

The Hub Review

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Rienzi rocks Jordan Hall



The musical forces required by Rienzi. Photo: Kathy Wittman.

Every day, I suppose, *something* surprising happens. But surely the brief local bow (one night only!) of Wagner's titanic *Rienzi* counts as the most improbable event of the musical season.

And the fact that the spanking-new Odyssey Opera, under the baton of Gil Rose (still on the rebound from the collapse of his last gig at Opera Boston) brought off Wagner's 4-and-a-half-hour behemoth - even in a concert version - pushed the occasion past the improbable and into the remarkable. For I'd say Rose's take on this Wagner obscurity struck almost its entire audience as always credible, and often compelling. And as a sheer feat of musical logistics, it was mind-boggling: there were nearly 150 people (counting the chorus, outsized orchestra and half a dozen soloists) shoe-horned onto the Jordan Hall stage for the performance - sometimes supplemented with ensembles squeezed beneath the rafters in the balcony. (One extended battle-of-the-brass-bands all but made those rafters ring.) It was almost as if Wagner (and Rose) wouldn't take no for an answer: if you were inclined to reject *Rienzi*, the pair of them were willing and able to reach out from the

stage and shake you by the lapels until you changed your mind.

Of course the opera was *designed* to overwhelm; it was Wagner's attempt to outdo the spectacular trends of his day - and he by and large succeeded; in fact *Rienzi* may have brought in the most boffo box office he ever enjoyed. But the tide of artistic history turned against it; the composer almost immediately (with *The Flying Dutchman*) poured his energy into darker thickets of theory and concept, and loudly rejected *Rienzi's* blockbuster ethos (and his acolytes did, too).

Still, you can definitely hear the stirrings of Wagner's later high style in *Rienzi*. There's a lonely trumpet call that prefigures his later emphasis on the *motif*, and he leans heavily (and imaginatively) on the brass throughout. His hero - the "last tribune" of medieval Rome (*not* ancient Rome) - stands aloof in a peculiarly brooding masculine manner, and there are sequences in which a divided orchestra seems to be storming against itself in a familiar Wagnerian way. The chorus, however, gets the most consistently exciting vocal music - and most of the real drama, too; indeed, it's ingeniously deployed as practically a character in a way that would have pleased the Greeks (and one chorale, sung by the Lorelei Ensemble, is sweetly exquisite in a way that's rare in Wagner). Plus there are some memorable stand-alone themes - the brass gets a brightly lyrical line in an extended ballet, and *Rienzi's* slowly-unfolding "prayer" aria is one of the most eloquent melodies Wagner ever wrote.

To be honest, though, the opera has its deficits; as in much of the *Ring*, despite careening from one cataclysm to the next, the plot (a hash of political intrigues with popes and Habsburgs) is bloated, the action is flat, and the repetitively heroic exchanges are unfailingly rhetorical (and often - this was really weird - between siblings exuding a quasi-sexual vibe). That park-and-bark quality in some ways made Rose's concert version more credible - but the sheer size of *Rienzi* also worked against him over the long haul. Of course, in a staged version, the orchestra would mostly be under the floor; but here the singers were forced to cut through instrumental textures blasting away over their shoulders, and loud enough to fill Gillette Stadium; over four hours, this grew exhausting (for both performers and audience, which began to drip and dribble away).

Still, the vocals were often memorable. Rose seems to have been lucky in that *Rienzi* has recently seen a small European revival, and so there were major voices available who already knew the parts. The women were

stronger than the men - soprano Elizabete Matos struck me as a bit plummy and melodramatic for Rienzi's serene sister Irene, but the lady has glorious top notes that basically could cut through the Rolling Stones. The laurels for overall excellence, however, have to be laid at the feet of soprano Margaret Jane Wray, whose turn in the trouser role of Adriano was compelling musically, intellectually, and even morally. Someone bring this talented lady back to Boston as soon as possible, please!

For their part, the men held their own, and then some - baritones David Kravitz and Robert Honeysucker probably came off best - but didn't have quite the same impact as the women. In the title role, tenor Kristian Benedickt evinced a dramatic profile that was perhaps almost *too* internalized - but in vocal terms, he acquitted himself admirably against long odds, and hung onto some color (after over three hours of singing at the top of his lungs) to essay Rienzi's famous prayer, which brought him a well-deserved ovation. Louder huzzahs, however, went to the chorus he was sometimes competing against, which under the guidance of Harris Ipock sang with clarity and commitment for every minute of Wagner's marathon.

My only real regret about the performance, I have to say, was that it wasn't enjoyed by a larger house - Odyssey's debut only half-filled Jordan Hall. But then I think the shadow of Opera Boston's demise still lingers over this new enterprise, which is being funded entirely (it seems) by local opera enthusiast Randolph J. Fuller, who reportedly engineered the sudden collapse of the earlier company, leaving plenty of its subscribers in the lurch. That's not so easily forgotten, I think - although Rose's success with *Rienzi* may make people want to forgive it.