

Maestro Jonathan McPhee Captures the Best of the *Ring*

On April 2 and 3, 2016, Maestro Jonathan McPhee will conduct two orchestras, Lexington Symphony and Symphony New Hampshire, to bring you a concert version of part 1 of "The Essential Ring." In anticipation of this concert, the Boston Wagner Society interviewed him about his views on this music.

You are such an accomplished musician with a great deal of experience with different types of music and a variety of orchestras. How did you decide to take that scary step (at least for some people) to the Wagnerian repertoire last year and this year?

The *Ring* has always been an exotic work for me. Right after I started studying conducting with Sixten Ehrling at Juilliard, I asked if I could sit in the pit at the Met while he conducted *Die Meistersinger*. What a thrill it was to be sitting in that violin section. That began my journey watching him conduct the Met's *Ring*. We often talked about how brilliantly constructed this massive achievement was. Just a few years earlier, I had attended my first *Ring Cycle* at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden while I was a student at London's Royal Academy of Music. What struck me was the conceptual brilliance of telling this very human story on a massive musical scale. Ehrling used to say it's all about getting the right singers. At the time it seemed like an impossible dream.

What does Wagner's music mean to you personally and as a musician?

I was first exposed to Wagner's music as an instrumentalist playing, and then conducting, the Siegfried-Idyll while at the Royal Academy. Reading about the intimate story of Wagner's assembling the musicians to play this outside the bedroom of his wife, who had just given birth to their son, was so touchingly poetic. That short little piece with all of its leitmotifs clearly encapsulated Wagner's hopes and dreams for his son. Again, there were layers upon layers of meanings when you traced back those leitmotifs to their sources in his *Ring*. I was fascinated by his vocabulary. A melody, which elicits an emotional reaction from the listener, is altered structurally to beget other melodies, creating a narrative. Intellectually you can analyze how one theme gives birth to another theme in a way that actually illustrates their connection in terms of the story. Or you can listen without analyzing how he does it and allow yourself to just be naturally carried through the story. The thematic relationships are absorbed by the listener on a completely subliminal level. Wagner is the master of musical storytelling, and this epic redefined the future of Western music.

Of all of Wagner's 13 operas, including the four in the *Ring Cycle*, why did you choose to perform an abridged version of the *Ring*?

I would dearly love to conduct *Meistersinger* and *Dutchman*, but the *Ring* has fascinated me in so many ways. It is a work about which nearly every human being has some association. The general public for the most part doesn't even know they have any connection to this work, but they do. There are common references in everything from cartoons to TV commercials. It is so daunting at 17 hours in length that most people

never even entertain the thought of trying to explore it. I wanted to find a way to make this more accessible, to illuminate some of the features that make this such a groundbreaking work, and hopefully inspire people to want more.

So far, there have been very few performances of an abridged *Ring Cycle* with a full Wagner orchestra. Did you find it difficult and/or rewarding to reduce this huge work to 5 hours instead of the usual 16 or so?

Distilling this behemoth to two parts of 2.5 hours was enlightening, frustrating, and exciting. Whenever anyone cuts or reorganizes a large theatrical work, and I have done many new versions of the great ballet classics, there are always discoveries. In a way, you are retracing someone else's creative pathway and asking how that composer made this decision, or that musical transition and why. How can you keep these sections, and connect them to those without altering the impact of the musical through line? Shape becomes something important to preserve. Wagner's method of through composing makes it very hard to make any cuts at times because his structure is constantly modulating to a new place. Interrupting that flow can sometimes create a jarring effect that destroys the end result. Solving those issues was a huge challenge. What I have come away with is an even greater appreciation of his genius.

What goal(s) did you have in mind when making this massive reduction?

I wanted to include as many of the great vocal passages as possible, keep as many of the groundbreaking orchestral selections as I could, and make key transitions as smooth and invisible as possible. Within these parameters, the story line has been retained in vocal terms while always being true to the dramatic flow of the work.

Did reductions by others—such as Lorin Maazel (orchestra only), Jonathan Dove (chamber and voice), Cord Garben (full orchestra and voice), and David Seaman (chamber and voice)—inspire you or influence you in any way? Or should listeners expect a unique McPhee version?

I am aware of the Maazel version and looked at the Seaman version. If there was any influence at all, it was the desire to take a new look at trying to capture the best of the work in my own way. I wanted to give the listener a taste of the elements of the complete work in a way that is similar in approach to the original. I don't want it to feel as though I have done anything that offers a lopsided view of what Wagner was presenting. I want the listener to feel as though they have had a complete *Ring* experience – or enough of one [so that] they will be inspired to seek out more. Think of this as the theatrical release version of one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, knowing that there is an extended version or "Director's Cut" version out there with an additional 30 minutes.

How did you decide on which segments of the *Ring* to include in "The Essential *Ring*"?

I asked many Wagner fans to send me a list of their favorite sections in the operas. I went through many articles, critiques, and books, taking note of what each referred to as the most important selections musically, historically, compositionally. I assigned each section of the operas a vote from my readings so that I could prioritize them. Then I looked at the transitions between these selections to see how I could get from section to section without making an obvious cut that would interrupt the flow, or dramatic action, or transition. In the end, the clock was a limiting factor, and there were a few things I wanted to keep and could not because of time or transition problems. This has to feel like a cohesive work and not a pastiche. I know *Ring* fans will all be missing something they love, but if the uninitiated come away feeling as though they were touched by a great theatrical experience, I will have succeeded.

Wagner's music is so rich, complex, and multilayered. Do the members of your two orchestras, Lexington Symphony and Symphony New Hampshire, which you will combine into one orchestra for these concerts, find this music daunting? What are their reactions to the music?

The most often heard comment is "OMG, I have 70 pages of music to learn . . ."

As we know, there is a lot of resistance in Boston to Wagner's music. Why is that?

That question is one that is debated endlessly. In its simplest terms, after Wagner's death his music became closely associated with the Third Reich. For many people, that connotation is so strong, it is insurmountable. Look at Wagner's relationship with Felix Mendelssohn for another example. It is a complicated relationship wrapped with layers of admiration, jealousy, and anti-Semitism.

While I was living in New York City, I was trying to program the *Flying Dutchman* Overture with an orchestra in Connecticut (early 1980s). I hit a great deal of resistance to programming Wagner. At the time, I was attending Leonard Bernstein's Mahler rehearsals at Avery Fisher Hall. We had a quiet moment in his dressing room and I told him my programming dilemma. I had seen he was doing some Wagner on an upcoming program with the New York Philharmonic. One comment he made was particularly interesting to me. He said composers and artists are often tortured souls. They are human with all of the faults that are sometimes the worst of what we are, but they are capable of divine creation. He saw nothing wrong with conducting Wagner, nor did distinguished Jewish conductors such as Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer, who themselves had been persecuted by the Third Reich. Bruno Walter was in fact born Bruno Schlesinger and had changed his last name to Walter in honor of the man who wins the singing contest in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*.

Boston has been tough on German music. There is a famous review from the early part of the last century, right after the EXIT signs were installed in Symphony Hall. They were a real novelty and the critic said they were installed so people could "exit in case of Brahms"!

You collaborated with WGBH/WCRB Radio to create *Kids' Classical Hour*, which earned you a Gabriel Award in 1998. Would you present the *Ring Cycle* to children? If yes, what form would this take and at what ages?

That was with the old WCRB, before it became part of WGBH. What a marvelous undertaking that would be. There are so many ways to approach bringing the *Ring* to young audiences. For me, the most successful children's programs are ones that parents are just as fascinated in listening to as their children.

What do you hope to achieve with the premiere of this version in Boston's musical world?

My hope is to give a platform for some amazing voices to do what they do so well – bring all of the drama and beauty of this great work to full houses of people eager to watch and listen to them tell a great story with their voices.

Do you have any plans to take these concerts elsewhere, either in the United States or abroad?

I don't have any plans at the moment. It has to start somewhere. When I created the orchestral reduction of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which premiered at Lincoln Center with choreography by Martha Graham, people told me I was crazy to touch such a complex and iconic work. Bernstein was there and told me it was terrific and would eventually earn its place. Twenty years later, my version of *Rite of Spring* was and continues to be performed regularly all over the world in opera house pits and on the concert stage. My hope is that this "Essential *Ring*" will make Wagner's epic masterpiece more accessible to orchestras, singers, and audiences everywhere.

–Dalia Geffen