

Bayreuther Festspiele 2016

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It is impossible to begin this account of my time at Bayreuth without first thanking the Wagner Society of Scotland. Your generosity has afforded me an opportunity, which would not otherwise have been available to me. Singers, instrumentalists and opera lovers alike speak of Bayreuth Festspiele as an experience like no other and to have been handed such a gift by the society leaves me feeling truly honoured.

The moment you step foot in Bayreuth, you can feel the electricity of the Festspiele around the town. I found Bayreuth itself truly beautiful and one could clearly see why Wagner chose to house his operas in such a picturesque setting (despite, as I learned during the tour of the Festspielhaus, that Wagner himself did not originally want the site!). The theatre is like nothing I've experienced before; the acoustic really must be seen (or heard, in this case) to be believed, allowing the singers to be heard with ease even over some of Wagner's heavier orchestrations. Despite having no real architectural background, Wagner had the insight to use mostly wood in the construction of the Festspielhaus and chose to shun the traditional layout of the time, having no grand boxes or balconies and instead, having the seating laid out in a single, steeply tiered U-shape, much like an amphitheatre. Integral to this layout is the placement of the orchestra who sit in a hollow under the stage, entirely obscured from view. For me personally, the soft dynamic this acoustic allowed the singers to access whilst still riding over the orchestra was a joy to hear. This soft singing is so often not associated with Wagner, but is, in my opinion, an integral part of his vocal line. Regardless of my seating in the theatre, I had a clear view of the stage and missed nothing vocally, which is a true testament to Wagner's vision.

Surrounded by luscious gardens, each evening saw glamorously dressed operagoers gathering and an infectious excitement building as we sipped our pre-show drinks on the patio in the glorious sunshine. Audience members were then called to take their seats by the brass section of the orchestra, appearing on a balcony above us, playing a short excerpt from the evenings opera. I had to pinch myself all three evenings - I challenge anyone to suggest a better way for individuals to be invited to take their seats!

The first of the productions was a modernised staging of 'Der Fliegende Holländer', conducted by Axel Kober and directed by Jan Philipp Gloger. As this was the first Wagner composition I was ever exposed to, I hold a particular soft spot for the opera and I wasn't disappointed with the dramatic flair behind the large scaffold lighting structure that opened the evening. As an overall, the production itself was not quite to my taste with a modernised Dutchman portraying a world overtaken by consumerism and featuring very little of the gritty, mystical and nautical elements of the libretto which I have previously enjoyed. It was, however, quite a spectacle

with a large paper depiction of a fan at one point of the opera being set on fire centre stage.

This updated depiction saw the female chorus as workers in a fan factory, Senta amongst them. Whilst the theme behind the direction may not have been my preference, there is no denying the thought, passion and time that goes into creating the costumes and concepts. The Bayreuth chorus were outstanding, in particular in Parsifal (which I will discuss shortly), but their collective talent was also evident in this production with a dynamic control and wonderfully focused sound. Whilst the stamina of the singers cannot be denied and is more than impressive, the emotional intent with the main pairing of Thomas J Mayer (The Dutchman) and Ricard Merbeth (Senta) did not quite merit the same appreciation. I was, however, delighted with the performances by Andreas Schager (Erik), Christa Mayer (Mary) and Benjamin Bruns (Steersman) all of whom sang with a bel canto technique and yet a bite that carried easily over the orchestra, all with a strong dramatic intention.

The following night saw audiences delighted by a truly mesmerising production of Parsifal. Knowing very little about the opera beforehand, I entered the evening with little notion of the spectacle that would confront me and, from what I gather, it was unlike any previously seen. No detail was considered too insignificant and each set was outdone only by the one which followed it. In particular, the depictions of an eden-like scene in act 2 and even more so, the finale of act 1 is beyond anything I have experienced in the theatre before with a screen being lowered in front of the stage and a projection transporting the audience on a journey through the planets and stars of the universe; all set to some of Wagner's most breath-taking music. I'm not afraid to say I shed a tear, as did the majority of those around me. I also felt the decision to depict the story within a modern-day Iraq a brave, yet poignant choice; giving the production another facet to its already, very moving portrayal. It really was an experience of a lifetime and one couldn't help, but feel privileged to experience it in its envisaged home of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Indeed, those who I met in the interval after had very little to say other than how they were entirely blown away.

The singing in this production was outstanding, as were the orchestra who played with a profound sensitivity; a credit to conductor Hartmut Haenchen who I gather stepped in at a rather late stage in preparation. The standout performances for me came from Georg Zeppenfeld as Gurnemanz and Elena Pankratova as Kundry. Both singers were sublime in their vocal production, diction and dramatic depiction and I felt inspired by their performances. Whilst I felt Klaus Florian Vogt fit the part of Parsifal physically and in temperament, his singing lacks a depth for me which I felt the production would have benefited from. A highlight was the flower maidens scene featuring the female chorus, which had me entirely captured and enchanted. The beauty of this production will stay with me and continue to be an inspiration.

My final evening in Bayreuth saw me aptly attending the finale of Wagner's Ring Cycle, *Götterdämmerung*. This was, again, a first for me, although the music was more familiar having listened to a number of recordings including the recent concert by Opera North. Director Frank Castorf's vision appeared just as intricate as Wagner's own composition with many connotations towards the human condition and the greed of man. Dark at times (the opera began with the three Norns covering themselves and their surroundings in blood, as one of the more outwardly physical examples) I found Castorf's design fascinating with so many subtexts that I doubt I will ever fully grasp his concept. The conductor, Marek Janowski and orchestra surpassed my expectations (which were high to begin with!). One truly felt they were in the presence of some of the greatest players in the world.

Once again, the cast of singers were a force to be reckoned with and whilst I enjoyed the male casts performances, the mezzo-soprano Marina Prudenskaya in the role of Waltruate exhibited some of the best singing I have ever had the pleasure to experience live.

I arrived at Bayreuth believing I understood my own love of Wagner, but I left the experience with such a greater appreciation and affection. In addition, to attend three consecutive nights at a house which can hold just short of 2000 opera lovers (only a few short of the capacity of the Royal Opera House) and for each of those nights to be full to capacity was sincerely food for the soul for a young singer. The enthusiasm of those whom I had the pleasure to speak with was so inspiring and uplifting and to discuss this passion of mine with likeminded individuals of a similar age was a rare joy. I left having made some invaluable connections who I remain in touch with and for that, I can't thank the society enough. As I strive to forge a career in this ever-tricky industry, this opportunity will remain a notable point in my resolve to continue crafting my instrument, but beyond this, to work towards my greatest potential as an artist.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.