



The Bayreuth Ring 2013

On August 23 we were seated eagerly waiting for the curtain to rise on our first Bayreuth Ring Cycle. Ten days later we left feeling a range of very mixed emotions: anger, disappointment, shock, sadness, disgust and bemusement.

For those members considering a trip to Bayreuth to see Frank Castorf's Ring Cycle I would urge you to read the reviews by international critics.

It would seem that without exception this year's stage production of the Bayreuth Ring left audiences enraged. Critics accused Castorf of deliberately sabotaging and vandalising one of the world's greatest artistic masterpieces by undercutting the most dramatic moments and overlaying irrelevant and distracting stage effects.

One such critic, Martin Kettle, points out that Castorf "revelled in the booing as if it was a badge of honour. He stood on the stage for 10 minutes, mocking his detractors with a thumbs up, ironic applause and dismissive waves".

Diane Francis in "Graffiti on Germany's Elite and its Mona Lisa" rightly points out that "Castorf manages to subsume every important and dramatic musical highlight... He also alters plots and actions by the characters".

into Frank Castorf's background. His style is to be unorthodox, offensive and confronting. Focusing on effect rather than story. Creating the unexpected. Google search: 'Ring' director Castorf (1): 'Artistic Terrorism' in Bayreuth.

It is interesting that the Wagner sisters knowingly commissioned him and therefore condoned his staging. I just wonder what their answers would be to the following questions:

- What are their expectations of a Bayreuth audience?
- What is the relative importance of the music, singing, acting, stage sets and costumes?
- Should a production company have a responsibility to the audience?
- When does a production cross the line—what/where is that line?
- To what extent should the stage director and conductor be Wagner's advocate?
- Should a production adhere to the traditional interpretation of the original score, libretto, stage sets, costumes, etc.?
- To what extent should contemporary themes be used—guns, violence, sex, politics?

On reflection I feel somewhat more enlightened by my experience, in that I need to accept, or at least recognise, that modern opera productions can and perhaps should be based on more radical interpretations and be more entertaining for a 'younger' generation.

So, to go or not to go. That is the question.

—Colin Pyman

In 2012 we attended a performance of Wagner's Ring in Budapest. We loved the performances and, as a bonus, discovered a fascinating city and a wonderful conductor of Wagner's music, Ádám Fischer, who initiated the annual 'Wagner in Budapest' opera festivals.

We returned to Budapest this year for the 7th Festival. There were concert performances of *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger Von Nürnberg* on three consecutive evenings.

All performances were excellent and *Parsifal* was fabulous. Each opera was enhanced with clever use of stage and venue, outstanding lighting effects, modest but meaningful stage sets and costumes, and spirited singing and acting. Linda Watson, for example, was a positively hateful Ortrude and Klaus von Voght a charming and romantic Walther von Stolzing. They, of course, sang perfectly, as did most of the others. The productions are probably best described as being midway between concert versions and complete productions.

The highlight for us was the music, especially the conductor and his engagement with musicians and singers. At several times, particularly during *Parsifal*, it seemed that the whole orchestra and conductor recognised that something special was happening. Smiles and gestures between Fischer and orchestra echoed audience awareness at these almost magic moments. We remember Simone Young telling our Richard Wagner Society during a presentation that this kind of experience happened at times, albeit infrequently.

In the excellent program notes, which were provided at no cost, Fischer admitted to a particular awareness of the singers: "It is not that I keep a close eye on them but it is my opinion that their attributes must be utilised to the greatest possible extent for the sake of the production. He says that he specifically chooses singers, most of whom already know the piece and that, "The singer's acting abilities determine what kind of character can be tailored to the part."

Fischer's program notes include a multitude of interesting ideas about Wagner, his operas and the productions.