LA SCALA

La Scala Magazine

SPECIAL EDITION
DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN

EDITORIAL

For every theatre, every festival, and every artistic or cultural institution, a new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is not only a moment of extraordinary productive commitment, but also an opportunity for self-reflection—on the meaning and purpose of one's work, on the relationship with the public, and on one's place among other institutions. This is all much truer in 2026, when the 150th anniversary of the first complete performance in Bayreuth is prompting many major theatres to stage new productions, and above all, at a time of profound geopolitical and cultural uncertainty that makes engagement with a pinnacle of the Western Canon both more necessary and more daunting. It is no surprise that the two cycles of performances presented in consecutive weeks in March 2026, conducted by Alexander Soddy and Simone Young, sold out its early whole cycle tickets within days of going on sale. Seeing *The Ring* in its entirety—a life experience as much as a musical experience—becomes an intellectual and emotional journey to the roots of theatre and to the roots of ourselves. Sir David McVicar's production, rich with references to theatrical traditions from across the centuries, draws the dramaturgical and musical diversity of the separate days into a unified arc in which myth reflects our history, our passions, and our enduring need to confront death.

This is a new chapter in a performance tradition that spans more than a century of La Scala's history. The first *Die Walküre* at La Scala was staged on December 26, 1893. At La Scala—where the music publisher Giulio Ricordi had entrusted a very young Giacomo Puccini with preparing the score of the *Meistersinger*—different interpretations have long converged, shaped by generations of Italian, French, and German conductors. For example, some of those figures include Panizza, Toscanini, Furtwängler, Cluytens, Muti, and Barenboim. The same range and quality can be found in the theatre's staging history, the production by Luca Ronconi and Pier Luigi Pizzi, which would reach full realisation at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, being a turning point.
This special issue retraces the main chapters of this history from the voices of those who have been its leading protagonists over the years. First and foremost is Riccardo Muti, who gave musical identity and unity to La Scala's *Ring* cycle of the 1990s—which however could not achieve the same unity on stage. The orchestral musicians then recount the experience of the complete cycle conducted by Daniel Barenboim in 2013, and Alexander Soddy and Simone Young outline the principles and characters of the new double performance of the four works scheduled for March 2026.

Three other interviews offer distinct perspectives on the stage direction: Pier Luigi Pizzi evokes the exhilaration of the adventure he shared with Ronconi, which was emblematic of a more forward-looking Scala; Guy Cassiers describes his meticulously conceived production, which combines historical–political analysis with a rigorous correspondence between musical and visual gesture; and David McVicar presents a powerful act of synthesis, which brings together the psychological, political, cultural, and environmental themes of *The Ring* in a renewed encounter with myth.

Finally, we hear from those on stage themselves, two formidable performers: Waltraud Meier and Michael Volle share their Wagnerian journeys at La Scala.

Linking these living voices is a series of historical and critical studies. Angelo Foletto examines the conductorial trajectory, Laura Cosso the directorial one, and Maurizio Giani the vocal dimension. Marco Targa, on the other hand, leads us into the uncertain realm of incomplete projects, works that, in some cases, still left their mark, such as the paintings dedicated to *The Ring* by Mariano Fortuny, which La Scala has chosen to restore for the 150th anniversary.

Siegfried's Grotto, Carlo Songa, 1896
Teatro alla Scala Museum

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Mattia Palma
IN COLLABORATION WITH: Paolo Besana, Lucilla Castellari, Valentina Grassani, Davide Massimiliano, Raffaele Mellace, Piera Mungiguerra, Luciana Ruggeri, Carla Vigevani, Andrea Vitalini
TRANSLATIONS: Alexa Ahern

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COVER: Karl Emil Doepler,
The Ride of the Valkyries, painted glass
for the magic lantern in Act III of *Die Walküre*
at Bayreuth Festspiele 1876
Bildarchiv Bayreuther Festspiele

Portrait of Richard Wagner
Teatro alla Scala Museum

WAGNER AT LA SCALA, IN MILAN, AND ACROSS ITALY

by Elisabetta Fava

Wagnerian theatre made its debut in Italy with *Lohengrin* in Bologna, after it was initially met with hostility in Milan, but it was La Scala that became the centre of its success on the Italian opera scene.

The story of Wagnerian theatre in Italy began with the performance of *Lohengrin* in Bologna, conducted by Angelo Mariani, on November 1, 1871, a date chosen to compete with the European premiere of *Aida*, for which Verdi had chosen Milan over Bologna, and Franco Faccio over Mariani. The plan to stage *Lohengrin* in Bologna had been in the works for much longer—at least since 1869—when well-informed correspondents in Leipzig had already announced that negotiations were underway with the enterprising Giovannina Lucca, a music publisher who had acquired the rights to Wagner's scores in Italy and was looking for a suitable stage for the launch to compete with Milan, a stronghold of the Ricordi publishers.

In any case, the Bolognese premiere of *Lohengrin* was a truly national affair, and it was interpreted by many as an assault on Italian and Verdian traditions (Verdi himself went to hear a subsequent performance, but remained very guarded and, in private, did not hide his irritation). There was praise, criticism, caricatures, cartoons—in short, it was talked about across the country and reports poured in. Meanwhile, Wagner was awarded honorary citizenship of Bologna.

Emboldened by the success, Mariani continued the following year with a performance of *Tannhäuser* (Teatro Comunale on November 7, 1872), some excerpts of which had already been heard in previous concerts. The premiere was a fiasco, largely due to a group of hecklers, but Mariani made a few cuts, worked on the execution, and gradually won over the audience with subsequent performances.

This was not the case with a *Lohengrin* production conducted by Franco Faccio in Milan in 1873. Here, the damage was irreparable, fuelled by the rivalry between the publishers Lucca and Ricordi; by the "poorly concealed hostility of part of the orchestra," as Turin critic Giuseppe Depanis wrote, with all the regret of a momentarily defeated Wagnerian; by the discontent over an unhappy season; and by animosity towards Bologna and other less music-related reasons.

There were certainly voices of critics won over by the music and the performance, but a few reviews were not enough to repair the damage done by the *claques*—audience members paid to react a certain way. And

Wagner's consecration at La Scala coincided with Toscanini's presence at the theatre. It was he who conducted the successful revival of *Die Meistersinger* in 1898.

so it was that Wagner was not heard again in Milan until September 7, 1884, when another attempt was made, taking a more distant approach with *Rienzi*, which in reality satisfied neither the Verdians nor the Wagnerians.
The fact that nothing more had been done in Milan at that point, however, was also the fault of Giovannina Lucca. In 1883, Angelo Neumann, who had already directed the entire *Ring* cycle several times in Leipzig, Berlin, London, and Stuttgart, set out on an Italian tour with a travelling company of 150 members. His aim was to introduce the Nibelung cycle to cities across the country.
Wagner had been supervising Neumann's venture directly; and in April 1883, the first leg of the performances began in Venice—only two months after Wagner had died there. It then continued to Bologna, Rome, and Turin. From there, the tour (before stopping at the Politeama in Trieste, now on its way back) was supposed to move on to the Dal Verme theatre in Milan, but Giovannina Lucca did not grant performance rights, so instead of *The Ring*, *Fidelio* was performed.
It should be noted, however, that Wagner had been heard several times in concert in Milan: first at the Società del Quartetto, where, as early as 1880, in collaboration with the Conservatory, an all-Wagner evening was organised, conducted by Luigi Mancinelli; and shortly after Wagner's death, another similar evening was held in the spring of 1883 at the Teatro Carcano, again thanks to the Quartetto.
Wagner's name reappeared at La Scala only in two concerts in 1885, including the Prelude to *Lohengrin.* When the programme for the new season was released in 1887 without any mention of Wagnerian titles, a critic from *Mondo artistico*, a leading Milanese periodical, deemed it "unheard of".
But the ostracism was coming to an end. The reality was that the public was ready for Wagner and had been for a while. The real problems lay in the disputes between publishers. When Giovannina Lucca sold the publishing house, along with all the rights to Wagner's works, to Giulio Ricordi, he quickly scheduled a *Lohengrin* at La Scala for March 8, 1888; Franco Faccio conducted again, and this time it was met with success.
Once again, however, Bologna posed a challenge to Milan. In 1877, it had hosted another Italian premiere of Wagner's work with *Der fliegende Holländer* (or *Vascello fantasma*, as it was then called), and on June 2, 1888, it staged *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by Giuseppe Martucci.
But La Scala would soon have its comeback. Having acquired the Wagnerian scores and, thus, the rights to the performances, Ricordi wasted no time in putting together a title that had never been heard or seen on Italian stages before: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, for which he commissioned the young Puccini to prepare the Italian edition, with all the necessary cuts and a little restyling of the arias. Once again, orchestration was entrusted to the expert hand of Franco Faccio, who had gone to Bayreuth specifically to ensure the Milanese production would be in line with Wagner's instructions.
For Milan, this marked the beginning of a genuine change of heart in terms of repertoire and mentality. But it was not enough for La Scala to include the title in its programme, even in the favoured and prestigious position of opening production (the Carnival-Lent season opened immediately after Christmas in those days). In *La Perseveranza*, critic Giovanni Battista Nappi published a series of articles introducing Wagnerian theatre, the subject matter, and even its genesis, to the public.
Efforts to "prepare" the audience were repeated for all subsequent titles, inaugurating, among other things, an approach that belied the idea of mystical listening or similar vagueness. Discussions also began about translations. Ricordi used Angelo Zanardini's version, which Depanis considered "unfortunate", unpoetic, and not always sensible. In any case, the path had been opened and the experiment continued in 1891, again as an opening performance, with *Tannhäuser*; while the 1893 opening saw the Italian premiere of *Die Walküre*, which was followed by *Götterdämmerung* (December 26, 1896, one year after the Italian premiere in Turin), *Siegfried* (December 26, 1899), and *Das Rheingold* (again an opening production in December 1903).
La Scala was also the first Italian theatre that dared to present the entire *Ring* cycle in 1926, in two consecutive performances between January and February, an event so eagerly awaited that even public transport timetables were changed for the occasion.
Wagner's consecration at La Scala (including the first Milanese performance of *Tristan*, which inaugurated the 1900-1901 season) coincided with Toscanini's presence at the theatre. It was he who conducted the successful revival of *Die Meistersinger* in 1898 and then, subsequently, *Siegfried*, *Tristan,* and *Valkyrie* (while *Das Rheingold* in 1903 was entrusted to Cleofonte Campanini).
The decision to stage the entire *Ring* cycle in 1926 reflected a growing familiarity with the individual operas in the cycle, which had now been performed several times. Among the protagonists of the first performances were Giuseppe Borgatti, who had already played Tristan in the premiere with Toscanini and then repeatedly played Siegfried (not to mention, he was also the first Parsifal at La Scala in 1914). Ettore Panizza, instead, dominated the podium (1926-1927-1928; 1931), until Siegfried Wagner took over as musical director and stage director in 1930.
Until then, *The Ring* had always been staged in Italy using Zanardini's translation. Between March 29 and April 3, 1938, La Scala hosted the Munich Opera on tour, which performed *The Ring* in German for the first time, conducted by Clemens Krauss, with Max Lorenz as Siegfried. The following year, the same production (Oskar Wellek) was revived, this time with La Scala's ensembles conducted by Gino Marinuzzi.
To see another complete Tetralogy, audiences would have to wait until after the war, in 1950, with Furtwängler conducting, Josef Herrmann as Wotan, and Kirsten Flagstad as Brünnhilde (the previous year, Victor de Sabata had conducted only *Die Walküre*). From this moment onwards, all editions were in German.
More recently, Cluytens conducted a *Ring* production directed by Heinz Tietjen in 1963, marking the 150th anniversary of Wagner's birth. In the 1970s, as the centennial of the first performance approached, there was a desire to present the whole cycle, directed by Luca Ronconi and conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, which would then conclude by repeating the cycle in quick succession. And so, in 1973, *Das Rheingold* was staged, followed by *Die Walküre* in 1974, and *Siegfried* in 1975, but in 1976, the centennial year, the project came to a standstill.
Riccardo Muti would resume the project 20 years later, between 1994 and 1998, but only staging *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* with director André Engel. *Das Rheingold* was presented in a concert edition (which was highly praised), and *Götterdämmerung* would have a new director, Yannis Kokkos.
The 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth, on the other hand, was celebrated with a unified production. It began in 2010 with *Das Rheingold*, and in June 2013, the entire *Ring* cycle was performed twice, with Daniel Barenboim conducting and Guy Cassiers directing. They used videos with fantastical, faded images to show scenes that had long been considered impossible to stage, from the fiery cliff and the final pyre to the passage to Valhalla, the dances of the water nymphs in the Rhine, the forest, and the underworld of the Nibelung kingdom.

CONDUCTORS

Arturo Toscanini, reopening concert of a rebuilt La Scala, May 11, 1946

ON THE PODIUM OF THE RING

by Angelo Foletto

From Panizza and Barenboim to Toscanini, Furtwängler, Cluytens, and Muti, Wagner's Tetralogy has been a testing ground for La Scala and its conductors.

"All of Milan was talking about the Tetralogy," wrote Héctor/Ettore Panizza in his memoirs. The Argentine-born conductor, who later became a full-fledged Milanese, conducted the first edition of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at La Scala in February 1926, in its entirety and in the traditional order.

"An experience that a theatre conductor must have," said Riccardo Muti on the eve of *Die Walküre*, which opened the 1994-1995 season as a prelude of the upcoming Tetralogy project.

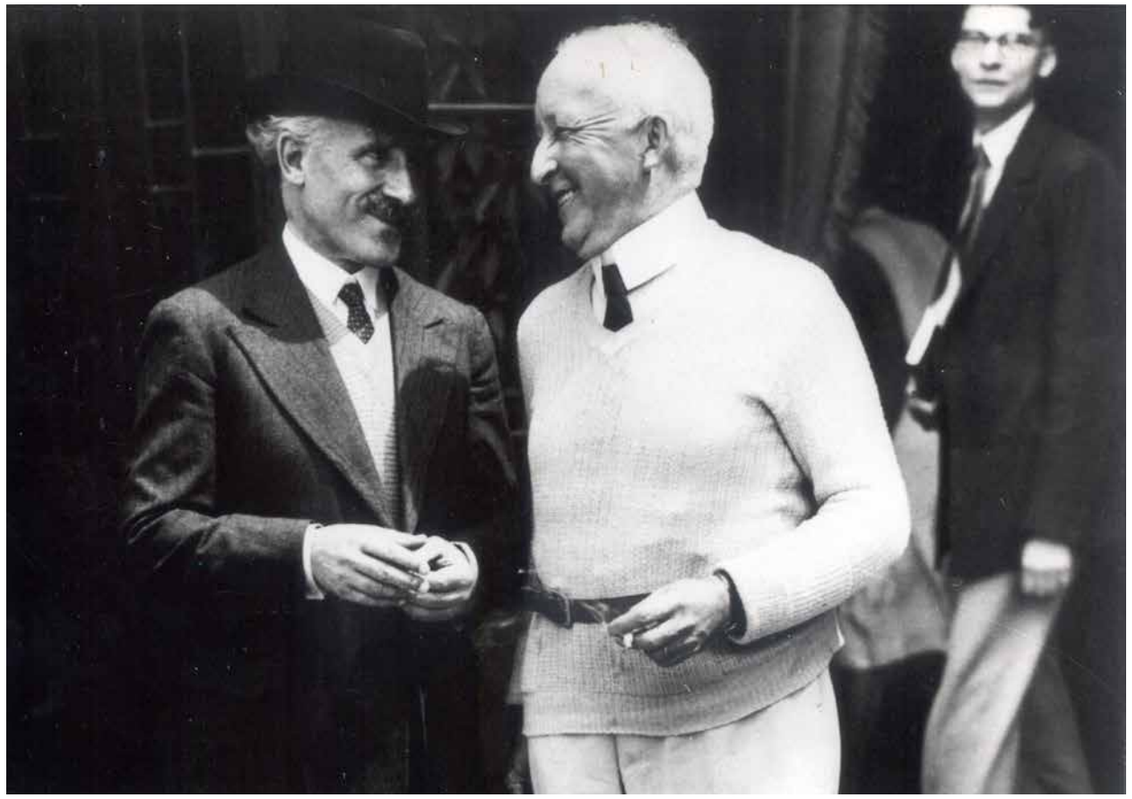
"*The Ring* is an absolutely essential work for a theatre; only by performing it does a theatre come of age," declared Daniel Barenboim on the eve of the last Tetralogy performed according to tradition; in other words, a single conductor on the podium, a single director on stage, performed consecutively but with calibrated intervals. "Because in reality, *The Ring* is a single opera in four parts and should be presented at the Bayreuth pace: *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in succession, then *Siegfried* after a day's rest, and *Götterdämmerung* after another day." This was in the summer of 2013, about 90 years after the premiere in Milan and on the 130th anniversary of Wagner's death.

The full performance of the cycle that will take place in the coming months will instead boast the title of La Scala's centenary performance of the Tetralogy, as well as the 150th anniversary of the world premiere in Bayreuth. Panizza recounts the 1926 production in detail in *Medio siglo de vida musical: ensayo autobiográfico*: "Three weeks were devoted to the complete performance of this colossal work, and it was so successful that the theatre was always sold out. The audience consisted of very distinguished people and a large number of foreigners from all over Europe [...]. I will not mention the outcome; it would be ridiculous," the maestro points out, "I will only repeat that for four seasons this show, which I directed—there were three performances per season—was part of the theatre's regular repertoire."

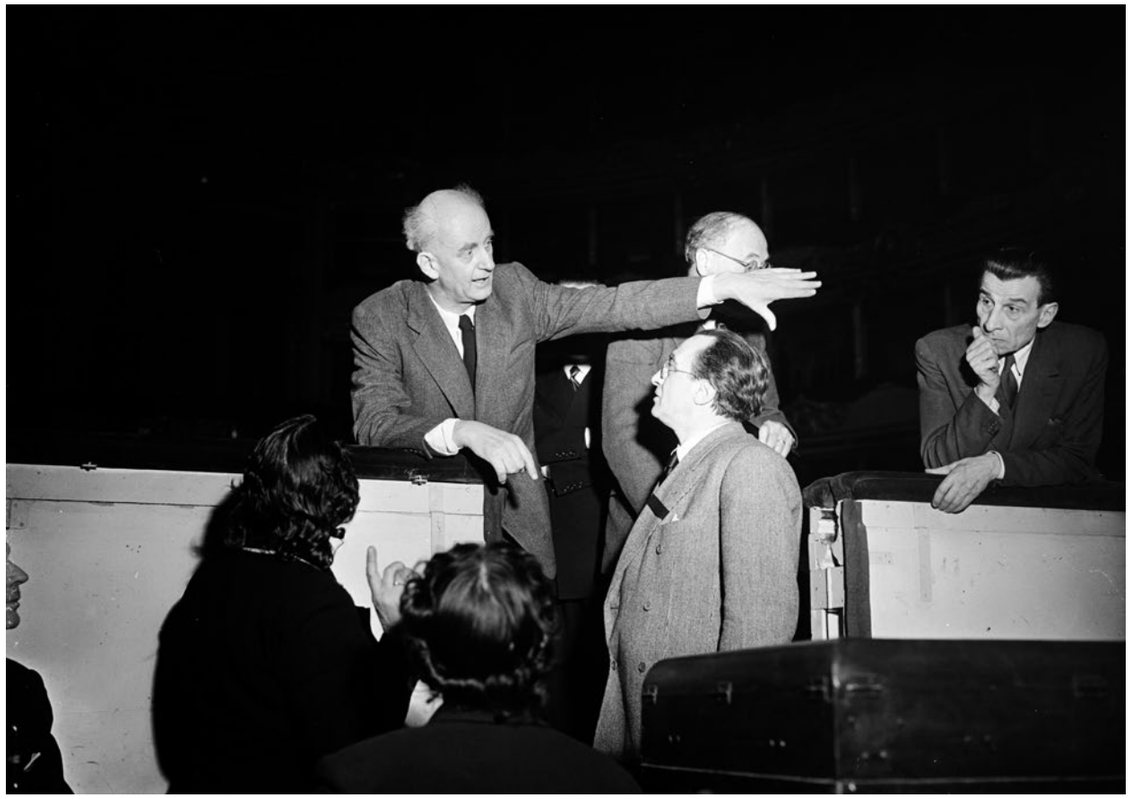
According to Panizza, who returned to the Tetralogy in 1931 with a partly revamped production compared to the one conducted by Siegfried Wagner a year earlier, with the same Italian vocal line-up, after a slight slowdown due to the war and the aftermath of the Verdi celebrations in 1913, the "*Wagnerdämmerung*" ("Wagner twilight") prophesied by Giorgio Vigolo never came to pass.

On the contrary, the Wagnerian wave returned to captivate the continent with audiences of "large numbers of foreigners from all over Europe," wrote Panizza. And so, the maestro's devotees sought out programmes that dared to feature all four operas together.

Ettore Panizza



Arturo Toscanini and Siegfried Wagner



Wilhelm Furtwängler and Franco Capuana
during rehearsals of *Das Rheingold,* 1950

In Italy, sophisticated but affordable publishing initiatives contributed to the spread of Wagnerism, such as the 1923 publication of a new edition of the text of the four *Ring* days in the Biblioteca Sansoniana Straniera series in a refined pocket format, having been "revised, with a parallel version, introduction, and commentary by Guido Manacorda." They were added to Guglielmo Bassi's historic version of the librettos (1903) published by Ricordi, with their sumptuous covers and book-like format, accompanied by the glorious "Thematic Guides". In reality, the appeal of the Tetralogy, which was even the subject of publications for children, such as *Il romanzo di Sigfrido* narrated by Diego Valeri and evocatively illustrated by Enrico Mario Pinochi, was more widespread and popular than its actual performance. Between 1926 and 1943, only 11 complete cycles were performed in Italy: seven at La Scala, three in Rome, and one in Turin.
But the history of *The Ring* at La Scala has a dual beginning. First, there is that of the individual titles. Arturo Toscanini opened the inaugural evening on December 26, 1899, with *Siegfried*. The protagonist was played by Giuseppe Borgatti from Ferrara, the Italian Wagnerian tenor of the moment. This was also the Italian premiere. It was a continuation of Toscanini's dialogue with Wagner's works, which he had practised extensively in previous years. He would go on to reserve the entire programme of his last concert in Milan (September 19, 1952) as well as his final, dramatic farewell with the NBC Symphony Orchestra (April 4, 1954) at Carnegie Hall in New York for the entire opera. He conducted the Italian premiere of *Götterdämmerung* (not quite in its entirety) in Turin on December 22, 1895. These performances should have been followed by the complete Tetralogy, but in the meantime, the maestro accepted the position at La Scala, where he conducted *Götterdämmerung* in 1907, which had already been conducted in Milan by Vittorio M. Vanzo in 1896. On December 26, 1901, another opening night, and in the year of Verdi's death—just to illustrate how free Toscanini's choices were—he conducted *Die Walküre*. However, in 1893, Edoardo Mascheroni had already presented the first day's opera at La Scala.

The history of complete cycles, as mentioned above, officially began in 1926-27, under the musical direction of Panizza, who was considered part of the dynamic duo, along with Antonino Votto, of assistant-deputies to Toscanini. In previous seasons, the Argentine composer and conductor had tested his Wagnerian faith and convinced Toscanini to entrust him with the undertaking, conducting *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung* and *Das Rheingold* in succession. This was in January 1926 and the project had had a prelude two years earlier with *Die Walküre*.
The Milanese premiere of the Tetralogy was not planned to take place at La Scala. In fact, it was supposed to be at the Teatro Dal Verme in April 1883, just a few weeks after the composer's death. Angelo Neumann, a businessman with a keen commercial eye, had organised a legendary European tour of the Bayreuth production, conducted by Anton Seidl. However, with contracts signed and posters printed, the company's Milanese leg, which would later be welcomed also in Venice, Bologna, Rome, Turin, and Trieste, was banned at the last minute by Giovannina Lucca, the owner of a publishing house, rival to Ricordi, which held the rights to perform Wagner's works in Italy. It was a major city scandal, with tedious legal repercussions and colourful news stories.
The train carrying the sets, costumes, and Nibelung props did not arrive at Central Station and was instead diverted to a dead-end track and remained there under seizure for several days. Count Francesco Dal Verme, the theatre's owner, eventually had to settle for a concert dedicated to Wagner and a performance of *Fidelio*. Although it took over 40 more years for the Tetralogy to arrive at La Scala, the unique charm of the cycle was kept alive by the conductors' preference for two days that were not sporadic in the programmes: *Siegfried* and *Die Walküre*. These were the two central titles, the ones with the most protagonists. After the Second World War, the primacy of *Die Walküre* was unquestionable: it was programmed individually several times at La Scala (*Siegfried* was never performed on its own), starting with the edition conducted by Victor de Sabata in 1949, a new production, although it had already been performed in

1934. There were high-quality performances and posters, and the conductors included Herbert von Karajan, Wolfgang Sawallisch, and Georges Prêtre. Absolute reference readings were also useful for understanding the interpretative projection that these protagonists would have impressed upon their versions of *The Ring*.

Previously, and until the Second World War, the most frequently programmed and individually loved title had been *Siegfried*. This was probably due to the "exotic" and romantically epic narrative of that day and a couple of generations of Italian tenors famous for their Wagner singing, called "*wagnerital*". This term was coined by Eugenio Gara to define the characteristics of Wagnerian idiomatic voices and later came to sum up the Italian performance style, which, with the language of the scores—Angelo Zanardini's "translation and rhythmic version"—was the norm in all non-German-speaking theatres around the world until after the war.

The 1926 production of La Scala's *Ring* cycle received extensive coverage in the general press and non-Milanese newspapers of the time. They emphasised the enthusiasm of the audience, the musical (and production) commitment, and the success achieved by all the artists. More pragmatically, Panizza recalls in his memoirs the difficulties in putting together the orchestra ("16 first violins, 16 second violins, 12 violas, 10 cellos and the same number of double basses; a corresponding number of woodwinds and brass instruments, six harps and tubas brought in from Germany") and the ingenious solution adopted to improve the acoustic relationship between the voices and the orchestra pit: "The orchestra was placed at a lower level than the stalls and sides, where the brass instruments were located, and a sort of cover was raised. *Das Rheingold* and the first act of *Die Walküre*, given the relatively light instrumentation, were performed with the orchestra placed 50 centimetres below the level of the stalls; from the second act of *Die Walküre* to the finale of *Götterdämmerung*, it was lowered by about 1 metre."

In fact, every complete Nibelung cycle, apart from the imported ones that allowed it to be heard in the original language and in the same week—the first time in 1938 with Clemens Krauss and the Munich State Opera ensembles—involved great efforts on the part of the theatre. It was also an opportunity to host non-Italian "Wagnerian conductors", despite the existence of a national school of considerable preparation and personality, which made the pilgrimage of direct knowledge and learning to Bayreuth several times. Toscanini led the way. For the record, and for this generation, the *real* sound of the Tetralogy at La Scala, that is, one that doesn't rely solely on the memories of others, dates to 1950, March-April to be exact. It was the first Tetralogy in the world staged by a theatre after the end of the war. And it exists thanks to a wire, not a radio broadcast. It was the wire on which the performances conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler were recorded in the theatre for the first time in La Scala's orchestra pit, using magnetic remnants from the war. In the audience was the young Claudio Abbado, who was blown away by it.

What those present heard at the time, thanks to a dazzling cast singing in German, was not only a performance that still inspires enthusiasm—undoubtedly the best Furtwänglerian performance of *The Ring* recorded on disc—but a unique artistic opportunity. For the first time in Milan, all of Wagner's music was on the music stands. "I still remember how the thick scores were brought to our hotel, and he entrusted me with the task of cutting the pages that were stuck together in piles," testified his wife, Elisabeth. "Untouched pages appeared, none of which had ever been played at La Scala." Today's listeners have been able to catch an echo of Furtwängler's lesson in the oracular and dense passage that Barenboim restored to *The Ring* a decade ago. Similarly, the echo, if not the imprint, of the ancient Wagnerian style, certainly influenced by the lessons of his teacher Votto, also informed Muti's interpretation.

One notable musical performance was the edition conducted by André Cluytens, a conductor who devoted much of his life to Wagner and was a frequent guest at Bayreuth. In 1955, he was the first French conductor to be invited to the festival. He was the third "foreigner" after Toscanini and De Sabata in the 1930s. Visionary and very physically "gestural", like De Sabata in some ways, Cluytens revealed in 1963 at La Scala a Wagner who was free in his phrasing, organised "colouristically" as well as "symphonically", narratively extroverted and impetuous—Dionysian rather than prophetic.

Ten years later, the edition that Wolfgang Sawallisch was supposed to conduct (considered the most Wagnerian conductor at La Scala in the post-war period, having conducted all the other works by the composer) came about, but it was then cut off after *Rheingold* with its "old" staging (a memorable performance nonetheless) and two days of staging that were deemed unsuitable for his vision. It had no epic excesses, no mythology or poetic nationalism underpinned by symphonic monumentality or semi-oratorical seriousness, as Ronconi/Pizzi did on stage, pointing the way that Patrice Chéreau would later follow, according to a perspective that Herbert von Karajan would choose as the musical measure and method of his revolutionary *Ring* performances. As early as 1958, in reviewing *Die Walküre* with his conducting (and directing), Massimo Mila had explained this by observing an interest in "muffling its muscular energy in favour of a refinement of traits and psychological introspection". With Sawallisch's abdication, the opportunity was lost to see how the directorial vision of the Tetralogy had evolved: transfigured, "humanised", and brought into the interpretative modernity that the third millennium is further developing, performance after performance.

PHOTOS BY ERIO PICCAGLIANI (3)

ABOVE
Herbert von Karajan, 1962

ABOVE
Birgit Nilsson, André Cluytens,
Siegfried, 1963

ABOVE
Georges Prêtre, *Die Walküre*, 1968

PHOTOS BY Lelli e Masotti(2)

ABOVE
Riccardo Muti, Gabriele Schnaut,
Waltraud Meier, Plácido Domingo,
Die Walküre, 1994

ABOVE
Violeta Urmana, Riccardo Muti,
Mette Ejsing, *Das Rheingold*, 1996

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano(2)

ABOVE
Daniel Barenboim, *Die Walküre*, 2010

ABOVE
Simone Young, *Das Rheingold*, 2024

THE ITALIAN LIGHT OF MUTI

Interview with Riccardo Muti by Nicola Cattò

From his debut with *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) in 1986 to *Götterdämmerung* at La Scala, Riccardo Muti looks back on his experience with Wagner, a composer without whom it would be impossible to perform Bruckner or many other composers who descended from him.

Riccardo Muti's Wagnerian journey began with a concert performance of *Der fliegende Holländer* in Philadelphia in October 1986 and culminated (for now, at least) a dozen years later with *Götterdämmerung*, which opened the 1998/1999 season at La Scala: in between, there was another *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Piermarini (March 1988), *Parsifal* on December 7, 1991, and then *The Ring* project. The first opera was not, as per tradition, *Das Rheingold*—which he performed only in concert form in May 1996—but *Die Walküre*, for Sant'Ambrogio 1994. *Siegfried* arrived in April 1997 and the aforementioned *Götterdämmerung*, with a change of director, the following year. With Maestro Muti, we take a look back at his Wagnerian experience and the way he approached this musical masterpiece.

NC It all began in 1986 in the United States...

RM Yes, but it could have gone differently: Wolfgang Wagner had already asked me in 1972 to conduct *Der fliegende Holländer* in Bayreuth, after coming to hear me in Florence. But I had never been there, I had never conducted Wagner, and I didn't feel ready. Then in 1983 there was a second approach, this time offering me *Tannhäuser*. I went to Bayreuth to experience the acoustics of the theatre, but I confess that I felt a sort of claustrophobia in the environment, despite the wonderful sound coming from the orchestra pit (Barenboim was conducting *Tristan* with Waltraud Meier, who would later be the heroine of my Wagner productions at La Scala), so I said no once again. Looking back today, it still amazes me—why did Wolfgang Wagner ask a 31-year-old with almost no experience of the German repertoire to go to Bayreuth? Probably intuition, like Karajan when he invited me to conduct *Così fan tutte* in Salzburg in 1982...

NC Let's go back to *Der fliegende Holländer* in Philadelphia. What do you remember?

RM I was conductor of that wonderful orchestra, and I thought it was perfect for my Wagner debut. It's not true that *Der fliegende Holländer* is similar to Italian opera, as some claim. Its dense symphonic texture, the river of sound that the voices navigate (the opposite of early 19th-century Italian opera), led me, when

FOTOGRAFIA DI LELLI E MASOTTI

Riccardo Muti, *Die Walküre*, 1994

“I was conductor of that wonderful Philadelphia orchestra, and I thought it was perfect for my Wagner debut.”

staging the same opera at La Scala, to consider tackling Wagner’s most problematic piece, *Parsifal*. I say this both from a musical point of view (I am thinking of the beginning of the third act) and from a theoretical-philosophical point of view, with its content which had infuriated Nietzsche. But for that opera, I was fortunate to have Plácido Domingo, with whom I had been working since 1973 (*Aida* in Vienna), whose Mediterranean warmth influenced both my interpretative discourse and our human relationship. After all, Wagner loved Italian singing and Bellini in particular, whom he called “*il soave siciliano*” (the charming Sicilian). Plácido’s Parsifal was perhaps not orthodox for strict Wagnerians, but for us it was a source of comfort. And with him was Waltraud Meier, with whom I developed a strong musical understanding, and who explained to me right from the start that German can be a musical language too. When it is not, it’s because of the laziness of singers who give in to overly mechanical articulation. And it’s true: just listen to Schwarzkopf or Ludwig in Mahler!

NC *The Ring* had not been performed at La Scala since the 1970s, when Sawallisch and Ronconi failed to complete it. Did you feel compelled, as conductor to revive it?

RM Exactly. I naturally loved the Italian repertoire and felt a strong need to bring back works that had been missing for too long (*La traviata*, for example). So yes, there was an artistic obligation for a theatre like La Scala to stage a production of *The Ring*, and I felt compelled to take on the task. Without Wagner, you cannot perform Bruckner and many other composers who descended from him. So, I began the meticulous task, starting with a word-for-word translation of the librettos, because I wanted to have control over the meaning of each one, at all times, even within the dense symphonic fabric: a sound/word relationship different from Verdi’s (where it is more “vertical”), characterised by a certain freedom within the flow of sound.

NC What sound did you have in mind for Wagner? How did you achieve it?

RM I learned a great deal both from my visit to Bayreuth and from my relationship with the three orchestras I conducted most often at the time: Philadelphia, the Berliner, and the Wiener (with whom I will celebrate 55 years of uninterrupted collaboration in 2025). Performing Brahms and Bruckner with them gave me experience with a density of sound that I then wanted to bring to the La Scala Orchestra. It was a long process; we did a lot of rehearsals. Watching the video of *Die Walküre*, for example, you can hear both an Italian “lightness” (although I wouldn’t dwell too much on this) and the depth of sound in the lower register of the strings, which is unusual for orchestras in our country. In *Siegfried*, there is a very long passage for the violins that is extremely exposed; we began every morning of rehearsal for two weeks with that, as a sort of musical “gymnastics”.

NC There were problems with the directors: André Engel did *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, Yannis Kokkos did *Götterdämmerung*.

RM After *Parsifal*, for which Cesare Lievi created a wonderful production, I thought I would start *The Ring* with the opera that was most to my liking, which was *Die Walküre*, for which I hired a cast of the highest calibre and André Engel as director. I really liked his work, but it was heavily criticised, and even today I don’t understand why. That field of poppies was both poetic and effective. Perhaps frightened by the controversy, Engel proposed a very different, more adventurous and abstract stage design for *Das Rheingold*, which I did not accept. Since there was no time to change directors, we opted for a concert format, but with the orchestra in the pit and minimal stage movement, as well as highly effective lighting. It was a huge success. After all, Wieland Wagner’s great Bayreuth productions were based on lighting. Then we moved on to *Siegfried*, which I was confident about. It was a complex and interesting show, but one that was rejected by the critics. I then realised that a change was needed for the last opera of *The Ring*: I called Yannis Kokkos, who directed a traditional and highly poetic production, with an unforgettable moment in the Funeral March scene, with the large white horse moving slowly across the stage. For the conductor, too, that is the most moving moment of the Tetralogy. And at the dress rehearsal, I had a special guest...

NC Who?

RM My great friend Carlos Kleiber, who had already come for the dress rehearsal of *Parsifal* and returned for *Götterdämmerung*, two operas he had never conducted and which he did not think would suit the Italian Muti! And at dinner he asked me, “Riccardo, don’t you think that’s the funeral march for a fascist leader?” Being accustomed to the funeral marches of southern Italy, I was a little taken aback and didn’t know how to respond... But in reality, I was convinced that *Parsifal* was the perfect opera for him. I told him this, and he replied, with his delightful irony, that he didn’t have “long enough arms”!

NC Your Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* was played by Jane Eaglen, who also sang *Norma* with you, a pairing that was often theorised but rarely put into practice.

RM Eaglen was a typical Wagnerian singer, with a bright ring in the upper register, but I heard a softness in her voice that was not always present in German singers performing this repertoire. I thought then that she could be a good Norma because of the fluidity of her sound. Was she the ideal Norma? Perhaps not, but was there one in those years? I didn’t find one, at least not after Renata Scotto.

NC You mentioned Bruckner earlier, whose *Seventh Symphony* you performed at La Scala last February with the Vienna Philharmonic. What is Wagnerian about the Austrian composer?

RM It is well known that Brückner was an admirer of Wagner, even borrowing the use of Wagnerian tubas from him, but when I conduct Brückner, I always remind the orchestra members that he was Austrian, not German. The instrumentation and complexity of the writing may be reminiscent of Wagner, but the sound comes from a musician who grew up in a rural environment, imbued with a pan-Germanic sense of nature. This should not be overlooked, and a certain Teutonic heaviness in performing Bruckner does not do justice to his lyricism, to his depiction of creation in music. You can understand this by going to Sankt Florian and listening to his organ, with those crescendos that have a solemn grandeur rather than a warlike one. Unfortunately, the reception of Bruckner, like that of Wagner and Beethoven, was contaminated by its use by the Nazis. But Bruckner starts with Schubert, first and foremost, the other soul of 19th-century Austria. And, as Toscanini said, the secret is always to “sing”.

NC Toscanini was, among other things, a great Wagnerian interpreter; his counterpart traditionally being identified as Furtwängler. Who do you refer to most for this repertoire?

RM I know little about Toscanini’s Wagner, but I am well aware of his interpretation of the *Tannhäuser* overture, which is the opposite of Furtwängler’s. Both are magnificent, but they are the products of two worlds and two distant cultures. In my approach to Wagner, therefore, I have not chosen Toscanini as my model, due to my limited familiarity with his work; De Sabata’s *Tristan,* on the other hand, has been my ideal reference point. That’s not to mention Guarnieri’s Wagner, whom Karajan himself, during a dinner in Berlin, pointed out to me as an unmistakable master of orchestral sound.

NC Maestro, after 1998, you no longer performed Wagner in the theatre, and even in concert you only occasionally conducted his most famous symphonic works. Why is that?

RM I recently conducted the overture to *Tannhäuser* in Chicago, as well as that of *Der fliegende Holländer*, not to mention the *Kaisermarsch*, which I proposed for the reopening of La Fenice in 2003. But in general, I see Wagner as purely an opera composer who needs the stage, unlike Verdi, whose symphonies can stand on their own. In short, projects such as the symphonic *Ring* are not for me!

BARENBOIM'S LESSON

by Luca Ciammarughi

Retracing the memories of some of La Scala's orchestra members, we remember *The Ring* conducted by Barenboim in 2013, a musical experience in which time no longer followed a clock but was that of music.

Staged at La Scala between 2010 and 2013, Wagner's *The Ring* conducted by Daniel Barenboim and directed by Guy Cassiers (who took over for Klaus-Michael Grüber after he died in 2008) left a deep impression not only on the audience but also on the La Scala orchestra musicians who took part in the production.

The exceptional nature of this production was due to special circumstances: in the second half of June 2013, La Scala staged a double performance of the Tetralogy over the course of two weeks, as per the Bayreuth tradition. This was special because La Scala had not staged *The Ring* in a single week since 1938, when Clemens Krauss conducted it with the Munich State Opera ensembles (Wilhelm Furtwängler, on the other hand, had conducted it over a month in 1950).

Clarinettist Stefano Cardo, who joined the La Scala Theatre Orchestra in 2007, vividly recalls his experience of *The Ring* with Barenboim, preceded in 2007 by *Tristan und Isolde*.

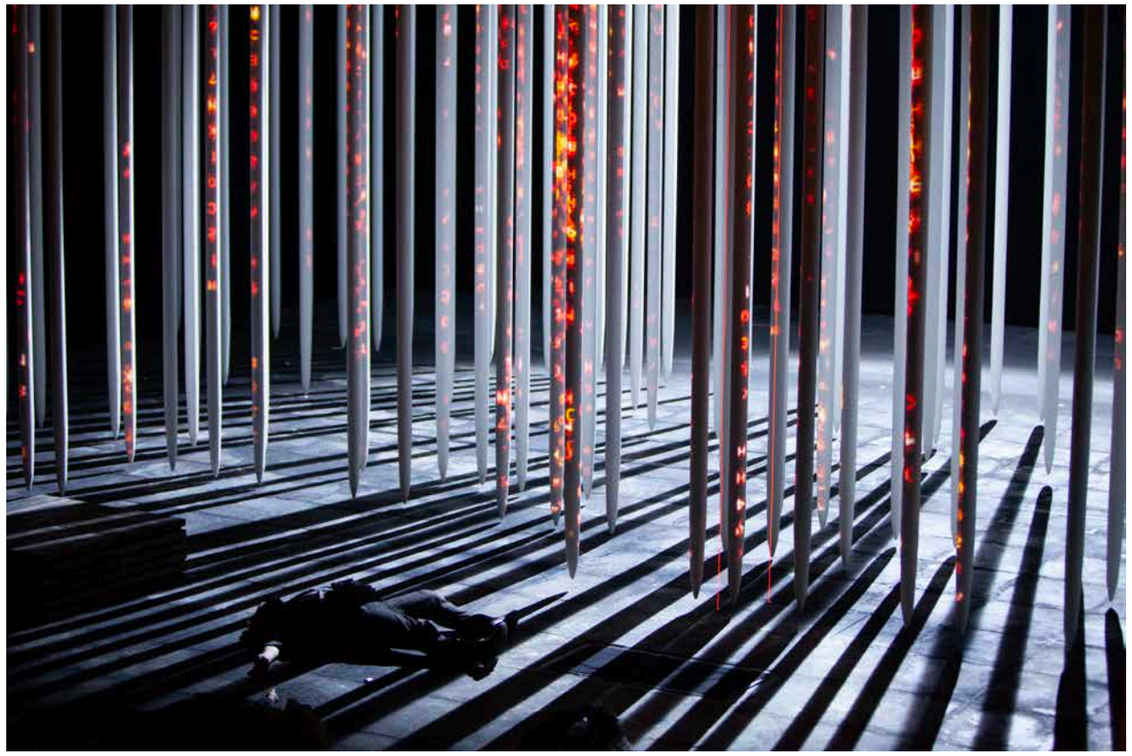
"Being conducted by Barenboim was like going to class every day. It wasn't just about working. Rarely have I seen such an ability to notice even the slightest imperfection in intonation. Building *The Ring* with him meant tackling technical issues with a musician of extraordinary skill, even before delving into questions of phrasing and Wagnerian philosophy."

La Scala violinist Agnese Ferraro speaks of "very intense rehearsals, but functional in their complexity in overcoming technical and ensemble difficulties, as well as entering into Wagner's character and spirit. As a violinist, I appreciated his expertise in my field (as in every other section!). His technical approach to suggesting fingerings and bowings that were consistent and functional to the agogics and timbre he wanted to achieve for certain atmospheres, whether dark or transcendent, was very instructive.

Cardo further emphasises that, from a dynamic point of view, Barenboim sought to take risks, i.e. to go to extremes. "If it doesn't come, it doesn't come." Better an idea realised imperfectly but carried through with conviction than a missed opportunity. Consistent with

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano(2)

Daniel Barenboim, *Die Walküre*, 2013



ABOVE
Simon O'Neill,
Die Walküre, 2010

this, he left the singers as free as possible to express themselves and take risks, without imposing maniacal control at the expense of more passionate expression—his close relationship with Waltraud Meier is historic for this reason.

Although, due to Barenboim's reluctance, *Götterdämmerung* was conducted by Karl-Heinz Steffens during the two Wagner weeks, Cardo still recalls "the profound emotion of being able to perform the entire *Ring* in such a short space of time, thus truly coming to understand it as a single piece of work. Barenboim cared deeply about this unity and constantly emphasised the links between the four dramas."

In terms of his relationship with the individual musicians, "Barenboim would call us to attention when he noticed that a form of routine was setting in, or when, as can happen due to fatigue, someone was playing passively. For him, especially with an intense composer like Wagner, it was better to make mistakes with conviction and participation than to just play the right notes without real involvement."

The dark, almost gloomy, abyssal colour of Barenboim/Cassiers' *The Ring* corresponds to what Cardo said about the importance of "conceiving passion first and foremost as pain, in a very German way, different from that of the Latins. Barenboim asked us for a Wagner who was not very sentimental, but rather pervaded by a metaphysical pain and that twilight mood that is written in the title of the last day opera."

From a strictly musical point of view, Barenboim's performance of *The Ring* at La Scala was special for his incredible attention to rhythm. Cardo recounts how the conductor insisted on playing the "Wagnerian eighth" (or other time value following a dotted note) *breiter* (broader), the opposite of the "French-style dotted note." The point was to hold back the tempo, rather than thinking of the fast note as leading to the next one, a way of conceiving rhythm organically rather than metronomically, which has its roots in Furtwängler's teaching.

This broad vision also corresponded to particular sound research: the dynamic extremes had to be there, but the fortissimo should never be "crushed".

As Agnese Ferraro also points out, a recurring phrase during rehearsals, almost a mantra, was: "Rhythm is an individual responsibility." This statement is part of the idea that every single orchestra member actively participates in the final result. Even a composer with often titanic sounds such as Wagner can therefore be approached from a chamber music perspective.

"Despite the monumentality of the compositions and the size of the orchestra, what Barenboim never ceased to emphasise," continues Ferraro, "was the importance of listening to those who had the leading voice or the predominant rhythmic structure. As is the case among civilised and educated people, even within an ensemble of more than a hundred musicians, it is essential to respect the timbre and rhythm of those who are "speaking" at that moment, with the same attention that one would give to chamber music, with the desire to play together in a balanced way without overpowering each other."

Finally, there is the ideological aspect. Cardo emphasises that Barenboim said, "I have always played Wagner." When conducting, Barenboim is serving Wagner the composer, putting extra-musical ideological issues (such as the long-standing question of Wagner's anti-Semitism) in the background (when making music, of course).

As Ferraro says, it is rather the ethical aspect that is at the heart of everything.

"Barenboim has always wanted to show us that we have a personal civic responsibility to be bearers of peace and harmony, because 'culture is not only aesthetic but also ethical'. Fundamental in this sense is his social commitment through the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together musicians from historically enemy countries and cultures."

Daniele Morandini, principal trombone at La Scala since September 2012, recalls, "My first year at La Scala was in fact the Verdi/Wagner anniversary. I came from the Israel Philharmonic, where Wagner was never performed. I was a blank slate and for my first Wagner, I received the influence of the man I consider to be the greatest contemporary Wagnerian. His work on sound was unique, as was his ability to make us part of a human journey. What I remember clearly is that the musical dramas seemed to last 15 minutes with him, instead of five or six hours. Time no longer followed a clock but was that of music."

ONE RING, TWO BATONS

Interview with Simone Young and Alexander Soddy by Oreste Bossini

For the first time ever, two conductors will share the podium equally in a new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at La Scala. In this interview, Simone Young and Alexander Soddy discuss this unique challenge, which has been made possible by their shared Wagnerian heritage and musical vision.

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano

PHOTOS BY Christian Kleiner

While it is normal for a conductor to hand over the baton to a colleague for some performances of the same show, it is not typical for two conductors to share a new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* equally. This is what is happening at La Scala with Simone Young and Alexander Soddy, following Christian Thielemann's withdrawal from conducting the cycle. In fact, it is unprecedented.
While it is common for a production of *The Ring* to be revived in subsequent years with a new conductor, either in Bayreuth or at other major theatres, it is highly unusual for two artists to be involved from the outset in constructing the show and making the complex interpretative choices required for Wagner's epic tale. This is likely only possible thanks to the alignment of musical planets. The most important aspect is that both Simone Young and Alexander Soddy come from a Wagnerian tradition dating back to Daniel Barenboim. Barenboim was the last to conduct *The Ring* at La Scala, in a production by Guy Cassiers, between 2011 and 2013.

OB This is such an unusual project. Was it the result of a choice or a necessity?

SY Initially, it was a necessity because Thielemann announced on short notice that he would not be able to conduct *The Ring*. Neither Soddy nor I had the time to take on such a commitment alone as our schedules did not allow it. So, the idea of tackling the project together was born—a rather unique and special one—which was ultimately possible because we both started from the same place.
Soddy has long been a highly accomplished independent conductor with his own musical style, but he first entered the world of *The Ring* with me 20 years ago when I was music director of the Hamburg Opera. Alexander was my first piano accompanist, just as I was Barenboim's piano assistant 30 years ago in Bayreuth. In other words, our shared vision of *The Ring* originates from the Bayreuth tradition, going back to Wilhelm Furtwängler and Daniel's important mentor, Barenboim. Having worked with figures such as Barenboim at the piano—and Soddy later with

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano(3)

Klaus Florian Vogt, Elza van den Heever,
Die Walküre, 2025

Kirill Petrenko, also in Bayreuth—probably enabled us to bring this special project to life. Otherwise, I don't think it would be possible to share the podium with another conductor. Last autumn, fitting the rehearsals and performances of *Das Rheingold* like a puzzle into our schedules was almost a miracle, as it was for *Die Walküre*. It was possible not only because we start from the same musical starting point, but also because we had previously worked with the same singers for this *Ring* as we did in Vienna, Munich, Paris, and Berlin. In other words, we have formed a kind of family, speaking the same language and sharing the same musical ideas.

AS Yes, I don't think it's ever been done before, it's quite a unique situation, but ultimately, I think it's very interesting, perhaps revealing new aspects of our work. The idea of *The Ring* is so vast that it's as if four different works coexist within the cycle, highlighting very different aspects.

SY I had a similar experience in Berlin with Barenboim, but only for *Götterdämmerung*. I conducted the orchestra rehearsals, then Daniel arrived for the final ensemble, after which he conducted the first cycle of *The Ring,* and I conducted the revival. But that was possible because I entered his world, his way of interpreting Wagner, a sort of three-dimensional vision of his music. I think this is because both of us, like Soddy, come from the piano.
For a pianist who becomes a conductor, there is always the idea of the vertical weight of sound developing horizontally over time. Weight does not mean force or aggression, but rather depth, attraction towards the centre of gravity. This is the idea of sound we seek in Wagner. I always tell the orchestra to think of Schubert, to seek a sustained sound, deep but not too loud. Soddy and I have the same musical goals and, as Alexander said, perhaps this is the beginning of a new way of working, because I believe it is very stimulating for the orchestra and the singers to engage with two musical personalities who are related but not identical.

AS I agree. That's exactly what I think too. The production of a cycle as impressive as *The Ring* thrives on the flexibility and immediacy with which the story unfolds. The foundations are the same, but the immediate and spontaneous way of making decisions as

"Soddy and I have the same musical goals and perhaps this is the beginning of a new way of working."

you go along offers a new dimension to the world represented in the theatre. The idea of sound that I learned from Simone at the beginning of my career remains with me, but we have both conducted Wagner since the beginning and have internalised the text and dramatic progression of *The Ring*, so there is nothing dogmatic, no rigid canon of systems on how to conduct the repertoire. The extraordinary aspect of music lies in a profound knowledge of those aspects that allow one to be spontaneous. And I believe this also applies to singers, who are so skilled and musical that they can only enjoy the benefits and have fun while being subjected to different stimuli at the same time, which can become powerful creative elements.

SY For an artist, it is important to forget about technical problems during the performance; work on the finer details has already been done during rehearsals. When it comes to the show, the live performance, you need to feel like you are creating something new, something spontaneous, as if it were being born in that moment. Of course, there are also artists who repeat the same things, the same clichés, every night, but I find the formula we are experimenting with here very stimulating. After all, it is a new approach to musical theatre, and it works.

AS I also think that this kind of approach is particularly interesting in this music. I remember conducting most of *The Ring* during the rehearsals in Bayreuth when I was Kirill Petrenko's assistant, and he could listen to me, just as Simone did with Barenboim before me. Mutual friends told me that it was an extremely useful exercise, because the sound produced when working with orchestras of this calibre, such as Bayreuth or La Scala, is so mutable depending on who the conductor is, how they conduct, and how they move. I find this very interesting, because regardless of how you hear this music and the fact that the general approach is similar, the orchestra is an extremely flexible organism and reacts viscerally in the moment. So, I repeat, I really believe that it is a great advantage to be exposed to such different stimuli.

OB This is an interesting topic, for other reasons too. You have both conducted at the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, which has unique characteristics in terms of sound. Simone Young was also the first woman to be invited to conduct a cycle of *The Ring* in Bayreuth. The orchestra is arranged in layers that descend deeper and deeper into the so-called mystical gulf, until it is more than two floors below the level of the podium. The impression is that a conductor must have a very different attitude towards the orchestra depending on the venue. In Bayreuth, the conductor's main task seems to be to guide the sound that arises from those depths, and it would probably be counterproductive to stimulate the orchestra too much. In a theatre such as La Scala, on the other hand, the conductor may need to push the orchestra to achieve a certain type of sound.

SY That's right, it's one of the things I learned last summer when conducting *The Ring* in Bayreuth. There is no other orchestra pit in the world that can reproduce the initial sound of *Das Rheingold* like the Festspielhaus, that's an indisputable fact. But when Wagner wrote *Das Rheingold*, the theatre didn't exist, it hadn't been built yet. That sound was first and foremost in Wagner's mind, and I think my job is to seek out the sound that the composer had in mind in every theatre where I conduct.
I have conducted *The Ring* in Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, and Munich, all of which have extremely different acoustics, but the central idea remains the same. It is a symphonic sound that comes from German Romanticism, starting with Beethoven and Schubert and continuing with Bruckner. We don't just play Wagner; I have personally conducted over 100 operas, including at least 18 by Verdi, with a repertoire ranging from Mozart to the present day. Each opera has its own particular characteristics and specific problems, and the experience gained in a certain type of repertoire helps to interpret everything else. *Aida* in Vienna, for example, helps me conduct *Die Walküre* in Milan.
The fascinating thing about this job is that every day, in every rehearsal, in every performance, you learn something, especially with *The Ring*. From one director to another, the staging of the show changes, and

“I believe it is very stimulating for the orchestra and the singers to engage with two musical personalities who are related but not identical.”

as a result, every phrase sung by the singer takes on a different meaning and must be approached differently. The singer’s words begin with a particular sound, whether it’s an “m”, a “de” or a “sch”, and we have to find that kind of sound in the pit too, because the orchestra is not only part of the music but also part of the text. Working with David McVicar is fantastic, because his idea for the show stems from a thorough knowledge of Wagner’s text, as is the case with all the artists in the cast, who have a perfect command and awareness of the words they sing. This is why the theatre experience is so incomparable, because of the continuous and endless search for and discovery of new nuances and new possibilities.

AS Returning to the initial question about the relationship between sound and space, this was one of the first things we discussed with Simone many years ago. I can say, remembering when I had the opportunity to conduct in Bayreuth, that you can never learn enough about Wagner’s sound as you can by conducting for an hour in the Festspielhaus, and it is incredible what we learned working with that wonderful orchestra and with great artists such as those in Bayreuth. But I must also add that every great orchestra, whether in Paris, London, or Vienna, has something special to offer. Of course, it is the responsibility of a conductor to achieve a certain ideal sound, formed through study and experience, but I believe it is equally important to know how to listen to what is new and different that the musicians you work with can give you. Today, the standard of musicians is very high everywhere, and each of us has had experiences all over the world. I am English, Simone is Australian, we trained in Germany, and we work in Italy and France. Here, for example, the orchestra has exceptional flexibility, a unique ability to listen to each other and follow the stage. The extraordinary thing about this kind of artistic *koiné* is that there is something to learn everywhere, given that we conduct so much and so many different repertoires. As long as you are willing to listen, which is the most important thing, there is nothing dogmatic about it.

SY It is important to emphasise this aspect, because we do not expect to do the same things in every theatre. Every high-level orchestra already has its own particular sound; everything else is added by the experience and teaching of the conductor. I would also like to highlight another thing that unites us in our work. The fact that we both have a sense of humour. We laugh a lot during rehearsals, and in my opinion, this is particularly important with Wagner because the ideas are so profound, so tragic—themes of power versus love, ideology versus humanity—that it is immediately clear how relevant *The Ring* still is, indeed how timeless it is, since it speaks of feelings experienced by people in every era. Perhaps it is simply the tragedy of humanity, but it certainly remains at the heart of this music. It is theatre music, it is music that breathes, it is beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

AS Equally important is that our training is rooted in the great tradition of the *Kapellmeister*, or a conductor accustomed to conducting the entire repertoire. Of course, each of us feels closer to certain composers, to certain scores, but we do not want to become specialists. We must grow with the entire repertoire, from Mozart to Strauss, Verdi to Puccini, because each title influences the rest of the work. This is very important since we know from experience how many clichés circulate around certain composers. Perhaps those who do not know Wagner intimately are inclined to think that he is all heavy, long, slow, dense or profound, when in fact he had a side that belonged to Schubert. Sometimes he shows himself to be light, dramatic, flexible, romantic, luminous, and beautiful like Puccini. In reality, they are closer than one might think. I believe this is an important message to convey to the public, because shutting oneself up in specialism means becoming a cliché oneself and losing authenticity.

SY When talking about La Scala and its orchestra, we must remember that this is a theatre with a long tradition, where the greatest maestros have worked. It is a privilege to conduct an opera here. My first opera at La Scala was Britten’s *Peter Grimes*, which perhaps

Michael Volle, Okka von der Damerau,
Die Walküre, 2025

does not have a language that is inherent to the Italian tradition. But the intelligence and theatricality of these fantastic musicians allowed me to guide the sound in a direction that was perhaps new to them. The same thing happens with Wagner, and what I find truly surprising is to hear how the orchestra changes when the singers arrive. The true nature of this orchestra is opera, and I realised this on the day of the first Italian rehearsal, with singers and orchestra together, both in *Grimes* and *Das Rheingold*. That’s when I said to myself, “This is it.” Because this is an orchestra that lives and breathes with the singers, and that’s really something special.

OB Simone Young, I would like to avoid discussing the role of women as conductors. Nowadays, there are more and more women conducting orchestras, and they do it magnificently, just like you. I wonder, however, whether an epic work such as *The Ring* might be interpreted differently by a woman than by a man. An opera such as *Die Walküre*, for example, highlights a series of themes, from the *amour fou* of the first act to the experience of motherhood and the relationship between father and daughter, which perhaps a female conductor interprets differently from a male conductor.

SY I have been asked this question before, but it is impossible for me to answer, simply because I have never been a man! I cannot say whether I feel these things differently because I am a woman. I think it is important for an artist to have both strength and sensitivity, and it seems to me that we often tend to make a simplistic equation between masculine equals strength and feminine equals sensitivity. I do not believe this to be true. An artist must have enough imagination to identify with every character, to immerse themselves in every context. As a conductor, I have to be Wotan and Brünnhilde, Siegmund and Sieglinde, all the Valkyries and even Hunding in that moment. When I conduct, I can become any character. We are artists. Who is a conductor after all? A musician whose instrument is the orchestra.

AS Every great work of art contains something universal. Of course, our personal experiences play a part

Michael Volle, Camilla Nylund,
Die Walküre, 2025

in defining the themes that are close to our hearts. For example, I am the father of two girls, so now I find the finale of *Die Walküre* much more moving, and I cry more than I used to, since I have a point of comparison. But there is no Shakespeare play, work of art or theatre piece that does not transcend gender divisions, between male and female or whatever direction sexuality takes, because in the end, in truth, the human theme is far more essential. What is truly fascinating and powerful in *The Ring*, and what is evident when rehearsing with McVicar, is that the music speaks of power and corruption, good and evil, truth and lies, hiding or keeping faith with agreements. I realise more and more that this transcends all our divisions between men and women, or of any other kind, and that is why this music is increasingly necessary today.

OB *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is a gigantic work, created over a period of more than 20 years. It is incredible how Wagner managed to keep this endless story together over such a long period of time, while writing two other masterpieces, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Can this continuity be felt in the music?

SY Certainly, but it should be noted that Wagner wrote the libretto first and composed the music backwards. He began by writing *Götterdämmerung*, then decided that he needed to tell the story of Siegfried, then that of Brünnhilde, and finally that of *Das Rheingold*. Consequently, when he began composing the music, starting with *Das Rheingold*, he already knew where he was going to end up. Twenty years ago, Alexander and I worked on Wagner's works in Bayreuth; we spent weeks examining the scores with his corrections. I can still see the score of *Götterdämmerung* before my eyes, and I wonder how it is possible that one person sat down at a table one day and was able to conjure up all this from his imagination. This applies to Wagner, but also to Verdi and Puccini, Botticelli's paintings, Shakespeare's plays. How could a man have had such an incredible imagination as to invent these masterpieces? We have the privilege of following in the footsteps of these giants.

AS I would like to add two interesting points regarding your question. All the leitmotifs that form a tightly woven fabric in *Götterdämmerung* were already heard in their embryonic form in *Das Rheingold*, even though there is such a large time gap between the two operas. Wagner already had a world ready to be composed in his mind. But there is a noticeable break between the first part, up to the second act of Siegfried, and the rest. It is fascinating, especially given the weight and size of the orchestra. The third act of Siegfried suddenly becomes a much larger space, enormous in terms of sound balance and challenges for the orchestra, and we know that in the meantime Wagner wrote *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*. It is certainly fascinating, but when you consider the time it took to write all this, it is surprising.

SY We must also remember that Wagner was a *Kapellmeister*, and this certainly influenced his work. For example, in *Meistersinger*, the debt to Fromental Halévy's, an opera that Wagner admired and had conducted, is obvious.

AS The same could be said for Liszt's *Faust-Symphonie*, where you can hear a theme reminiscent of Siegfried's sword, or for the chord in *Tristan*, which can be found in a piano piece by Liszt.

OB Alexander Soddy, what is the most important thing you learned about Wagner from Simone Young?

AS Having a mentor of such calibre at the beginning of my career was a great stroke of luck. Of course, I learned a lot during years of collaboration and long conversations, but above all, it was important to be close to a musician of her calibre, who encouraged me to always seek authenticity, to strive for ever-better quality, to never give up. You could say that we have incredibly similar talents. We play the piano in the same way, we have an absolutely similar vision of music, so there is a very strong musical bond. I think that when you find a wonderful mentor at the beginning of your career, the most important thing is to be able to stay close to them. It's not so much what you can learn every day, which is also there, but rather finding confirmation of the things you have and realising that it is possible to become what you want to be. Simone never tried to make me a copy of herself, but rather to encourage me to find the best version of who I was. I think that's the greatest lesson you can receive from someone, and Simone has this extraordinary ability to care for others and to do so in the right way. For Wagner, I would say that this meant what we talked about earlier, his exceptional instinct for sound, for literature, for a certain way of playing *legato*. You learn a lot by preparing singers on the piano in bel canto, and we both started out that way, doing a lot of Italian bel canto repertoire. There is a difference with the German *legato* style, which has more to do with sustained sound, with the upbeat. I also learned what the Germans call Handwerk, craftsmanship, knowledge of how these works are constructed, understanding of their symphonic nature and how singers adapt to it, and finally the ability to find a balance between moments when you have to follow the voices and give the artists freedom, and others when control and guidance are necessary.

OB But there must be something you disagree on! Don't you ever have different opinions about anything?

SY Of course, we are not the same person, and we often have different points of view, but the discussion is always friendly and, above all, constructive. Barenboim once told me that the most important thing is not to know how, but why, and that is the truth. For me, what matters most in an artist is curiosity, always searching for the truth that lies in music and theatre. You are always consumed by the anxiety to find something more, even at the cost of not sleeping at night or not taking holidays. That's what makes an artist interesting.

AS Searching is the key word, and you must never stop searching for something new. Even if you have done something dozens of times, you need to go even deeper. Also, to motivate the many people who play for you, they need to see that you are always searching for the next goal.

FOTOGRAFIA DI Erio Piccagliani

Luca Ronconi, Pier Luigi Pizzi, 1974

DIRECTORS

VISIONS OF THE RING

by Laura Cosso

From Adolphe Appia's abstract utopia to Guy Cassiers' reflective modernity: the long theatrical journey of the Tetralogy at La Scala.

It all begins with the revolutionary actions of a great conductor. In 1923, at La Scala, Arturo Toscanini showed unprecedented audacity when he invited Adolphe Appia to stage *Tristan und Isolde*, which he conducted. Of course, the audience and critics were quite taken aback, but Toscanini's foresight would soon become clear. In fact, after the Second World War, it was Appia's theories that inspired Wieland Wagner's new direction for the Bayreuth Festival. In contradiction to the naturalistic approach desired by his illustrious grandfather, he opted for an abstract, symbolic, and timeless staging based on the relationship between light gradations and musical flow (in a word, "alla Appia") in Wagnerian musical mythology. Thus began one of the richest and most varied sequences of events in the history of musical theatre, in which convictions about the necessity of evolving theatrical direction to keep the art form alive were met with calls for a return to Wagner's "sacred" stage directions.

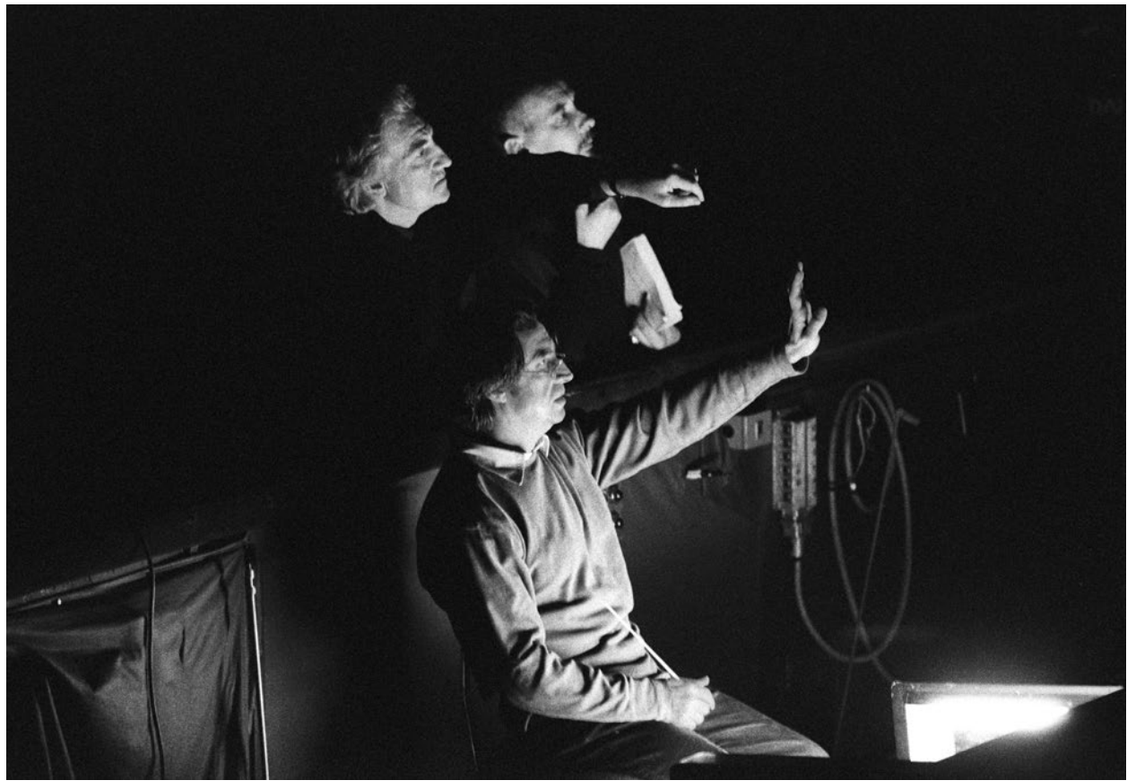
In their own way, both Appia and Wieland were indeed faithful, but to the Wagner in his later writings, he who affirmed the superiority of music over poetic intention. And some form of fidelity must also be recognised in the directors who came after them, who were convinced that behind Wagnerian mythology there was a wealth of social, political, existential, and psychoanalytical themes to be unearthed. Would anyone today dare to deny this?

Within this context, La Scala played a leading role, promoting at least two milestones in Wagnerian staging: Appia's staging of Tristan und Isolde, a forerunner of the very concept of opera direction, and, 50 years later, the project was completed following the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino of *The Ring* entrusted to Luca Ronconi, one of the productions that contributed most to a new vision of directing.

That's not to mention that, among all the theatres in the world and as proof of its strong connection with the Wagnerian universe, La Scala also had the honour of staging the first revival of *The Ring* cycle after World War II, with the famous production directed by Furtwängler in 1950. It was a remarkable achievement, to say the least, so much so that it is only fitting to begin our discussion of La Scala's productions of *The Ring* there.

FOTOGRAFIA DI Erio Piccagliani

ABOVE
Nicola Benois, Otto Erhardt, 1950



PHOTOS BY SILVIA LELLI

It was 1950, and the entire cycle was directed by Otto Erhardt, with sets and costumes by Nicola Benois. Naturally, at the time, all attention was captured by Furtwängler's charisma, by the Dionysian magnetism of his conducting, but something was done from a scenic point of view, experimenting with a curious Italian-German mix that mediated between the needs of an allusive, essential space (which Erhardt, in some ways, inherited from Appia) and the figurative, imaginative rather than flatly realistic approach that characterised Nicola Benois' poetic style. Benois, in turn, was inspired by Emil Preetorius, the set designer who, together with director Heinz Tietjens, had not only established the spectacular model in Nazi-era Bayreuth, but also continued to be a point of reference for Wagnerian productions throughout Europe after the Second World War.

It was thus natural that La Scala decided to revive that same spectacular model when it wanted to restage the Tetralogy in 1963, entrusting its direction to André Cluytens. And it is likely that, although modified, Benois' sets were well suited to the tastes of the director, Heinz Tietjen, who had miraculously escaped the denazification process.

Rocky stratifications, Dolomite peaks, forests, dragons, and gigantic fires engulfing Valhalla: as spectacular and evocative as it was, Nicola Benois' scenery had run its course. This became clear the following year, when Wieland Wagner brought his production of *Tristan*, originally conceived for Bayreuth, to La Scala, baffling audiences with its enigmatic, highly poetic symbolism. A change of direction, therefore, was marked first by a *Die Walküre* production conducted by Georges Prêtre in 1968, for which one of Wieland's two assistants, director Hans-Peter Lehmann, was called in. But the real turning point, as already mentioned, was *The Ring* that began in 1973. Wolfgang Sawallisch was on the podium—Luchino Visconti was forced to withdraw for health reasons, and Luca Ronconi was called in at short notice to replace him. Given the very tight schedule, the staging of *Das Rheingold* was imported from Munich (directed by Günther Rennert), while Ronconi directed *Die Walküre* (1974) and *Siegfried* (1975), which are still remembered today for the fierce criticism and hail of boos that overwhelmed the director and his set designer Pier Luigi Pizzi.

PHOTOS BY LELLI E MASOTTI

ABOVE
André Engel, 1994

LEFT
Yannis Kokkos, Riccardo Muti, 1998

Those were good times, when scandals were battles on the field that often turned into resounding successes because although La Scala was forced to put an end to the project (given Sawallisch's opposition), a few years later, in Florence, Ronconi was able to stage the entire Tetralogy, receiving well-deserved recognition.
The fact is that, in the meantime, the Wagnerian environment in Bayreuth had been shaken by the so-called Centenary Tetralogy (1976) created by Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau, a production that was as controversial as it was memorable. And while it is not known what Chéreau saw or appreciated in Ronconi's productions, there was certainly some affinity between them, the same affinity that would lead to a fundamental change in Wagnerian directing.
What was "new" during that time in the productions of Joachim Herz in Leipzig (1973-1976), Ronconi at La Scala (1974-1975), and Chéreau in Bayreuth (1976)? In essence, it was a matter of turning the page on the timeless symbolism of the Appia-Wieland line—a directorial season that had achieved outstanding results but had by then hardened into a repetitive formula; of bringing an end to the purification (initially necessary, after the compromises with Nazism) by which Wagnerian mythology had been purged of every ideological residue; and of wresting *The Ring* from an abstract dimension in order to ground it in the concreteness of history. For the Tetralogy contains both myth and history: the timeless grandeur of myth, but also 19th-century bourgeois ideology, the aporias of capitalism, as well as the moral minutiae of the age in which Wagner lived.
Each director interpreted the work in their own way. According to those who saw the show, Ronconi embraced the "all too human" nature of the characters, stripping them of any metaphysical aura (some images speak for themselves, like Brünnhilde with her head resting on the table like a little girl who has just been scolded by her father); he staged emotional clashes, bourgeois drama à la Ibsen, and interiors of palaces rendered unrealistic by ostentatious fiction. And yet, precisely because they were set in prosaic contexts, other moments stood out by contrast, taking on an extraordinary, almost unprecedented metaphysical breath (the appearance of Wotan, in profile, in dappled light, on the narrow door leading to Mime's lair), or the myth exuded a deadly character, frozen as it was within fragments of the 19th century (the famous scene of the equestrian statues).
After Sawallisch/Ronconi's great "stump", it took about 20 years for the entire Wagner cycle to return to La Scala. It was then 1996/1998, in the era of Riccardo Muti, and the maestro's Tetralogy was certainly imbued with an interpretative project of absolute coherence, favouring intense, dramatic tones. It was instead André Engel's staging that struggled to find its own style, moving between pantheistic visions (the famous field of poppies in *Die Walküre*, with the interplay between the image of nature and the alienation of mechanical horses), hints of psychoanalysis and hyper-realistic falls. So much so that, after *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, *Das Rheingold* would be performed in concert form and *Götterdämmerung* would be entrusted to director-set designer Yannis Kokkos.
An unquestionable harmony of intent dominates the most recent *Ring* production at La Scala, that of 2010-2013, directed by Daniel Barenboim and Guy Cassiers. Behind this production lies, first and foremost, the experience of the great Wagnerian conductor, the same experience that 20 years earlier had made him the protagonist of one of the editions that made history (*The Ring* he conducted in Bayreuth in 1991 with the visionary, apocalyptic, lucidly pessimistic direction of Harry Kupfer) and thus the path by which he further developed his bitter, inexorable conception of the Tetralogy. Faced with this La Scala production, one gets the impression that Barenboim was trying to replicate that combination of pessimism and visionary thinking born of his encounter with Kupfer, now seeking it in Cassiers' technically sophisticated and deeply profound production, albeit with a touch of intellectualism. Continuous video projections and choreographed movements convey the characters' inner lives, sudden splashes of colour "pierce" the darkness of the stage, the contorted and petrified bodies of Jef Lambeaux's late 19th-century bas-relief, entitled *Les passions humaines*, called upon to appear several times and to close the entire cycle with the evidence of a proclamation, even more than with the subtlety of a symbol.

PHOTOS BY BRESCIA AND AMISANO

ABOVE
David McVicar (right) with his team, *Das Rheingold*, 2024

THE RING THAT BROUGHT SCANDAL

Interview with Pier Luigi Pizzi by Sara Chiappori

Pier Luigi Pizzi recalls the Wagnerian revolution presented at La Scala by him and Luca Ronconi in 1974 with *Die Walküre*—met with a tempest of boos and applause that marked a turning point in the interpretation of *The Ring*.

March 11, 1974. La Scala Theatre. The curtain falls on the premiere of *Die Walküre.* And all hell breaks loose in the theatre, or so it seemed. The boos and insults were mainly directed at Luca Ronconi and Pier Luigi Pizzi, guilty of high treason for having desecrated the Nibelung myth. There were those who applauded enthusiastically too, making the atmosphere even more heated, and the controversy raged on in newspapers over the following days. The truth is that on that evening at La Scala, in the name of Wagner, a piece of musical theatre history was taking place.

This was the prologue to Ronconi and Pizzi's major undertaking of *The Ring* in 1981, only this time not at La Scala but at the Maggio Fiorentino, and instead of Wolfgang Sawallisch on the podium there was Zubin Mehta. Meanwhile, the director and set designer at the centre of the scandal, at the height of their collaboration, remained defiantly faithful to their vision. And they were right to do so—when it comes to *The Ring,* they win.

SC Maestro Pizzi, let's take a look back. How did your collaboration with Luca Ronconi come about?

PLP We met when we were very young, in Rome, in the 1950s. Luca was at the beginning of a promising acting career, even though he later decided to abandon it in favour of directing. I was starting out as a set and costume designer. However, our professional collaboration began much later, in 1969, on my initiative. I had done two shows in Verona, *Turandot* with Luigi Squarzina and *Don Carlo* with Jean Vilar. They had been so successful that I was asked to do the sets and costumes for the following year as well, giving me the opportunity to suggest directors. For *La traviata*, I suggested Mauro Bolognini, and for *Carmen*, Luca Ronconi. The collaboration with Luca proved to be immediately successful and very fruitful, so much so that soon after we received the incredible challenge of staging the television version of *Orlando furioso*, which we worked on for two years.

PHOTOS BY Erio Piccaglani (3)

ABOVE
Pier Luigi Pizzi and Luca Ronconi during rehearsals for *Siegfried*, 1975

Jean Cox, *Siegfried*, conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch,
directed by Luca Ronconi, 1975

SC You shared many adventures with Ronconi, but *The Ring* holds a special place.

PLP Certainly, and its genesis is also special. It all began before our time, as La Scala had launched a plan to stage *The Ring* with Luchino Visconti, who, in the meantime, fell ill. Forced to withdraw, he suggested Ronconi, but for *Das Rheingold*, scheduled for the 1972/1973 season. They were short on time, so they decided to use a rather traditional production from Munich, suggested by Sawallisch. Massimo Bogianckino, artistic director of La Scala, did not agree. He accepted, but on the condition that a new *Ring* cycle would begin the following season with *Die Walküre* and Ronconi.

SC So then Ronconi called you, and you set the stage on fire with *Die Walküre*, transporting the Nibelung myth into Wagner's 19th century, the rise of the bourgeoisie and capitalism. "*The Ring* is one of the cultural systems of the 19th century," Ronconi said in an interview.

PLP Once the assignment was made official, Luca and I locked ourselves away for a long time in my studio in Rome, studying, researching, reasoning. We shared a lack of interest in the myth as is, but we felt it was much more relevant to analyse the era in which Wagner worked, i.e. the 19th century, investigating its economic and political aspects, its public and private contradictions. We looked at the four days of *The Ring* as the story of a family and a society.

SC It was a radically new interpretation, and not everyone understood it at the time.

PLP In the eyes of die-hard traditionalists who mourned the loss of horned Valkyries and all the trappings of an archaic, oleographic imagination, our historicised reading was sacrilege. At the premiere of *Die Walküre*, the reactions were violent, with dissent coming more from the stalls than from the gallery. When Luca and I first came out for the applause, the boos intensified. Once we returned to the wings, we thought we would not come back out, but we found a note from the superintendent Paolo Grassi instructing us to come out again. We obeyed, and the boos continued, but the applause also increased. It was clear that this was not so much a disaster as it was a true battle. The message came across and it did not leave people indifferent, so we could say we had succeeded.

SC Two years later, in 1976 in Bayreuth, Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez continued the revolution, but you had paved the way.

PLP For *Die Walküre*, we were heavily criticised, but we also received very enthusiastic acclaim. I am thinking of certain critics, such as Lorenzo Arruga and Fedele D'Amico, who immediately embraced our idea, thoroughly understanding the reasons behind it and thus helping to make it understood.

SC In 1975, *Siegfried* came along, but the La Scala project stopped at the third opera, which was actually the second for you.

PLP Sawallisch was not at all convinced by such an innovative directorial proposal, and there was no mutual understanding with Luca. After the controversy surrounding *Die Walküre*, he was determined to give up. We managed to get him back for *Siegfried* because I went to Munich to plead our case in person, but he never really believed in the project. And in fact, he abandoned it before *Götterdämmerung*. Bogianckino, who had meanwhile moved to Maggio Fiorentino, decided to take up the whole project again, starting from scratch, with a new departure. *Das Rheingold* was staged in 1979, followed by *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, which were reworked with some changes because we had now focused our objectives more clearly, and finally, in 1981, *Götterdämmerung*. It was a success. The project had been enriched with new reflections and new ideas, partly because we had found what we had previously lacked, namely the opportunity to work on the overall stylistic unity.

SC When *The Ring* moved to Maggio Fiorentino, Zubin Mehta took to the podium to conduct all four operas.

PLP Our relationship with him was excellent. It was constructive because it developed in a calm, relaxed environment. He immediately got into the spirit of our interpretation and embraced it with conviction and commitment, guaranteeing an outstanding quality in the performances.

SC The Ronconi-Pizzi production of *The Ring* is memorable for its theatrical machinery, scenographic inventions and multiplication of perspectives.

PLP Luca and I shared a passion for Baroque theatre and therefore for theatrical machinery, which was the basis of our work on *The Ring*. To be honest, all the references to a certain romantic style of painting were also very important, but there is no doubt that the machinery was the key. The goal was clear: to restore their use in the service of a theatre of wonder, which, in my opinion, is the very nature of theatre. To generate amazement through invention.

SC No realism, maximum artifice, even in the costumes, which suggested 19th-century style, but were far from any philology.

PLP They were all inventions. For me, theatre is artifice, imagination. That's why I felt so comfortable with Luca.

SC Did he ever ask you to do anything impossible?

PLP I wouldn't say so. Over the course of our ten-year collaboration, we did difficult things, often very complicated things, such as *The Ring*, but that was the beauty of it. Luca trusted me; he knew that for me, with my background as an architect, the organisation of space was the primary concern. He listened to me and allowed himself to be guided towards a certain rigour of synthesis. He had a tendency to add, I to subtract, which ensured a sense of balance and allowed us to agree on solutions that we were both convinced about. I made my proposals, he made his, and we compared them. The fact that Luca was a possibilist, i.e. he often changed his mind, discarding the previous idea because he had found one that interested him more, made everything more stimulating. Not easy, but never boring.

SC After more than 20 years as a brilliant set designer, in 1978 you directed your first opera, *Don Giovanni*, at the Regio in Turin.

PLP It is quite significant that Luca's *Nabucco* was staged at the Maggio at the same time, a massive production that had everything and everything was in motion. I was delighted to have done it, of course, but I was aware that we were perhaps exaggerating a little. And in fact, perhaps as a reaction, my *Don Giovanni* had an almost neoclassical structure, with a sobriety that later became my trademark. Of course, I then made many forays into Baroque theatre, having the opportunity to rediscover the wonder of the machinery, for example in *Armide* at La Scala, which I consider the culmination of my work in this field. But at the bottom of it all, there has always been a tendency towards simplicity—avoiding the superfluous, distilling and achieving the necessary.

Donald McIntyre, Ruža Baldani, *Die Walküre*, conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, directed by Luca Ronconi, 1974

THE RING AS A MIRROR OF CRISIS

Interview with Guy Cassiers by Anna Girardi

For Wagner's bicentennial, Belgian director Guy Cassiers staged a visionary multimedia *Ring* performance at La Scala, transforming the myth into a reflection on the crisis of power and society that is still relevant today.

In 2013, to celebrate the bicentennial of the births of Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi, La Scala staged the entire *Ring* cycle, conducted by Daniel Barenboim. The ambitious project was directed by Belgian theatre director Guy Cassiers, with Arjen Klerkx and Kurt d'Haeseleer, and lighting designer Enrico Bagnoli.

Born in Antwerp in 1960, Cassiers, who had a background in graphic arts, made his debut in the theatre in the 1980s, developing a distinctive style. Since then, his career has taken off, leading him to become director of the Toneelhuis in Antwerp in 2006. Cassiers is recognised in Europe as an innovative multimedia artist, with a visual approach that integrates technology and literature.

AG How did you approach Wagner's opera?
GC I started with a statement by Michael P. Steinberg, who co-wrote the script for this *Ring* production with Erwin Jans. The Ring and the phenomenon of Richard Wagner and musical drama must be understood as symptoms of a crisis and, at the same time, as the bearers of a critical analysis of that crisis. The world depicted by Wagner, in fact, represents a society in which political, social and family relationships are seriously unbalanced. Wagner paints an allegorical picture of an era in which established beliefs about bonds and stability are disappearing and new meanings have yet to emerge.

Through this work, I believe we can encourage people to think about the situation in our society and how we might try to change it. Culture has a duty to make us reflect on the reality that surrounds us. In this sense, Wagner gives us many ideas. By observing everything that is negative in the realm of *The Ring*, the Leipzig composer asks the audience to analyse themselves and the society in which they live. We too ask the audience to take on the responsibility that is necessary for change to happen. The world described by Wagner can be easily compared to Europe today; I don't think that everything has to end, as it does at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, but I do think it is necessary to look around us and take responsibility.

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano (3)

ABOVE
Guy Cassiers, Marie Danielle Halbwachs, rehearsals for *Die Walküre*, 2010

PREVIOUS PAGE
Detail of the bas-relief by Jef Lambeaux, *The Temple of Human Passions*

"For the staging, I started with the grand theme of power. To hold onto power, the main characters betray the rules and laws for which they should be responsible. And because of this, they fall."

AG So, for you, is *The Ring* today a metaphor for the political crisis of our time?

GC Yes. For the staging, I started with the grand theme of power. To hold onto power, the main characters betray the rules and laws for which they should be responsible. And because of this, they fall. It is a very topical subject that says a lot about the crisis in Europe, in Italy. The inevitable consequence of the lust for power that has—then as now—guided gods and men is their downfall, the decline of the powerful and of society, in short, the "twilight" of society. I tried to lead the audience into a world where all certainties were disintegrating, while new ideals have yet to emerge. We find ourselves in a twilight era, or so-called "The Twilight Zone".

AG How did you attempt to translate these concepts into a reality?

GC I reflected on the process of globalisation, which has led to an era of obscenity, where the boundaries between political and economic, private and public, intimate and pornographic have dissolved. The media and multimedia, with their excess of information, have made it difficult to access authentic reality. Real power is in the hands of those who control, manipulate and distribute images and information. Wagner's crisis concerned the transition of the world from an agricultural to an industrial society. Today, the pivotal transition is from a material world to virtual reality. There is an increasing sense of being in a reality that is conveyed to us by the press and the mass media, which is very different from the one we experience. There is a strong need for control, the same need that characterises Wotan and the other characters in the Tetralogy. In our case, this takes place through virtual means, through important means of communication. The use of videos and projections, therefore, is not exclusively an aesthetic issue. It should be used as a language in its own right—it is not the end point, but the means by which we can say something. The combination of virtual reality and real virtuality is fundamental: everything that is virtual can become real and vice versa.

AG Can you give us an example?

GC The entire cycle is characterised by a continuous clash and blending of nature and technology. Which universe tells the truth? Siegfried, for example, finally manages to forge Notung, the sword, in Mime's forge, but on stage it was created through video manipulation, so it was generated by an illusion that became reality. This is precisely why Siegfried did not have to fear the dragon, which was also the result of projections. Having grown up using the media, is he perhaps aware that this too is an illusion?

Returning to the "twilight zone"…twilight is a moment of transition, a state in which forms dissolve and transform, and in which new forms are born. All the characters find themselves, consciously or not, in a sort of twilight state, a state of decline. The very first scene of *Das Rheingold* is emblematic. The protagonists are the three Rhine Maidens—Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde. Although each of them has her own identity, with video they appear as fragments of the same person. I wanted their presence to consist of a changing interplay between voice, physical presence, and manipulated video images. The three daughters took turns in assuming these three positions and constantly shifted from one medium to another. This made them completely elusive to Alberich. They symbolised the manipulative and seductive powers of the image, constantly shifting between reality and virtuality.

AG Speaking of videos and projections, some people have questioned their use. How do they coexist with music, acting, and performance in your view?

GC Wagner, with his concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, understood that the stage is the ideal place for a dialogue between different artistic expressions. I have tried to stay as close as possible to his idea of 'total work of art', that every language (music, dance, video, lighting) contributes equally to creating the world we see on stage. I have constantly asked myself what I want to say and how, and I have tried to use the different artistic disciplines as autonomously as possible. What is said with one medium should not be said with another. This is what starts the dialogue. Just as Wagner's music is never univocal, the same is true of directing. The separation of voice, body, and image is not only a deconstruction of the character, but also a deconstruction of the viewer's perception. The viewer is "thrown off balance" and must try to arrive at a new perception starting from the separate elements. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is ultimately produced in the viewer's mind. It is not always easy for a viewer to accept this challenge and ask themselves, "What does this mean to me?" Usually, it is the director who reveals their point of view, and the viewer decides whether or not to accept it.

AG We haven't yet addressed the theme of leitmotifs. In your show, in addition to the musical leitmotif, there were also recurring visual themes that evolved and "aged".

GC When working on a cycle of shows, we seek an evolving aesthetic, with a development that involves both the individual show and the entire project. In *The Ring*, Wagner's music was a model. The musical leitmotifs, associated with characters, situations, and objects, anticipate or recall events. In the same way, the visual leitmotifs had to be repetitive but never static, enriched by variations that made them always new and dynamic. They didn't accompany the music but were added to it, creating an independent dialogue that reinforced the sense of continuity and transformation of the work.

AG What were these visual leitmotifs?

GC Throughout all four pieces, you could see the evolution of the main themes—the sphere, the forest, even a 75x75 tile, and the evolution of the costumes. But what I had in mind from the beginning was Jef Lambeaux's frieze *Les Passions Humaines*. Created by Lambeaux in 1898 on commission from Leopold II, the frieze is located in the Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels but is rarely visible to the public. It depicts intertwined bodies, evoking both erotic euphoria and physical torture, dominated by the figure of the devil. This combination of eros and death reflects the lust for power and the consequent fate that befalls all the characters, from Alberich to Wotan.

The set design included a semi-transparent fibreglass replica of the frieze, 16 metres long and 6.25 metres high, adapted to the La Scala stage and used in three different ways. First, we were able to project images onto the transparent frieze, making it function as a screen with the sculpted image fading behind other images. The second function was achieved through backlighting, which revealed the bas-relief in its entirety, emphasising the work as a scenic and symbolic object. Finally, the frieze could become the basis for the projection of itself, offering a more detailed and dynamic view of the sculpture.

During the fourth scene of *Rheingold*, Donner's rainbow led the gods to Valhalla, where the frieze served as a portal and came to life with decomposed bodies projected onto the reliefs of the wall. The golden and disturbing images expressed the excessive craving of the gods, now incapable of understanding love and human relationships. The sterile society tries in vain to regenerate itself through technology, an emblematic failure of the technological age. In the finale of *Götterdämmerung*, an enlarged version of the frieze appeared as a monumental tombstone, closing the drama with a sense of inexorable fatality. The frieze slowly descended, separating the audience from the universe of *The Ring*. At the end of the orchestral explosion, only the frieze remained, appearing in all its marble and powerful materiality. This final symbol was not only a scenic closure, but an invitation to the audience to take responsibility: "The Gibicung are you!"

ABOVE
Simon O'Neill, Nina Stemme, Waltraud Meier, *Die Walküre*, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, directed by Guy Cassiers, 2010

IN THE MIRROR OF MYTH

Interview with David McVicar by Raffaele Mellace

David McVicar reflects on the meaning of myth in *The Ring*, its dramatic and political relevance today, and the challenges of staging a production that appeals to the audience's imagination.

RM What role does myth play in your project?
DM When I started thinking about *The Ring* over 20 years ago, as well as when I returned to it for the Milan project, I asked myself why Wagner chose a mythological world. Wagner intuitively understood, as an artist, the importance of myth in our lives. It is something that today's society has lost. To say that something is a myth is to say that it is as false as the lies of politicians. Our ancient relationship with myth, on the other hand, alluded to something that was not literally true, but rather true in a deeper sense, connected to our profound spiritual journey. One of the weaknesses of the modern age is precisely that we have lost the sacred link between man and the rest of creation around us, a relationship that in ancient civilisations was explained by myth.

RM What role does myth play in Wagner's project?
DM Wagner applies a mythological framework to the story he wants to tell. And yet the story he tells belongs to his time and is still relevant today. He wants to remind us that transgressions against ourselves and the environment are indelible. Myth explains how we got to this point and asks the question: where will we go from here? In *Rheingold*, Wagner invents a creation myth based on the fundamental discovery of money, capital, and financial growth. Money controls all our lives from cradle to grave, yet it only has the value we ourselves attribute to it. One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Ring* story is that no one ever actually uses the power of the ring. Its only power is that all the characters on stage believe it to be powerful. It is the greatest myth of all, so much so that the 16 hours of *The Ring* boil down to this one meaningless circumstance: the power of the ring lies in the value that everyone attributes to it. Wagner tells us of a journey through life that, because of this illusion, takes on a futile, meaningless character, but which at the same time has its own beauty, simply because life has been lived.

RM *The Ring* ultimately speaks of human beings and their passions...
DM Alberich's renunciation of love in order to possess the ring in *Das Rheingold*, which is then imitated by other characters, is fascinating. We need to

FOTOGRAFIA DI Brescia and Amisano

Ólafur Sigurdarson, Andrea Carroll, Svetlina Stoyanova, Virginie Verrez, 2024

David McVicar

consider what the opposite of love is: hatred, anger, a combination of both, or the range of negative impulses that dominate man. The overarching theme that runs through *The Ring* is the awareness of what love is in the broadest sense, not merely in the erotic sense. We must always bear in mind the era in which Wagner lived, when he was confronted with the effects of the industrial revolution on human beings, with the discovery of the achievements of industry and the subsequent radical transformations in the balance of power between nations. In *The Ring*, Wagner offers one of the most penetrating analyses of human nature and the social structures that man has created. He does so with intelligence, compassion, and artistic understanding. This is why he chooses to adopt myth. As with Greek myths, myth is a mirror. The entire *Ring* is a mirror that Wagner holds up to us.

RM How do you stage this "mirror" *Ring*?
DM It is not easy to tell this story on stage. There is great heterogeneity between the four parts of *The Ring*—the music is different; the narrative is different. Since Wagner took so long to complete it, the very perception of the story has gradually changed. It is difficult to create a coherent, unified dramaturgical structure that makes the audience understand, over the course of 16 hours of opera, that the point of arrival depends on the point of departure, that there is a trajectory, a defined dramaturgical evolution. It is a piece that, on the one hand, requires political awareness and humanistic sensitivity, and on the other, requires you to stage dragons, rainbows, giants, talking birds, a magical fire, and a river that floods the entire stage...

RM What approach did you choose to stage this multifaceted subject matter?

DM A literal approach is certainly not the best choice for resolving the problems posed by Wagner. If you stick to the stage directions as they are written, you lose the symbolic heart of everything that happens. In his very long and detailed stage directions, Wagner already imagines cinema, a technology a century ahead of his time, which is extraordinary. Fortunately, however, theatre did not follow suit. Nor should it. Theatre works in different terms. In theatre, the audience is asked to actively engage their imagination in the story being told. So how do you create a giant in theatre? There are, of course, many ways: you can ignore Wagner's instructions, use projections, elaborate costumes... How can you attribute symbolic resonance to a dragon, avoiding the literal approach that would inevitably end up turning the story into a pantomime? The solution you choose depends on how much imagination you want to ask the audience to use.

RM These seem like difficult problems to solve...
DM Indeed. Keep in mind that we are dealing with music, some of the greatest music ever written for the theatre. We are dealing with singers who must perform difficult parts for a very long time, competing with a very loud orchestra. How can we position them so that they can be heard at their best? How can we best honour the wonderful beauty of the score? How can we visually complement the music? How can we offer a visual correspondence with what the audience is listening to? These are challenging and fascinating questions.

RM Which characters interest you most in *The Ring*?
DM All Wagnerian characters are of the utmost importance: there are no trivial ones. Every character is extremely important, regardless of how much they sing or how much stage time they have. Even Froh, whom we will not see again, has his place and significance in the dramaturgy of *The Ring*. Obviously, Wotan is the most fascinating character, but ultimately, *The Ring* belongs to Brünnhilde. Siegfried, on the other hand, is the most difficult character to portray because it is difficult to love him, difficult to make the audience care about him. My favourite character is Mime, a character I love. He is extremely interesting. He is the most disturbed, sick, strange, abused, dangerous, criminal, extremely negative character, but not through his own fault. Alberich is also totally fascinating. I associate him with Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Both characters have their reasons for fighting against divine will. Even Hagen has his reasons. Wagner's genius—as is also the case with Mozart and Shakespeare—is his ability to create multidimensional, fully developed characters.

RM If you could choose only one scene from the entire *Ring*, which one fascinates you the most?
DM The scene I find unbearably moving is Wotan's farewell, before he kisses Brünnhilde's eyes and puts her to sleep, perhaps forever. I find the whole scene leading up to that point fascinating, the complexity with which the father-daughter relationship is handled, the realisation of a situation from which there is no escape, but which at least can be faced with love.

RM What can we say about the unity of *The Ring*?
DM I think it is a mistake to impose unity on *The Ring*, to ignore the evolution in the project. Wagner changed his mind about its meaning as he worked on it. When we reach *Götterdämmerung*, we must consider the ambiguity that has arisen. Through his reading of Schopenhauer, Wagner arrived at an extraordinarily sombre conclusion, which speaks of the end of the world, closer to us today than we can imagine. Even Brünnhilde's final monologue contains supreme ambiguity. The character has passed from divine to mortal status, but despite the unfortunate outcome of the story, her love has given value to the tragedy that has unfolded.

RM Let's close the circle—or shall we say ring?
DM Yes, let's go back to the beginning. The myth originated at a time when Neolithic man developed his own funeral practices, placing bodies in the foetal position and thus interpreting death as something other than an end, but rather as a new beginning. The myth exists because we feel the need to understand ourselves in the face of the inevitability of our death. Wagner's *The Ring* corresponds to the works of the ancient Greek tragedians in their attempt to address and find an answer to such a question.

THE "CURSED" RING PRODUCTIONS OF LA SCALA

by Marco Targa

Scheduling a production of *The Ring* is always a challenge. In addition to the famous Tetralogy performances that have left their mark on the history of La Scala, there are also projects that, for various reasons, were never staged, but which deserve to be remembered.

The history of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at La Scala is as intense as it is troubled. With ten completed productions of the entire cycle and one currently in progress, La Scala is undoubtedly one of the stages that has most frequently witnessed the stories of the gods and heroes of Wagner's epic.
However, we cannot proceed without revisiting two well-known and sensational cases in which the initial project was interrupted: that of Luca Ronconi and Wolfgang Sawallisch in 1974-75 and that of André Engel and Riccardo Muti in 1994-95. Both projects foundered due to misunderstandings between the conductor and the director. These were not the only cases in which the fatal thread of the Norns was cut short.
A strange series of events has repeatedly plagued Wagner's masterpiece in Milan since the 1950s. Alongside the illustrious history of completed projects, there is a lesser-known story of performances that were planned and designed—sometimes even announced in the programme—but never made it to the stage. Had these projects come to fruition, they would certainly have been another important chapter in the history of Wagnerian directing.
There are essentially four unfulfilled *Ring* productions at La Scala: the one with sets by Mariano Fortuny for the 1950 cycle; the one by Wieland Wagner, which would have been staged in 1963, on the 150th anniversary of the birth of his grandfather; the one by Luchino Visconti in 1973, which was aborted due to the director's health problems; and finally the one that would have brought together Giuseppe Sinopoli and Akira Kurosawa. The number rises to five if we also consider Thielemann's last-minute withdrawal from conducting *The Ring* on the 150th anniversary of the opera's debut. Thielemann's sudden departure is therefore only the latest in a long series of setbacks that have plagued the history of *The Ring* at La Scala.
Mariano Fortuny is arguably one of the most Wagnerian painters and set designers of all time. He painted the famous Wagnerian Cycle, a series of 47 paintings inspired by scenes from the German composer's operas. Since the days of his partnership with Gabriele D'Annunzio, he had imagined a new type of spectacle for Wagnerian theatre in which the bright colours of Pre-Raphaelite style coexisted with the soft atmospheres of the floral style, in accordance with a Mediterranean reinterpretation of Wagner's mythological universe.
This project inspired the sets for *Tristan und Isolde* at La Scala in 1900, as well as the search for a new concept of light, which culminated in the installation of the famous Fortuny dome in the Milanese theatre. The artist's death in 1949, however, hindered the realisation of the set design commissioned by Nicola Benois.
Four paintings depicting a scene from *Das Rheingold* and three scenes from *Die Walküre* remain at the theatre. Of particular interest is the sketch for the first act of *Die Walküre*, which contains a clear self-reference to the famous painting belonging to the Wagnerian Cycle entitled *L'abbraccio di Siegmund e Sieglinde* from 1928. The two characters are depicted at the door of Hunding's hut, locked in the same passionate and desperate embrace captured in the painting 20 years earlier. There is only one difference: in the sketch, the sword Notung is brandished towards the sky by Siegmund, in a mixture of eroticism and heroism, instead of hanging limply behind Sieglinde's back.
In 1950, Benois took over the staging of *The Ring* for Fortuny, and Furtwängler was entrusted with conducting the orchestra. This reinforced the close ties between La Scala and the Bayreuth Festival, which had been forged during the Toscanini era and remained strong even after the war. The presence of Furtwängler and, later, Tietjen demonstrates this, as does the number of artists who were invited to Milan after receiving Wagnerian recognition on the 'green hill'. These included conductor André Cluytens, who would conduct *The Ring* at La Scala in 1963. He suggested to the theatre that they hire Wieland, Wagner's grandson, for the sets and direction. Wieland had already agreed to follow in his father Siegfried's footsteps; Siegfried had conducted *The Ring* in Milan 33 years earlier, a few months before his death. However, for some unknown reason, Wieland's letter of engagement was never sent, despite repeated reminders from Cluytens to the theatre's management. The opportunity was lost forever. The following year, Wieland arrived at La Scala with the same production of *Tristan* that he had staged in Bayreuth in 1962.
Ten years later, another potentially epoch-making *Ring* disappeared: that of Luchino Visconti, which would have been the director's triumphant return to La Scala, 20 years after the successes of his partnership with Callas. However, he was prevented from doing so by the health problems that plagued him in the final four years of his life.
Paolo Grassi and his artistic director, Massimo Bogianckino, had long courted Visconti, who had accepted the assignment despite being exhausted by the gruelling production of the film *Ludwig*. Mario Chiari, the set designer who had shared the hard work of filming with him, was also at his side throughout the design phase of the scenes for *Das Rheingold*. The only indirect trace we have of those sketches is a brief mention in a letter from Bogianckino to Visconti.
The two had, in fact, discussed the idea of recovering some of the figurative, mythological, and geographical elements that the abstract style of Wieland and his followers had erased. However, the *maquette* presented by Visconti and Chiari foreshadowed a scene intended as a sort of "container for music", characterised by volumetric symmetries and very few realistic elements. This was somewhat different from the expectations of the theatre management, so much so that Bogianckino dared to request a few changes, which fell on deaf ears. Thirteen days later, a telegram arrived announcing the director's definitive withdrawal from the project, due to his well-known health problems from a stroke the year before.
Visconti's sudden withdrawal 40 days before the premiere forced artistic management to hastily fall back on hiring a ready-made show. Sawallisch, who was then conductor of the Munich Staatsoper, brought the show that Günther Rennert was preparing for the cycle scheduled at the German theatre to Milan. The following year, Ronconi took over with his renowned production of *Die Walküre*. However, the project for the entire Tetralogy, including the prologue, was ultimately left incomplete.
The same thing happened 20 years later: the Sinopoli-Kurosawa project of the 1990s foundered before it even began in favour of the Muti-Engel duo, who, however, fell victim to the same curse of *The Ring*. Only Barenboim and Cassiers were able to break the spell in 2013, exactly 50 years after the last complete *Ring*.

SINGERS

photos by Erio Piccagliani

Birgit Nilsson, Regina Resnik,
Die Walküre, conducted by André Cluytens,
directed by Heinz Tietjen, 1963

VOICES FROM VALHALLA

by Maurizio Giani

From the 1950s to the turn of the century, we go on a journey through the history of the vocal casts that brought Wagner's *The Ring* to life at La Scala, including legends of the past and new performances.

Revisiting the casts of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* productions staged at La Scala from the mid-20th century to the early years of the new millennium means retracing more than 60 years of Wagnerian vocal artistry in some of its highest expressions. The journey begins with *The Ring* conducted in the spring of 1950 by Wilhelm Furtwängler, who, in addition to leaving an irreplaceable record of his musical interpretation, assembled a voice ensemble that was, in many ways, legendary.

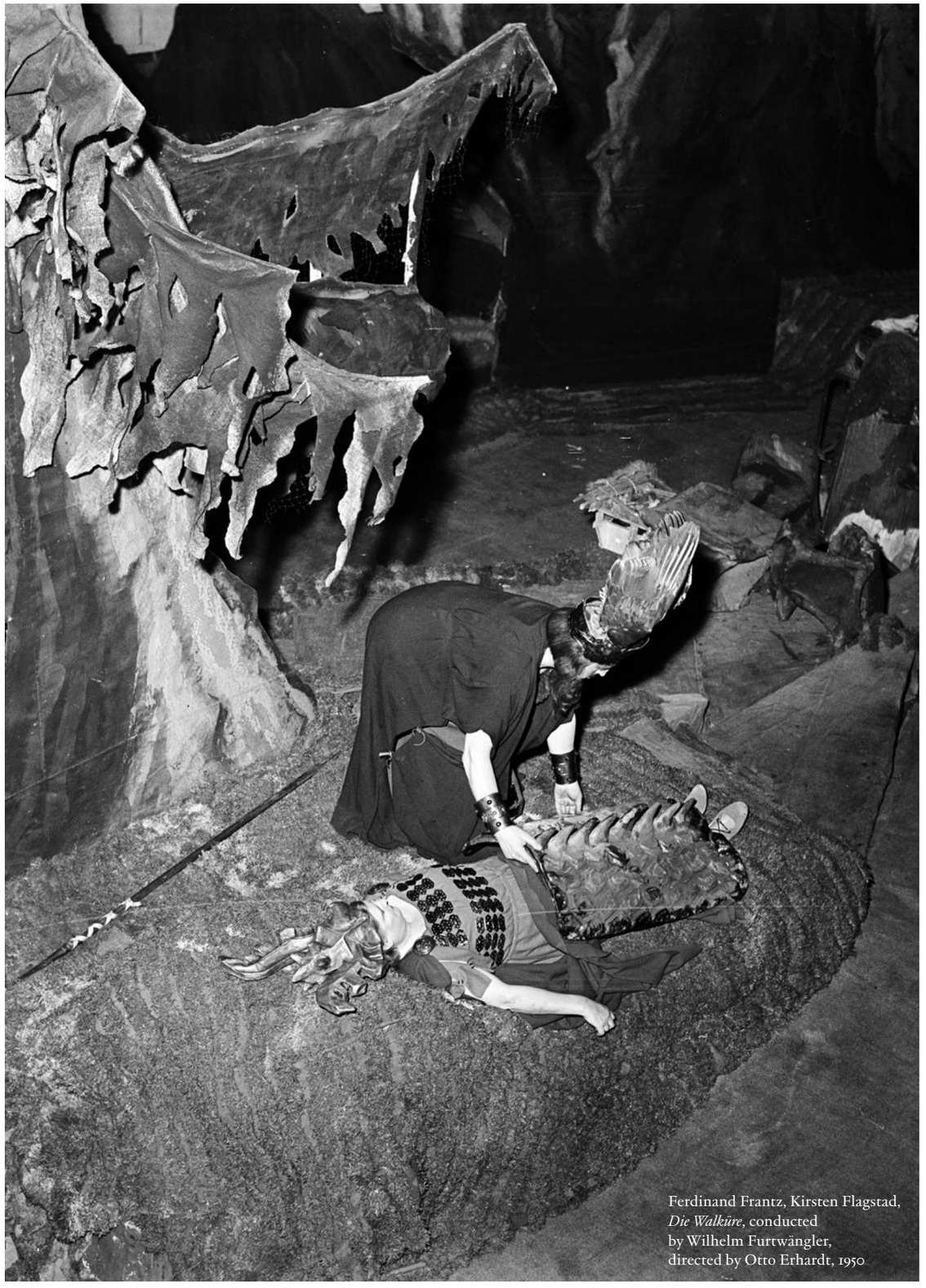
For the role of Wotan, he selected the acclaimed bass-baritone Ferdinand Frantz, whom he would bring along again three years later in the revival of the Tetralogy, performed as a concert at the RAI Auditorium in Rome. Frantz was a "supple and majestic" Wotan, according to a *Corriere della Sera* critic, even if he was not always convincing in his exploration of the character (in the second finale of *Die Walküre*, when he addresses Hunding, who has just killed his son Siegmund, he does not appear to be the father torn apart by grief that he should be).

At his side in *Das Rheingold* is Elisabeth Höngen—who the following year would sing in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* under Furtwängler at Bayreuth for the Festival's reopening. She bestowed her incredible gifts on the complex role of Fricka. Less impressive was tenor Joachim Sattler as the Mephistophelean Loge. Two formidable bass-baritones, Ludwig Weber and Alois Pernerstorfer, were also cast, one in three roles—Fasolt, Hunding, and the villainous Hagen—and the other as Alberich.

But the star of the Tetralogy was undoubtedly Kirsten Flagstad, who gave an unrivalled performance as Brünnhilde (the following year she would appear as a memorable Isotta in *Tristan und Isolde*, recorded by Furtwängler in London for EMI). Her dialogue with Wotan and the announcement of death (*Todesverkündigung*) to Siegmund in *Die Walküre*, and above all the final scene of *The Ring*, are unanimously considered one of the most brilliant and moving moments in Wagnerian vocal music.

Alongside her, Set Svanholm brought to life a virile and handsome Siegfried on the second day—described as "incandescent" by the cantankerous critic James Leonard—and in *Götterdämmerung* he handed off the role of the heldentenor in another legendary performance, this time by the older and slightly declining Max Lorenz, who is nonetheless admirable in many moments, especially for the sense of wonder he was able to convey in Act III.

PHOTOS BY Erio Piccaglani(4)

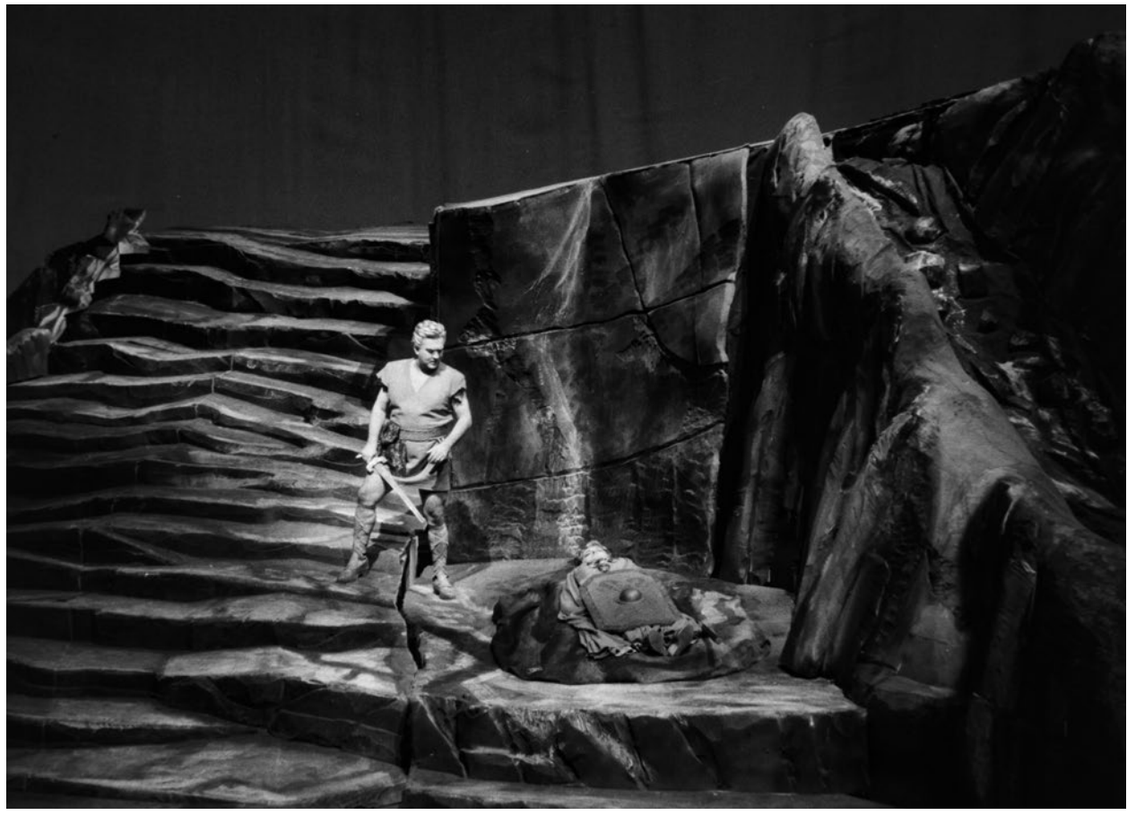


Ferdinand Frantz, Kirsten Flagstad, *Die Walküre*, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, directed by Otto Erhardt, 1950

Set Svanholm, *Siegfried*, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, directed by Otto Erhardt, 1950

Jean Cox, *Siegfried*, conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, directed by Luca Ronconi, 1975

Thirteen years later, the La Scala ensembles were led by André Cluytens—the first French conductor ever invited to Bayreuth, in 1955 for *Tannhäuser*, and a regular guest there in the years that followed. His Wotan was entrusted to another operatic legend, Hans Hotter, an incomparable interpreter of the role (as well as of Gurnemanz, the Dutchman, and Hans Sachs) who was commanding onstage and aware of every nuance of Wagnerian declamation.
Fricka was played by American mezzo-soprano Regina Resnik, who had a powerful, intense voice (she began as a dramatic soprano, until Clemens Krauss suggested she switch to the other register) and was theatrically effective even if her German pronunciation is not flawless. Alberich was played by the Danish baritone Frans Andersson, who was gifted with exceptional vocal talents and remarkable acting skills, while Fafner was played by Arnold van Mill, who previously performed the role in Hans Knappertsbusch's 1956 production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth. He was probably the best interpreter of the character, conveying from the very first notes an unsettling coldness towards his brother (played here by another powerful bass, Franz Crass).
The role of Brünnhilde was sung by the greatest soprano of the time, Birgit Nilsson, a worthy successor to Kirsten Flagstad. In the words of Franco Abbiati, she was "admirable both in her warrior's cry and in the most eager and warmest of passions." Once again, we find van Mill in the role of Hunding, who was excellent for both his power and expressiveness. Siegfried is sung by Hans Hopf, an illustrious debut at La Scala, another heldentenor much appreciated for his robust and confident baritone voice (he also played Othello) and for his lively performing style. In 1951, Hopf also sang in Bayreuth's *Ninth* conducted by Furtwängler.
After a generation, *The Ring* returned to La Scala under the direction of Riccardo Muti, spread over a five-year period. New voices brought the various characters to life, starting with Monte Pederson, an American bass-baritone with a career as brilliant as it was unfortunately short, a Wotan who was solid both vocally and on stage; and Violeta Urmana as Fricka (who had the opposite trajectory as Resnik, having started as a mezzo-soprano before moving to the soprano register). Heinz Zednik appeared in the role of Mime, already memorable as Loge in the famous and controversial centenary *Ring* production directed by Pierre Boulez and staged by Patrice Chéreau in Bayreuth.
In *Die Walküre*, the sibling-lovers had the voices and stage presence of Plácido Domingo and Waltraud Meier, while Hunding is played by bass Matthias Hölle, a regular presence at Bayreuth in the last two decades of the century. Gabriele Schnaut played Brünnhilde, but only in *Die Walküre*; the role passed to Jane Eaglen in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, with Kammersänger Wolfgang Schmidt as Siegfried and the resounding Kurt Rydl as Hagen. Only good things can be said about Eaglen. Her voice was clear and bright, powerful and subtle, certainly a far cry from previous protagonists, especially Flagstad, whose vocal temperament had a softness that was truly beyond comparison.
The Ring cycle at La Scala in the 2000s was helmed by Daniel Barenboim, who conducted it twice, in 2010-2013 and then, in "Bayreuthian" style—two performances, each spread over six days as Wagner wished—in June 2013, on the bicentenary of the composer's birth (in May, *Götterdämmerung* was staged at the end of the previous cycle). The alternation of singers in the individual roles was, with a few exceptions, a peculiar choice by Barenboim. Three performers were called upon to play Wotan: Michael Volle, with his rich voice, in *Rheingold*; René Pape, unfortunately not in great form, in *Die Walküre*; and Terje Stensvold, perhaps the most convincing and expressive of the trio, as Wotan-Wanderer in *Siegfried*.
Johannes Martin Kränzle's Alberich was perfect both vocally and scenically, while Ekaterina Gubanova's Fricka and Anna Larsson's Erda offered mixed performances. The former was very good, and the latter less so, with problematic high notes in terms of intonation. Siegmund and Sieglinde were voiced by Simon O'Neill and Waltraud Meier, whose excellence—especially Meier, already a splendid Isolde in Barenboim's 2007 Tristan—needed little comment, while Hunding



FOTOGRAFIA DI LELLI E MASOTTI

was played by the physically and vocally colossal Mikhail Petrenko, who also took on the role of Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*, a very successful character, albeit with some signs of fatigue at the end.
Lance Ryan played Siegfried in the previous May production, both in the drama of the same name and in *Götterdämmerung*. He was perfect on stage in the sword-forging scene, but was vocally lacking with the high notes, despite having a powerful and ringing voice. In any case, in the June production of *Siegfried* he appeared decidedly improved, more consistent and precise. On the third day, he was replaced by Andreas Schager, a tenor who is also very effective on stage, with a warm voice that reminds some of Jonas Kaufmann, although less rich and with a correct but not particularly "heroic" delivery.
Finally, the supreme heroine, Brünnhilde, was played by Nina Stemme in the 2010 production and by Iréne Theorin in the centenary production. A soprano with great presence and a warm, persuasive voice, Theorin appears on stage on all three days of the second cycle, a tour de force that understandably leaves her a little fatigued in the final sacrificial scene, but nevertheless perfectly suited to the role, with moments of great intensity. The pianissimo was unforgettable, barely whispered on the words with which Theorin's Brünnhilde absolves Wotan: "Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott." And it was thanks to her exquisite sensitivity that in the "music of the end" we can become a little more aware of this painful twist, of almost *lieder* contemplation, inscribed in the notes composed by the old magician.

ABOVE
Plácido Domingo, Waltraud Meier, Matthias Hölle, *Die Walküre*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, directed by André Engel, 1994

LEFT
Hans Hopf, Birgit Nilsson, *Siegfried*, conducted by André Cluytens, directed by Heinz Tietjen, 1963

PHOTOS BY Silvia Lelli

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano

ABOVE
Jane Eaglen, Wolfgang Schmidt, *Siegfried*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, directed by André Engel, 1997

RIGHT
Waltraud Meier, Simon O'Neill, *Die Walküre*, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, directed by Guy Cassiers, 2010

BEING ISOLDE

Interview with Waltraud Meier
by Andrea Penna

Throughout her career, Waltraud Meier has redefined many Wagnerian heroines. At La Scala, she played Sieglinde, Waltraute and, most notably, Isolde: "the pinnacle of my artistic career."

AP Since you started your career performing in opera companies in Germany, was including Wagner's works in your repertoire intentional, coincidental, or did it come about naturally?

WM I didn't seek it out at first, but right from the start, my main connection to Wagner stemmed from the inseparable link between text and music that characterises his work. I have always perceived an autonomous musical component in the librettos themselves. I am not referring so much to the famous alliterations, but to a music that emanates from the very construction of phrases and words, accents, vowels, and consonants. Of course, there is also the speculative and philosophical aspect that touches on timeless, eternal questions in many moments. Verdi also knows how to use text in an extraordinary way to portray the human condition, but for me, some librettos are too influenced by the aesthetics of melodrama—"Numi", "mio Dio", "oh cielo", "ahimè"—which Wagner overcomes, or at least, for a German singer, naturally resolves into a more authentic and meaningful flow of speech. These characteristics were immediately attractive to me; they moved me and seduced me. I felt that music was truly mine.

AP You haven't just played only Sieglinde, Kundry, and Isolde. Your first successes came with Erda and Fricka. Was it a gradual progression?

WM Let's not forget Waltraute, my faithful companion throughout my career. I sang Waltraute for the first time in 1978 in Mannheim and last performed her in 2023 in Dresden with Thielemann conducting. I have never tired of her. In shaping the lines in her exhortation to Brünnhilde, I would discover something new in the role of this messenger every time. This freedom is a wonderful gift that Wagner's music offers us. Once again, I would draw a comparison with Verdi, who, in the interplay between text and music, very precisely defines the style and technical parameters with which the part must be sung, whereas Wagner gives the performer more space.

AP You played Waltraute at La Scala in 1998, but you had already played Sieglinde under Riccardo Muti in 1994. When did you first encounter Sieglinde?

PHOTOS BY Marco Brescia

ABOVE
Waltraud Meier
in the role of Isolde,
Tristan und Isolde, conducted
by Daniel Barenboim,
directed by Patrice Chéreau,
2007

PHOTOS BY Lelli e Masotti

ABOVE
Waltraud Meier (Sieglinde) and Gabriele Schnaut (Brünnhilde), *Die Walküre*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, directed by André Engel, 1994

WM I made my debut in 1992 in Vienna, alongside Plácido Domingo, who was performing the role of Siegmund for the first time. I was then called to Berlin as a replacement and I remember Daniel Barenboim saying something funny but true: "Waltraud, you are the best miscast one could wish for Sieglinde." He was referring to the fact that I was a mezzo-soprano—not the obvious choice for Sieglinde—even though it's true that, at least for the entire first act, the tessitura remains fairly central.

AP But anyone who heard you in the second and third acts of *Die Walküre* will remember your unbridled energy. Did you find it difficult to move into the soprano range?

WM No, it came quite naturally, partly because I immediately discovered the secret to attacking those lines in the third act softly, without launching into them with excessive fervour. Even though the phrase "O hehrstes Wunder!" must be considered one of the high points of the entire opera, it should not be overdone. If I hadn't learned to attack it softly and then reinforce it, it would never have worked.

AP Let's talk about the length of Wagner's works. Can you learn to pace yourself during *Die Walküre* or *Parsifal*? Birgit Nilsson joked that the secret was to wear very comfortable shoes.

WM And also to have strong knees. Anyone who has sung in Harry Kupfer's production of *The Ring* for years knows what I'm talking about. More seriously, it is essential to understand when the score offers the possibility of relying purely on the rhythm of the text and when, instead, you have to let the full power of your voice run free. Some singers do not know how to take advantage of the text. Relying on the text allows you to avoid tiring your voice, but also to be better understood by the audience, which is, after all, our main objective. Wanting to show off the power of your voice all the time is tiring and, in the long run, rather banal. By studying the score, you can see very clearly how Wagner writes long passages in a particular way, entrusting the singer with information that allows the story to flow. However, everything changes—and those moments are clearly identifiable—when you move from information to emotions, which must reach the hearts of the audience. Then you really need to use the fullness of your voice. These are two situations in which you need to use completely different technical and interpretative means.

AP A technical-interpretative solution that must inevitably be shared with the conductor. What experiences have you had in this regard?

WM I have always tried to convince them, to get them on my side. The maestro who understood me best, almost without explanation, was Daniel Barenboim, but this was also the case with Christian Thielemann. I also got on well with Riccardo Muti, because he listened and always tried to accommodate my ideas. The same was true of Claudio Abbado. With all the great conductors, I managed to achieve the performance I wanted, the one I felt was necessary.

AP Sharing the director's vision is equally fundamental in shaping the role. Which directors have you felt the strongest affinity with?

WM The director with whom I found myself in complete harmony was Patrice Chéreau. *Tristan und Isolde* at La Scala with him was the high point of my artistic career, I have no doubt about that. Every gesture, every thought, everything was in tune, everything was right. I also worked wonderfully with Harry Kupfer, as well as Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Götz Friedrich, and Johannes Schaaf. I always tried to convince others of my ideas, but I also tried to get them to explain the hidden reason behind a certain gesture or a particular scene. If the reason was convincing, I could try, perhaps looking for common ground, alternative solutions. Sometimes the discussions became rather long.

AP In Wagner's works, we encounter characters from the realm of myth who are gods or demigods. Are there any characters created by other composers that can prepare us to engage with Wagner's characters?

WM They are gods, but they are also so human. It is incredible how Wagner manages to explore the problems and relationships of people of different eras, especially in *The Ring,* in connection with the power guaranteed by the ring. Even today, if we look at Chéreau's production, we realise that the interpretative approach with which he defined those themes remains perfectly valid and surprisingly modern. Curiously, I learned a lot from the Verdi part of Eboli, which I sang early in my career, first in German and then in Italian, in both the four-act and five-act versions. Then I took part in the Paris revival of Luc Bondy's production, the French version that Antonio Pappano conducted magnificently. The performances went well, but something wasn't clicking, not as usual. I realised that loading it with the same intensity, using the same accents as in the Italian version—take, for example, the trio "Trema per te falso figliolo"—in the French opera was a mistake, and that was why the audience reacted coldly. The reason was the disconnect between language and music, something that can never happen with Wagner and that should be easier for a German singer to achieve. However, I still prefer the Italian version of *Don Carlo*.

It seems to me that, despite the libretto, Verdi captures all the musicality of his language.

AP Interpreters and directors of Wagner's works now often analyse the kaleidoscope of social issues, even controversial or hateful ones such as anti-Semitism. The element of eroticism, which in *Die Walküre* takes the form of incest, is often overlooked, particularly in light of its significance in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*. Why is this?

WM Sexuality is an underlying theme in all of Wagner's works. It is a latent element that often motivates the characters according to an evolution that Wagner develops throughout his creative career. Leaving aside *Tristan and Isolde*, sexuality plays an important role in most of Wotan's actions in *The Ring*, and it is still powerfully felt between Ortrud and Telramund and is present in other works right up to *Parsifal*. The influence of Buddhism will push the dramaturgy of Wagner's later works towards the quest to overcome desire, including sexual desire, and this is where the dual aspect of the characters of Parsifal and Kundry comes into play, destined to strip themselves of those passions.

AP Speaking of passion, singers who perform Puccini insist on the difficulty of containing emotion and feeling when singing certain works. Is the same true for Wagner? How did you learn to control your emotions?

WM It's part of a singer's professional training. It's true that interpreting Isolde's death was complex, because at the end of the opera I always felt like I was visualising my own death, yet I knew I couldn't let myself be overwhelmed by emotion.
On the other hand, I had to sing Mahler's Rückert Lieder in a recital while my mother was dying. As I was on my way to the concert hall, my sister called to tell me that our mother had passed away. I knew what I was risking by having to sing "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen", yet I managed to transform the violence of the emotional impact into a tribute to my mother. I performed that music for her.

AP In the gigantic theatrical machine of a Wagner opera, is there room to think about the audience, as well as your own part, the direction, and your relationship with the conductor? Were you able to sense their presence?

WM I always found moments in which I could connect directly with the audience. I would focus on the hypothetical Mr. Rossi in row 20, seat 43, and try to communicate the urgency only with him, the irrepressible need to convey the message that the music was entrusting to me. The absence of the fourth wall is even more evident in a *Liederabend*, but the principle is the same. Isotta's monologue in the first act of *Tristan* is being told to Brangäne, but it is also directed at the audience. Everyone can take something from it, identify with one of the two characters, or both. I always sensed the presence of many Brangänes in the audience, but also a few Isottas and various King Markes.

AP Which part did you identify with most? Which friend were you hoping to meet on stage in every production?

WM I always sought that closeness in the part I was singing at the time, whether it was Marie in *Wozzeck*, Dalila or Leonore in *Fidelio*. The role I identified with most deeply, however, was definitely Kundry. That was my part. And then one day Isolde came along.

FOTOGRAFIA DI Silvia Lelli

ABOVE
Waltraud Meier in the role of Waltraute, *Götterdämmerung*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, directed by Yannis Kokkos, 1998

THE VOICE OF WOTAN

Interview with Michael Volle by Andrea Penna

From his first Wagner production to major roles in *The Ring*, Michael Volle retraces his Wagnerian journey through voice, character, and stage awareness.

In the new century, Michael Volle's performances in Wagner's works revealed to theatre audiences around the world a sensitive performer who is extraordinarily attentive to human values and the inner lives of his characters, from Amfortas to Wotan.

AP Your musical journey began as far away from Wagner's music as possible. Was this a deliberate choice?

MV I still remember my surprise when, almost 30 years ago, during a festival dedicated to Bach, a very kind lady, I think she was an agent, asked me when I would sing my first Wotan. At the time, I wasn't even singing Mozart's operas. However, it is true that I started singing Wagner as early as 1993, beginning with the Herald in *Lohengrin*, a perfect, short part that gave me my first taste of the unique features of Wagnerian vocality. After that, Wolfram in *Tannhäuser* came quite naturally, and then for many years my career followed different paths. It was only much later that I sang Amfortas in *Parsifal*, a more significant part within Wagner's musical dramaturgy, which I fortunately waited a long time to take on. The real turning point came with Beckmesser at the Zurich Opera in 2004, a truly demanding part. I still wasn't even thinking about singing Hans Sachs, which wouldn't happen until 2012.
Since then, I have explored some of the great Wagnerian roles, starting with Wotan in *Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, in concert versions, then finally with the first complete cycle in 2019 at the Metropolitan in New York. I think the timing was perfect for me and I hope to continue singing both Sachs and Wotan for a long time to come, the two roles I feel closest to.

AP Have we forgotten *Der fliegende Holländer*? Isn't that one of the best possible preparations for Wotan?

MV That's true! It's a role I've sung so much and so often it's become a part of me—I've even taken it for granted. This wonderful character has been vital to my growth. It's the most fragile human traits that make us love the *Der fliegende Holländer*. In his duet with Senta, he reveals his desperate need to find a woman who will choose to end the spell, to end his torment. But the Dutchman cannot force her, he can only hope and pray that their relationship might lead Senta to freely make this difficult choice.

PHOTOS BY Brescia and Amisano

“The first few times, I had to concentrate hard to keep all the threads of the story together, but now it’s almost second nature to me.”

Something similar can be found in the famous duet between Wotan and Fricka in the second act of *Die Walküre*, once again an intense relationship in which the figure of the god appears to us as a sad soul, a defeated character, a prisoner of the laws he himself has established. At first, I was attracted to his glory, his dark power, especially when I thought of the Wanderer in *Siegfried*, but I soon realised that Wotan is a tragic figure, watching his power, his relationships, everything crumble. That’s why he’s so interesting.

AP I imagine you have formed your own ideas about the character. How do you reconcile this with the director’s ideas?

MV I am always open to the new perspectives of each director, but it is also true that after playing a part like this several times, certain ideas become crystallised, and I think that’s a good thing, because it’s not always the case that the director has completely clear ideas. This is not the case with Sir David McVicar, with whom I work very well. The sets and costumes for this show are quite traditional, but the action is focused on the characters’ performances. The important thing is to have a clear idea of the story you want to tell the audience. There is not much difference between being a funny birdcatcher and the god of ancient Germanic mythology. This effect can even be achieved in concert versions, such as the one I will be singing at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in the next few years, for which there will be just a few visual elements. Otherwise, the performance will rely purely on acting.

AP How do you construct a coherent interpretative arc in the grandiose scenes that Wagner gives the bass-baritone in his operas?

MV This is a challenge that comes up in *Parsifal* as well, because Amfortas does not experience a great deal of development in terms of events, but rather delves into the intricacies of a philosophical plot which, despite my familiarity with the part, still tends to confuse me today.
In *Die Walküre*, the issue is clearer: the enthusiasm of the encounter with Brünnhilde is followed by the confrontation with Fricka, an explosion of the real problems between the two, and the beginning of catastrophe for the gods. It is a long confrontation in which Wotan must admit that he has attempted to violate the laws he himself created.
The first few times, I had to concentrate hard to keep all the threads of the story together, but now it’s almost second nature to me, I don’t have to think about it and, most importantly, I’ve found my own pace. The opening section is particularly complex because everything is based on phrasing, while there is almost nothing in the orchestra. Gradually, the atmosphere heats up and you have to be very precise in your pronunciation and enunciation. Even with an international audience that doesn’t immediately grasp the meaning of every single word, the overall force of the discourse becomes clearer. Now, after many performances as Wotan, I’m really starting to enjoy this process, even if it is tiring.

AP You have performed in many theatres with a long Wagnerian tradition: Mannheim, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Zurich. Have you had any significant or revealing Wagnerian experiences?

MV I began my career in Mannheim, a traditional theatre perfect for a young singer, where I stayed for four years. The local Wagnerian Association offered scholarships that included tickets to the Bayreuth Festival. In 1991, I was able to attend the famous *Ring* directed by Harry Kupfer and conducted by Daniel Barenboim. For *Siegfried*, I sat in the front row and still have a vivid memory of John Tomlinson, a torrent of a voice I had never heard before and an incredibly powerful stage presence. At the time, I never could have imagined I would be able to play Wotan or that I would sing him in Bayreuth, which I will next year. I listened to some historical recordings, from James Morris to the great German voices of Hans Hotter and Theo Adam, but as with other parts, I always preferred not to overdo it, to be free from influence when studying. I have my points of reference—Fritz Wunderlich and Bryn Terfel—at least as inspiration, because every singer has to find their own way on a journey that virtually never ends, especially in *The Ring*. Although for me, Hans Sachs remains the most challenging and most satisfying part of all.

AP Wotan is a huge, multifaceted role, spread across the different operas, which can be sung by both basses and baritones. Here too, do you have to find your own way?

MV Without a doubt, and the same applies to Hans Sachs. For me, singing Beckmesser was an excellent learning experience. I listened to many basses having to negotiate the *tessitura* of the last act. It’s a similar situation to the Wanderer in *Siegfried*, which is quite high-pitched, especially in the third act. Given my experience today, I can say that Wotan should not be entrusted to a beginner, whatever their vocal weight—maybe Wotan in *Das Rheingold*, whose phrases are more fragmented, except for the final aria. But you still need incredible concentration to stay on stage for over two hours; you need experience.
The three parts are completely different, so much so that there are colleagues who sing Wotan in *Walküre* with no problems but not in *Siegfried*, especially basses with dark voices. When singing the entire cycle, the effort becomes very demanding, even vocally. You have four days to sing the three operas, and you really need to rest on your day off to be in shape for *Siegfried*. I’m not sure how I managed it the first few times, but now I’m looking forward to the 2026 cycles in Milan because it’s an unparalleled experience for a singer.

AP The voice is pushed to its limits in every nuance, in lines expressing outbursts of anger and even a moment in the second act of *Die Walküre* when Wotan cuts Hunding down with his voice, with that double “Geh”! Geh’!’ Is this another demonstration of the power of the Wagnerian voice?

MV In that second act, Wagner asks the singer to show very different aspects of Wotan’s personality. First, he is the defeated god, embittered by his conversation with Fricka. But until Siegmund’s sword is broken, and he sees him pierced by Hunding, Wotan does not seem to have realised the reality of the situation. Only then, after the pain, does his fury rise, which is expressed not with violence but with the different intensity in the colour of those two words. Impressive. Pure theatre.

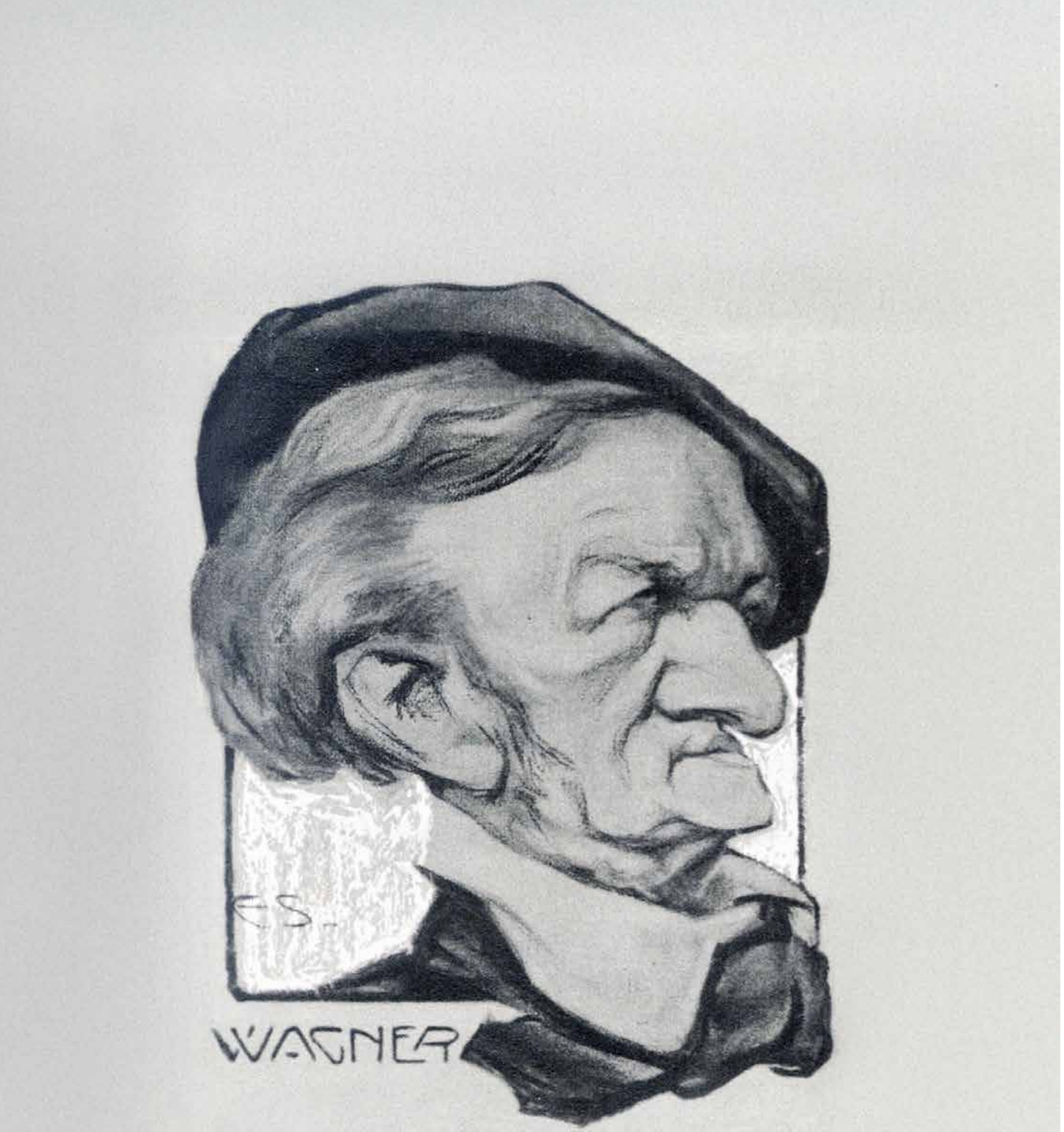
AP Not many singers have a baritone brother and another brother who is an actor. What do you talk about when you get together? Do you talk about music, your activities, characters, exchange advice?

MV We all live a bit far apart, but we get along well. For my brother Dietrich, who is five years older than me, it was more complicated, since we share the same repertoire. Even with the successful career he has had, it must not have been easy to see his younger brother follow the same path with great success. With my brother Hartmut, it’s different. I remember once inviting him to listen to one of my first performances as Papageno, a role with guaranteed success because it is a character that everyone loves. After the dress rehearsal, we spoke on the phone and I asked him for his opinion as an actor, not as a brother, and I remember his response: he harshly criticised all the jokes and cheap gags that were intended to elicit applause and advised me to focus on a less superficial and more convincing performance. I was upset at first, but it was very useful for my career as a singer-actor, and in fact I am happy that over the last 40 years singers have been forced to become more effective actors by the new way of staging musical theatre. This is why mastery of the language of the opera being sung is essential.

AP Would it be worth resuming the performance of Wagner’s operas in Italian, French, or English, depending on the theatre, as the composer intended?

MV It’s a question that comes up from time to time and is mainly linked to the relationship and difference between German and Italian styles, or, to put it simply, the difference between Wagner and Verdi. My view is that stylistic characteristics can be combined. After all, the basic technique remains the same, linked to bel canto, regardless of the language being sung and the stylistic features. In Wotan’s *Farewell*, we find a melodic line of such beauty, an arc so simple and moving that it recalls Schubert or Bellini. I am well aware that for a long time there was a school that focused primarily on a declamatory style that sacrificed the singing line for the pronunciation of the words, but today I do not find it makes sense.

PREVIOUS PAGE
Michael Volle in the role of Wotan, *Das Rheingold*, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, directed by Guy Cassiers, 2013



A charicature of Richard Wagner,
Teatro alla Scala Museum

DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN ON DISC

by Luca Chierici

The element that guides the overview of Wagner's entire *Ring* cycle discography is clearly linked to the work's overall length. A 78-rpm edition would have been impractical, as it would have required dozens of discs, making it difficult for most listeners to enjoy due to its size and cost. The same observation applies to complete studio recordings, the release of which was delayed by the various labels to such an extent that the first ones to be released were the most studied and recommended by critics.

Thus, *The Ring* discography draws primarily on complete recordings made in the theatre during live performances. In this sense, the two cycles conducted by Furtwängler at La Scala and with Rai in Rome have remained famous, having been released successively on disc and on 12 CDs. However, we recommend listening to these and the edition conducted by Clemens Krauss only after hearing more recent studio versions, as the sound quality of live recordings from that period (1950–1953) is certainly suboptimal. The Furtwängler edition, nonetheless, remains the absolute benchmark for those wishing to experience the historical vision of *The Ring*, centred on the Bayreuth tradition and the characters' portrayal in an Olympian absoluteness.

The first major studio recording of *The Ring* was released by Decca between 1958 and 1964. At the time, Georg Solti was considered unrivalled, the sound recording was highly effective, and the singers—including Neidlinger, London, Windgassen, Ridderbusch, King, Nilsson, Janowitz, Ludwig, and Flagstad—were of the highest calibre.

The Solti edition was immediately compared to Herbert von Karajan's *Ring,* released between 1966 and 1970, noting the absolute importance of the orchestral splendour exhibited by the former and the widespread search for poetic ideas pursued by the latter. The singers who participated in Karajan's *The Ring* are no less famous (Fischer-Dieskau, Kélémen, Talvela, Vickers, Dominguez, Donath, Moser, and Dernesch). We can say that these two are the reference versions that every good Wagnerian should take into consideration in their search.

Another valuable edition is the one recorded for Philips by Karl Böhm in the same period (1966-1967). To mention subsequent editions, which were often aimed at a deeper exploration of the characteristics of individual characters, we must refer to conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Marek Janowski, James Levine, Bernard Haitink, Daniel Barenboim, and Wolfgang Sawallisch.

DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN

March 1–15, 2026

Richard Wagner

ALL IN ONE WEEK, JUST AS WAGNER INTENDED

On the 150th anniversary of its world premiere in Bayreuth (1876), Wagner's *Ring* cycle returns to La Scala in March 2026 for two complete cycles, each lasting one week and featuring two different world-renowned conductors: Alexander Soddy and Simone Young. The audience will be immersed in the most visionary journey through time and humanity ever created in musical theatre, reinterpreted by director David McVicar.

The leading roles will be played by Michael Volle as the god Wotan, Camilla Nylund as his favourite daughter Brünnhilde, and Klaus Florian Vogt as the young hero Siegfried.

Full cycle tickets
Tickets for each of the two cycles of the Tetralogy are already available for purchase online and at the box office.

Individual tickets
Remaining seats, including other gallery seats, will be available for purchase as individual tickets for each performance starting on November 6, 2025.

1st Cycle	2nd Cycle	
Alexander Soddy	Simone Young	
1/03	10/03	DAS RHEINGOLD
3/03	11/03	SIEGFRIED
5/03	13/03	GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG
7/03	15/03	DIE WALKÜRE

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