
The Ring 10010110: vom Mythos zum Code

Das Rheingold

Seen opening night: July 27, 2026



For the festival's centennial, Wolfgang Wagner brought Pierre Chéreau to Bayreuth. His Ring cast the cycle in terms of the disruptions of industrialization and sparked controversy and even outrage at first showing. But it grew in stature and is now considered a classic. Moreover, it established a whole new

school of opera production that persists to this day.

For the festival's 150th, Katharina Wagner apparently aspired to do the same, bringing Marcus Lobbes, the director of the Academy for Theater and Digitality at Theater Dortmund, to Bayreuth to "curate" the history of the Ring and present it in an entirely new way: singers placed within a visual setting entirely generated by artificial intelligence.

The 10010110 in its billing is 150 rendered in binary code. The subtitle, "vom Mythos zum Code," translates as "from myth to code." It sounded like the potential for something new and exciting.

What we were promised: "Artificial Intelligence [appearing] on stage—not as a character, but as a generative visual force" constituting "a reflective surface for 150 years of interpretive discourse" drawn from images, voices, documents, and stagings throughout the entire course of Bayreuth's history. "The vocal performers occupy the focal point of the staging, exuding a calm, almost sculptural presence. Their bodies serve as anchoring coordinates within a visually dynamic cosmos of light, texture, historical reference, and associative meaning—within projections that rupture, continually shift, and merge into one another."

What we got: A concert performance. The elaborate costumed singers were sculptural indeed: frozen in place. (It appears only Loge was given permission to move freely about within the "reflective surface.") They were so dimly lit within the AI setting and costumed in

so consistent (not to mention ugly) a manner, it was nearly impossible to distinguish who was who.

And the AI environment itself? Stupendously underwhelming. Single images captured from the production often suggest something truly stunning. In actual experience, however, it was crude and relentless.

The projections were mostly abstract shapes and colors. Where people were rendered, they were for the most part bizarre, distorted, and unrecognizable. I read a comment online that it reminded you of the art typically hanging in your doctor's office. Not intrinsically offensive, intended to be calming, but utterly without content or meaning. Even when there was something specific to seize on (the shape of a figure, a building, or an environment) it was so blurred a reduction of the image that one has no idea who or what that might have been an image of or what "historical reference, and associative meaning" it was intended to call up. And even if they had been more representational, they all changed in a second, leaving no time to trigger any sort of "interpretive discourse."

It didn't even feel like cutting edge AI - It came off very much like the screensavers that have been built into operating systems as far back as Windows 95: pretty swirling abstract splashes of color that are pleasing to the eye but tell you nothing.

The big effects that this technology makes possible, the potential to actually deliver visualizations of the big transformations from scene to scene and present the magical/mythical effects (e.g.; the Tarnhelm demonstrations) in a manner that traditional stagecraft simply cannot do were all unrealized. It was all so dramatically static and inert.

I understand that many (most) of the audience was hoping to see AI used to generate concrete visuals to convey the narrative by bringing stage effects and settings to life. A cinematic application of AI, if you will. But we have to accept (and respect) that this was not and never was the curator's intention. Rather, the aspiration was to generate "a reflective surface for 150 years of interpretive discourse." You can criticize the decision to take this approach and certainly criticize whether the results met this goal. (They did not, in my view.) But it is unfair to criticize him for failing to generate a cinematic event when that was entirely contrary to his intended purpose.

Such a shame, for the performance was exemplary. I honestly believe Christian Thielemann led the most beautiful reading of the score I have ever heard. He struck a nice balance between the white-hot drama of Solti and the cool, reflective approach of von Karajan. If this had been an actual concert performance, it would have been historic; as presented, it felt like a cheat.

The cast was familiar: the major roles for this cycle overlap substantially with the cast I heard in Milan at la Scala earlier this year. Michael Volle's Wotan was stronger here and vocally commanding. Klaus Florian Vogt (who will also take on Siegmund and the two Siegfrieds in this cycle) offered a vivid and dynamic Loge. Christa Mayer was an awesome (as in generating real awe) Erda. Gerhard Siegel was a standout as Mime, eschewing the vocal exaggerations too many tenors adopt in the role. Mika Kares' Fasolt made one wish this character got more singing time. (It left me looking forward to his return later this week as Hunding and Hagen.) The remaining gods, goddesses and Rhine daughters were all quite fine. The only vocal disappointment (perhaps only noticeable in comparison to the level of singing going on around her) was Anna Kissjudt's woolly, hooting Fricka.

If Katharina's aspiration was for this sesquicentennial Ring to launch a new revolution in staging as Chéreau did at the centennial, she has so far missed the mark. Prior Bayreuth Rings (most recently the Castorf and Schwarz productions) provoked outrage. You could accept or reject and endlessly debate their intent and meaning and validity. But they were at least based on an idea. The idea here is simply absent. A technology is not, in and of itself, a dramatic or philosophical concept. You must do something with it to advance your argument. And even if you aspire to nothing more than a content-free demonstration of the technology, this made a poor argument for the tool. A failure as a staging; unimpressive as AI.

Perhaps we are building to something more satisfying. But I have my doubts.