

Bayreuth 2026 Reviewed

Mark J. Golden

President, Wagner Society of Washington DC

Rienzi

(Seen opening night: July 26, 2026)



So by *regie* standards this was pretty tame. Put things in a mythical dystopian future version of the 14th century and you don't have to explain the anachronisms between the text and the presentation: The large cast ubiquitously using cell phones and sending texts, the conflict between Rienzi and the nobles a high-tech modern political campaign and election, and so on.

But there was something darker going on underneath: the directors' introduction of a governing concept (presented in the now seemingly mandatory pantomime during any overture) of an incestuous relationship between Rienzi and his sister Irene. So Wagner's hero headed for a tragic fall is pretty bent before the action even gets started. Anything heroic in the title character must be recognized as his own, warped perception of reality. Where the libretto, read literally, starts with a noble Rienzi defending his sister from a physical assault, spurring him on to a quest to liberate the people from despotic nobles and restore the ancient glories of Rome, here he is responding to a social media attack on Irene (revealing their relationship and casting her as a 14th century Ghislaine Maxwell). To understand this production, you have to take every reference that Rienzi makes to Rome in his mind meaning Irene. Protecting Rome, being driven by his love for Rome, freeing Rome from societal oppression, it all comes down to literally, for him, meaning Irene. The words are there in the libretto: "I dedicated my entire life to her alone ... I wanted to see her, my splendid bride, crowned Queen of the World – for know, my bride is Rome." They are just meant to mean something else than Wagner or Bulwer-Lytton intended.

The brother lost to Rienzi and Irene (kind of a throwaway in the libretto) remains central here. He isn't (as in history and the libretto) murdered by a noble, motivating Rienzi's quest to free Rome. He is an infant who expires during the overture to some sudden illness. And his ghost haunts Rienzi's (frequent) hallucinatory episodes throughout the evening.

The ballet was hysterical: a parody of the Bayreuth festival experience populated with clichés of every Wagner opera yet to come. But it also was utterly irrelevant to both the original text and the directorial conceit. In the original the ballet was inexcusably and excessively long, but it offered a staging of the Rape of Lucretia as a parable of another hero who rose to free Rome from tyranny, and somewhat more successfully than *Rienzi*. Here, it is just an amusing interruption of the main story.

The production was thankfully free of any Nazi references or symbols. If anything, the directors seemed to want to make *Rienzi* come off as a caricature of Trumpian populism. The program book, though, seemed obsessed with the opera's Hitler taint. (Festival director Katharina Wagner has said this first ever Bayreuth production of *Rienzi* will also be its last.) Somehow a work never performed in Bayreuth before, during, or after the Third Reich because of the composer's intense desire to disassociate himself from a work he considered unworthy of his genius is the one that must be forever condemned for its inescapably Nazi core. (And yes, I know it was performed extensively in other theaters before and during the Third Reich. I know it was Hitler's favorite Wagnerian opera, that the score burned with him in his bunker, and he took great inspiration from it. But a particularly perverse form of reverse osmosis seems to be at work here. A latter-day misappropriation of the work makes any production suspect.)

There is a lot of fine music in this score. However, this was a deeply truncated version: less than 3 ¾ hours in performance, minus the intermissions. (The most complete recording of the work, by Edward Downes with the BBC Symphony, runs 4 hours 40 minutes.) There are some highly inventive musical/dramatic effects (if you follow the actual text, minus the directorial spin). Yet admittedly the total is considerably less than the sum of its parts. It isn't a great work, but the opera is better than it is given credit for, and it isn't any less musically or dramatically coherent than the bulk of opera being performed in its day. Nonetheless, Wagnerian music drama was clearly yet to come.

Still, even in its abbreviated form, it felt like a longer evening than it actually was, and I can't put this off entirely to jet lag.

The orchestra and chorus were commanding and sounded excellent, although this must have been new to all involved, including conductor Nathalie Stutzmann. It is a numbers opera, typical of French grand opera of the period, not through composed. Stutzmann's conducting felt a little too episodic. But that is a quibble.

The title role seemed tailor made for the indefatigable Andreas Schager's voice. The concept of heldentenor hadn't been created yet, but he brought the full toolbox of stentorian strength, grand opera lyricism, and stamina necessary to the part.

The two women (Gabriela Scherer as Irene and Jennifer Holloway in the trouser role of Adriano) were stunning vocally and dramatically. Holloway in particular impressed.

I have to admit, I have trouble keeping all the antagonists' roles (Colona, Orsini, Raimondo, Baroncelli, del Vecchio, etc.) straight in my mind (the absence of surtitles didn't help), but there was not a weak one in the cast.

I still think this work deserves a straight presentation in its own context, as written (flaws and all) to allow it to be judged on its actual (albeit, limited) merits. But I thoroughly enjoyed my first evening on the Green Hill in this festival season and it felt like a rare event I was lucky to experience.

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.

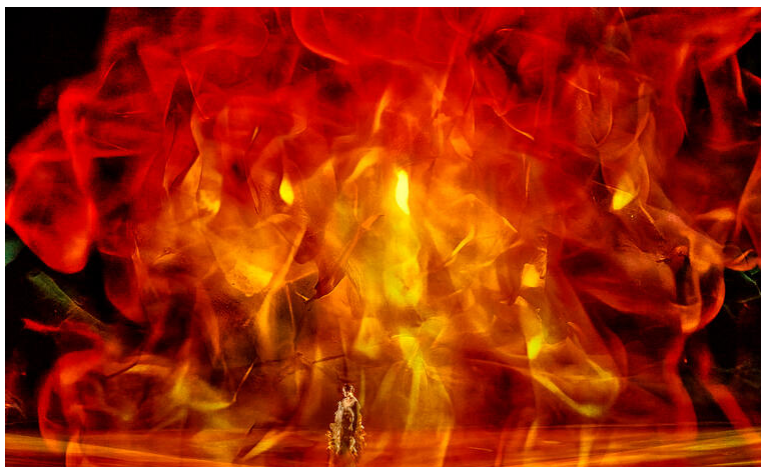
The cast was familiar: the major roles for this cycle overlap substantially with the cast I heard in Milan at la Scala earlier this year. Michael Volle's Wotan was stronger here and vocally commanding. Klaus Florian Vogt (who will also take on Siegmund and the two Siegfrieds in this cycle) offered a 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 wooly, 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.

Die Walküre

Seen opening night: July 28, 2026



The exceedingly high musical standards continue: the ever-reliable Volle magisterial as Wotan; Vogt shifting from biting Loge-mode to an intensely lyrical Siegmund; Elza van den Heever simply marvelous as Sieglinde; Thielemann in full command.

The production was also somewhat better. I still have issues with the approach, but the execution was clearer and cleaner. Rheingold was a second-by-second flood of constantly shifting and morphing images. Nothing remained observable long enough to draw any inference of meaning, (The experience was exhausting.) Things slowed down considerably tonight. The images remain largely abstract and opaque in meaning, but some were relatively concrete and offered intimations of being representative of something familiar. (I think I caught a hint or two of Wieland Wagner's 1951 disc set at moments.) Some were even photographic. But sometimes this clarity only increased the confusion: what exactly was the chain of associations that led the AI to produce a photograph of Thomas Mann during Siegmund's narration of his life with his father, Wolf, during Act I?

There were also repeated violations of the prime objective (the "vocal performers [occupying] the focal point of the staging"). These occurred with increasing frequency as the evening progressed: in much of Act III (and occasionally earlier) the sculptures ... sorry, singers were largely or completely blanked out by the AI images.

The singers were given more latitude to move about, which helped sustain a modicum of dramatic action. But not consistently. The Walküres were maddeningly static: stand, sing, march off when their music ended.

And the costumes remained largely uniform, oversized, dark, not to mention highly unflattering to the singers. A kind of generic "Game of Thrones" vibe. (I couldn't even distinguish the players when they came out for their curtain calls.)

And Hitler made his first appearance tonight. Apparently references by Wotan and Brünnhilde to the idea of protecting her in her sleep by allowing only a hero without fear to penetrate the magic fire consistently triggered photos of der Führer.

Nonetheless, a far more satisfying evening (albeit with continued qualms about the whole organizing concept).

Siegfried

Seen opening night: July 30, 2026



Overheard in foyer during the interval:
“So what do you think of the production?” “What production?”

And so it goes: the conductor, orchestra, and singers continue to deliver on the highest level. The AI generated imagery offers neither less nor more in the area of content that informs, provokes a response, or triggers an insight. There were a couple of graphic reductions that I recognized as from Castorf’s Ring.

More hallucinogenic human figures of unknown identity, relevance, or purpose, with grotesquely morphing faces and limbs. They generally end up finally transforming into a rock, a column, or just a geometric shape. A few head scratchers, like the photos of an astronaut on the moon that were prompted in the Wotan-Erda scene in Act III. But it all has stayed pretty much more of the same, and the audience seems to have given up entirely on even trying to make anything out of it. Just enjoy the pretty pictures and focus on the music. So much for providing “a reflective surface for 150 years of interpretive discourse” drawn from the history of this work and this house.

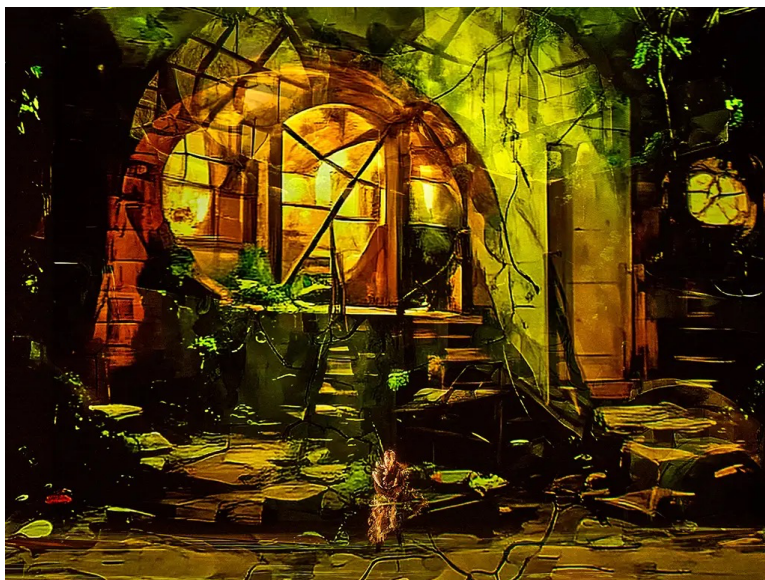
On the performers end, Christa Mayer was vocally resplendent as Erda. And special note must be made of Klaus Florian Vogt and Camila Nyland in the final scene. Such powerful music, but textually probably the weakest point in the librettos. Too often it comes off as intellectually arguing oneself into the idea of being in love, rather than the actual discovery and experience of love. Vogt and Nyland brought it life: all the excitement, fear, uncertainty, anticipation, self discovery, and at such a high level of singing.

The production team generally does not take a bow until after the final night of the cycle. There is an added sense of drama for Saturday's finale, wondering what kind of audience response they will get.

Temperatures in the mid to upper 90s at first curtain, yet it was not oppressive or unduly uncomfortable in the auditorium. Somehow, they do keep the air moving in the house. It was actually being evicted from the theatre and into the heat of the courtyard for the hour-long intervals that were a trial.

Götterdämmerung

Seen opening night: August 1, 2026



Strength upon strength from the singers and orchestra. Our first chance to hear the chorus, who sounded amazing, although kept invisible. The familiar names (Nyland, Vogt, Mayer) were all fabulous, but it was a name entirely new to me who took cycle honors: Mika Kares brought a sonorous, beautiful instrument to Hagen. A lively group of Rhine daughters sang beautifully and managed to add a spark of energy

to their characterizations, despite the static nature of the staging.

The curtain call for the production team was more civil than I expected, but I have never heard such unanimity from a Bayreuth audience. Usually there is a minority clique (pro or con) to be heard from at every production I have attended. But here the standing and cheering ovation for the artists went immediately to an unalloyed chorus of boos when the production team appeared, and back to cheers when the artists returned. There was no audible or apparent dissenting opinion.

“Artificial Intelligence Didn’t Fail Bayreuth: Natural Intelligence Did”

An interesting post popped up in my feed while here, that made a lot of sense to me. It argued that it wasn’t AI that failed; its human creators misunderstood how to use the technology. Rather than using AI as an analytical and creative collaborator, they reduced it to “a visual gimmick” and “a decorative image factory,” while direction of the singers, staging, costumes, movement, and dramatic choices remained human responsibilities

(and were sorely lacking, if not totally absent from the production). The author criticizes the decision to elevate familiar technical flaws of generative AI (“extra fingers, strangely distorted anatomy, hyperrealistic lilies, impossible rings, surreal textures”) as though these were a legitimate artistic language. “They are not. Those are [AI] errors.” Ultimately, “It [AI] should be asked to think before it is asked to draw,” because the central issue is not whether AI can make art, but whether humans understand how to collaborate with it creatively.

It’s a long post, which can be read in full here:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/41094986782/permalink/10162340564426783/>

If you were to see only still images captured from this production, you would probably be struck by how visually striking it must have been. This only goes to highlight the missed opportunity here. It is clear from this production what AI can do to create an environment within which the human artists can perform. But it was all wasted on a presentation in which the artists were left without direction and within mindless and only intermittently powerful visual effects.

Given the current state of economics in Bayreuth (and the opera world writ large), one wonders if this sesquicentennial Ring was driven more by budgetary limitations than creative considerations. (I think this production must have cost a fraction of the amount of your typical Ring.) I am sure we will see increasing use of AI technology in creating scenic spaces and stage effects in opera. But hopefully future experiments will be approached as an actual collaboration of humans applying technology to realize an artistic vision, not just an unguided release of technology.

It turns out, algorithms, left to their own devices, are as stunningly uncreative as one might have expected they would be.

But then, a bad night in Bayreuth is still better than a good night anywhere else.

