

THE SEATTLE “RING”

Fellow member, Gillian Rogers, participated in our trip to Seattle for a performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle of operas. Seattle is nine and a half hours away, by air, so the travel was tiring. However, comments indicate that members enjoyed their experience. Gillian kindly agreed to write-up the trip for us, and here is her report.
Bryan Suitters

On 22 August 27 members of the Music Club flew off with Bryan Suitters to Seattle for Wagner's "Ring", and stayed in The Roosevelt, a very comfortable and well-chosen hotel near to the monorail, which sped us along, within minutes, to the opera house.

Seattle is a city with a difference. The opera house is in an amusement park, with carousels, a big dipper and a beautiful fountain beside it. Children were splashing in the water, which cascaded like fireworks from the huge fountain. We were happy to see them, as we had been told that in Seattle, the home of Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks and Amazon-dotcom, there are more dogs (all pampered, manicured and receiving acupuncture!) than children.

In the opera house we had excellent, central seats in the first tier, although some thought them a little far back. I, however, was glad to take in at a glance the stunning, naturalistic scenery on the wide, cinemascope stage. These sets were inspired by the forests which we saw later around Mount Rainier, as well as by the rock faces with their maze of fault lines. I also admired the Rhine Daughters, who swam around suspended on trapezes. My only disappointment in *Das Rheingold* was that at no time did the orchestra succeed in sending a frisson up my spine.

We all thoroughly enjoyed the experience of this eagerly awaited Ring Cycle. *Siegfried* especially was superb, and we left this opera on a high.

After each opera everyone was full of opinions, many and varied: Alberich (Richard Paul Fink) and Fricka (Stephanie Blythe) were brilliant; Hagen (Daniel Sumegi) was not frightening enough; the Rhine Daughters, in their pool in *Götterdämmerung*, were a delight. Whilst they teased, warned and pleaded with Siegfried, they were girlish, giggling, petulant and enchanting. Wotan's farewell was truly moving. He was clearly torn.

I'm not sure what to think about one Valkyrie opening up a bag and taking out body parts, and another one coming in with a floppy Guy Fawkes figure over her shoulder, all to be flung behind a rock into a pile. Were we meant to laugh? But in the lecture we had been told that the Valkyries had no feeling for the heroes; fetching them was just a job.

The dragon was realistic and dramatic. Speight Jenkins, general director of the opera house, in his talks referred to the dragon as 'Fluffy'. I wonder if he called it this after Hagrid's pet, the three-headed monster which guarded the philosopher's stone in the first Harry Potter book. The film was on at the IMAX cinema beside the Fisher Pavilion lecture hall.

In all the operas there were lovely touches. We saw the forest bird flying away and later the ravens. We loved seeing Alberich and Mime (Denis Petersen) throwing rocks at each other. Brünnhilde's horse, a real live one, came in twice, but maybe the second time was a mistake. The horse was too static (as if posing for Stubbs?) and didn't add to the tension and excitement of the denouement.

The end of *Götterdämmerung* was a muddle and all too hurried. Siegfried was carried away on what looked like the kitchen table. The Rhine Daughters were swinging so madly on their trapezes, behind swirling gauzy curtains, that you almost missed them knocking Hagen over to drown him. It took place in the blink of an eye. Then Valhalla rose up from the ground on a pedestal, like a jack-in-the-box, and sank down again amidst flaming red lights; and if I hadn't been told, I wouldn't have noticed that in the final, quickly-shown set, the ash tree was sprouting leaves. New life had begun. It all seemed, dare I say, to end more with a whimper than a bang, almost as if the cast were weary and couldn't wait to get home.

On the other hand, this may be Wagner's fault. Speight Jenkins had intimated to us in his final lecture that Wagner had not tightened up or reworked this last opera.

Speight Jenkins' lectures each opera morning were brilliant and illuminating, with a deep analysis of Wotan's complex character and motives. Jenkins was charming and articulate. He talked about conductors who took the score slowly and said that the speed did not matter as long as the tension was there. (Did our conductor have tension?)

The surtitles were brief and conversational and carried us along. For the first time I was enthralled by the Norns and not longing for their scene to end. The same was true of Wotan's discourse with Erda. They were like an old married couple. After all, she had borne him a daughter.

I am no musical expert and cannot presume to pass judgement on the singers and their singing. Siegfried (Stig Andersen), although he had put on weight since we saw him in Helsinki, still managed to portray the bumbling, though fearless, naïve youth, and didn't even notice the dragon when it was breathing down his neck. (Look behind you, Siegfried!)

Wotan (Greer Grimsley) received rave notices from our group; and Brünnhilde (Janice Baird) received them off and on (I think more on than off.) Hunding (Andrea Silvestrelli) had a rich and powerful voice and was more fearsome than Hagen, and Margaret Jane Wray was a believable and moving Sieglinde.

The whole cycle was a tremendous, exciting and stimulating experience, and you felt you were living inside the myth. There were uplifting moments of pure magic.

Thank you, Bryan, for arranging this.

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On our free days we had two group tours: one was a city tour to Pike Place Market, where the guide paid \$3 to a man to throw a fish over my husband's head. We visited The New Olympic Sculpture Park and read the delicious gobbledygook that people wrote about their sculptures..... "The voids seem filled and the solids seem empty." "I'm not interested in the texture of the work but in its shadow.".... "I fell in love with black. Black is the most aristocratic colour of all."

Then we dined in the restaurant up in the Space needle.

On another day we visited an unspectacular waterfall, a winery and a brewery, with a terrible driver-cum-guide who thought he was a wit. He told us that Washington State was famous for its salmon. Everyone loved salmon and they had a song about them: "Salmon enchanted evening..". With that joke we felt we had reached rock bottom.

On other days we went our separate ways, visiting the glass museum at Tacoma, going to the Klondike Gold Rush Museum, riding the lift to the top of the Columbia Centre Skyview, visiting the Boeing factory, using the free buses and travelling for free in the transit tunnel, taking ferry trips, and visiting Mount Rainier National Park with a young and delightful driver who was also a geologist. He brought us back to Seattle through an Indian reservation belonging to a tribe with the improbable name of the Muckleshoots (they had a casino and sold fireworks.)

It was an amazing ten days.

Gillian Rogers