prison himself."

As Everding puts it, "Wotan behaves like a macho. He says, 'It has to be done,' but he sees he was wrong, and his wife knows better, but he says, 'I want it that way!'" However, his wife wins out, and Siegmund is doomed.

Brünnhilde breaks out of Valhalla into her meeting with Siegmund, which takes place "in kind of a dream landscape, with a huge moon, always a sense of beyond, of space, and with two shiny black hills in the back. A white stone pathway leads from her to Siegmund," explains Conklin. As she tells him of his fate, and that she will guide him to Valhalla, a white mountain—a recollection of the home of the gods—will appear in the constantly shifting distance. Wotan and Brünnhilde watch Siegmund's battle with Hunding from those black hills.

Everding finds the fateful meeting of Brünnhilde and Siegmund fascinating: "He gets seduced by Brünnhilde to go to heaven. He says, 'No, I stay on earth with my beloved wife.' And she says, 'But you will become a god! Come on, go up with me!' But he stays, and this is a very touching scene for me."

In *Rheingold*, the bungee-swimming maidens were such a success that Conklin wondered if they could be topped. The answer may be—the Act III *Ride of the Valkyries* on trampolines! Conklin hoped to work this out over the summer, with the aid of Debra Brown of Cirque du Soleil, who choreographed the bungee maidens. "She's very interested not just in the technical circus part, but also in the expressive aspects.

"That worked!" Conklin says of the bungee action. "The kinesthetic motion of the girls really supported, and was



Designer John Conklin (l.), director August Everding (ctr.), and conductor Zubin Mehta (r.) are enthusiastic about their continued collaboration in forging Lyric's *Ring*.

supported by, that music—it was very exciting, and sort of abstract, it wasn't just people on wires pretending they were swimming. It was something else more interesting." This is the feeling Conklin wants to rediscover with the *Ride*.

The designer's ever-searching eye was taken by trailers for the summer Sylvester Stallone hit movie, *Cliffhanger*, which used Wagner's *Ride* music with extraordinary shots of mountain peaks. The *Ring*, he thinks, would make a terrible movie, but he admits that "I don't think anybody ever solved the *Ride*. Even the best productions fall apart at that moment...I don't want a lot of ladies rushing about the stage and singing...but the music is so kinetic, so extraordinarily violent and active."

Yes, the nine war maidens will have armor and helmets, though minus wings, and spears, though stripped-down versions. Simplicity is the watchword.

Wotan's farewell to Brünnhilde is another of those seemingly static scenes, but "musically and emotionally it's extremely dynamic," Conklin notes. Brünnhilde may be more visible than usual, lying somewhat upright in a glowing section of that black mountain. Conklin worked with soprano Eva Marton on the San Francisco *Ring*, and knows she's "very striking as an actress, very powerful."

Everding will pay particular attention to the moments when Siegmund is left defenseless, his sword shattered by Wotan's spear, and so is slain by Hunding. "There are two or three minutes of music I want to interpret there. Wotan knows why Siegmund was killed, and was it his fault or not? How does a father behave when his son lies in front of him dead?"

And as with so much of this composer's work, "Wagner tells me exactly what I have to do," says the director, "if you can listen—if you know the music."

**What did Jeannie Williams learn about
Eva Marton's and Siegfried Jerusalem's
interpretations of their titanic roles?**

Read on...



Eva Marton: A Brünnhilde for Every Woman

Eva Marton is a Brünnhilde who feels her role very deeply. "Wotan had put the fire around me on stage," she recalls of a Swiss production of *Die Walküre*. Her singing was over, "and I slept. But Robert Hale, my Wotan, he sang so wonderfully, I was so touched by the emotion that I cried....

I closed my eyes, I was on the floor with fire around me and I cried. And Robert comes to me and says, 'Don't cry, I can't sing any more, I have to cry too if you cry.' He was so touched for me....But I cried for myself, I cried for my life."

Marton in reality has little for which to weep. She is a renowned dramatic soprano who counts more than 80 roles, a famed Turandot and Tosca who has swept triumphantly from the Italian repertory to the Wagner parts, expanding them in recent years.

"In Chicago, I like to work again with this piece as if I never did it before."

Lyric audiences will be fortunate enough to see one of her first American appearances as the Brünnhilde of *Die Walküre*. Her Lyric debut was as Maddalena in *Andrea Chénier* in November 1979; last season, she sang the demanding title role in *Elektra*, and *Turandot* the year before.

She has sung the Brünnhildes of *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*—having recorded the latter two with Lyric's Siegmund and Siegfried, the German tenor Siegfried Jerusalem, and Lyric's Wotan, James Morris, for EMI. She has been both Elsa and a very dangerous and exciting Ortrud in *Lohengrin*, as well as Venus and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, and Eva in *Die Meistersinger*. And she has sung Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, with, among others, conductor Zubin Mehta, Lyric's Ringmeister.

In that Swiss production of *Walküre*, her Siegmund told her—singers *do* talk a lot among themselves onstage—that he wished she were singing Sieglinde. "He said, 'Why are you not my Sieglinde, I could love you then.' He was so desperate," Marton laughs. "But I told him, 'I am sorry, the time is past. Now I am Brünnhilde!'"

Wagner's Isolde also is in her future, in Barcelona and Washington. Beyond opera, her dream is to do some straight theater work, perhaps comedy or character parts.

The Hungarian soprano doesn't want to talk in much detail about the war maiden she will portray in Chicago. With each new production, "I am just a clean paper, you can write on my body, my head, everything," she insists. She awaits collaboration with director August Everding and Maestro Mehta.

"In Chicago, I like to work again with this piece as if I never did it before. When I did *Lohengrin* at the Metropolitan, Mr. Everding was so great, and I was so boring—I had so many questions. I had sung Elsa so many times...but I wanted to know everything Mr. Everding knows about Ortrud. Mr. Everding said to my husband, Zoltan, 'Tell me, does Eva ask you so many questions?' Zoltan

told him, 'No, at home she's very quiet!'" So Everding knows what to expect.

But Marton will say this much: "Brünnhilde is a very clean person, everything is just black or white to her in *Walküre*. She doesn't know about emotion, about love, nothing. The only love she has, has to do with father, with Wotan....That is why she is shocked when she hears what happens between her father and Fricka (in their second-act argument about the punishment of Sieglinde and Siegmund). This is the first point in her life she's thinking that not everything is 100 percent well around her."

One of the most moving scenes comes in Act II, as Brünnhilde appears to Siegmund to foretell his death, a section known as the *Todesverkündigung*. This is a crossroads not only for the Volsung twin Siegmund, but also for the warrior maiden. Marton refers to a *Bruch*, which we could call a breakthrough in English.

Siegmund, startlingly, will not leave his wife for the glories of Valhalla, he tells Brünnhilde. "And it is very clear in the music, the *Bruch*...in this moment she knows she will help Siegmund. She is going down to be a human being. Nobody can stop her, she's not afraid any more of Wotan."

To the multilingual Marton, Brünnhilde is "in Italian, *per eterna*, for eternity, for yesterday, today and tomorrow. She is every woman, with enormous love, enormous emotion, enormous freedom.

"So let me find something special in Chicago, working with Mehta and all my partners....Let me find something new about Brünnhilde."

Jerusalem Lifts Up His Voice



Chicagoans will see perhaps the biggest tenor gun in the Wagnerian repertory today when Siegfried Jerusalem dashes in out of the storm at the beginning of Act I of *Die Walküre*.

The tall German will have sung four of the five major tenor roles in the *Ring* this year, including both the young and the elder Siegfrieds and Loge in the Vienna Staatsoper *Ring*. In addition, he appeared in his first fully staged *Tristan und Isolde* this past summer at Bayreuth, with Waltraud Meier. His preparations for that role included the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Act II concert last January, with Meier.

Jerusalem laughs off the suggestion that singing these five big roles is a heroic feat in itself. A singer who calls himself "just a tenor," not to be pigeonholed as lyric or heroic, Jerusalem says, "The music is so beautiful, and you get to know many different conductors and directors. In essence, every performance is different...it never becomes boring."

This singer has had a most unusual career—it began with 17 years as a bassoon player before he ventured into serious singing, making his debut in 1975 in small parts. August Everding, who directs Lyric's *Ring*, signed him as *Lohengrin* in Hamburg in 1977, which led to his first Bayreuth Festival appearance (as the god Froh, who creates the rainbow bridge in *Das Rheingold*).

Many major Wagner roles followed (his Parsifal has been seen on PBS), and many Ring cycles; he also has sung Mozart, and in operas from Beethoven's *Fidelio* to Penderecki's *Paradise Lost*. He looks ahead to Italian parts—Radamès, Calaf, Otello—after he becomes more proficient in the language.

Having sung both heroes, Jerusalem is very much aware of the differences between *Walküre's* Siegmund and his son, Siegfried, who appears in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. "Siegmond is a depressed character who has had many experiences with the world, while Siegfried doesn't know anyone outside of Mime (who reared him after his mother, Sieglinde, died). When Siegfried goes into the woods, he is full of joy over the beautiful nature, while Siegmund is in flight most of the time because he has killed someone (Hunding's kinsmen), or helped someone (a maiden in distress, and later Sieglinde)."

**"The music is so beautiful...
every performance is different."**

This makes Siegmund a glum fellow: "He does not look positively into the future. He has only once a very positive feeling, and great hope—when he sings 'Winterstürme,'" notes Jerusalem. This lyrical song occurs after the moonlit night floods in on him and his twin sister, and he sings that their winter storms have waned in the winsome May, and love and spring have met in the Volsung twins. "Then he is almost like Siegfried," says Jerusalem. "It is a wonderful part to sing."

After Sieglinde gives her mate his new name, Siegmund, and he whips the sword out of the tree (the sword promised in time of need by his father, who is Wotan, unknown to the twins), some

productions can get pretty passionate. (Peter Hofmann's romps with Jeannine Altmeyer at Bayreuth and the Met set some kind of benchmark.) The lovers make the most of the spring night, but that's not the priority, according to Jerusalem.

"It was so also with the (Patrice) Chéreau *Ring*, that they were very intensively occupied with love. But Sieglinde, before *Winterstürme*, has received a shock, and first of all Siegmund must calm her down. And that is beautiful, calming music that has nothing to do with erotic feelings at that moment. Then, it comes naturally..."

His, it seems, will be a gentler Siegmund. Still, in Act II, the hero must "scold Brünnhilde terribly, tell her what a bad woman she is, so cold and unapproachable," reminds Jerusalem.

He has worked frequently with his Brünnhilde, Eva Marton. "I have sung Lohengrin with her often, and we have recorded Korngold's *Violanta*, and then *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* with Bernard Haitink."

Of Wagner's music, Jerusalem has said, "You must sing his music, not bark it." It's clear that Lyric audiences have a complete musician in store for them in this new *Die Walküre*.

Jeannie Williams is a columnist for USA TODAY, and freelances for opera publications. She is at work on a biography of Jon Vickers.

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