

# McVicar *Ring* at la Scala (March 2024)

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Seen March 1 through 7, 2026

By Mark Golden, President, Wagner Society of Washington DC

## Production

Opera productions (and Wagner in particular) can be realistic/literal (think the classic Schenk production at the Met) or abstract (and usually minimalist – think the Wieland Wagner new Bayreuth school) and there is vast room for productions that fall in between. But usually, the distinguishing factor is whether it comes freighted with a concept: environmentalism, fascism, industrialization, capitalism, generational conflict, feminism, you name it. Some specific meaning external to the literal words of the play that has been added on. That can be interesting.

Those looking for an external concept will be disappointed by David McVicar's production. It was neither a literal or realistic approach, nor particularly abstract. Something akin to a fantasy setting. I would call it a mythic approach: faithful to the narrative of the libretto but offering a wealth of visual tableaux in often stunningly evocative settings and stunning effects, inviting the viewer to populate it with their own responses. And by and large, highly effective in conveying the drama inherent in the words and music directly, without the need as an audience to struggle to decode for the director's externally applied meaning and messages. I liked it a lot.

That said, the personae were decidedly under-directed. Characters largely entered and exited downstage and too often performed on the apron, too seldom interacting with or in the settings. When there were many characters on stage, they often ended up lined up down stage in front of rather than in the setting. It was a missed opportunity from such an experienced and highly dramatic director.

(A particularly extreme example was the staging of the Wanderer/Siegfried confrontation in Act III of *Siegfried*: a dramatic turning point for the entire cycle, staged entirely in front of a dropped curtain. The scene offers so much more dramatic potential.)

Alexander Soddy led a propulsive and convincing reading of the orchestral score. But the vocal/orchestra balance was wildly inconsistent. Much of the cast were familiar singers I have seen in other productions, in houses much larger than la Scala, who had no trouble being heard over the orchestra, but were drowned out here. (Mercifully, none resorted to barking to be heard.) Balance within the orchestra itself was also problematic. (The tympani player often sounded like he was channeling Gene Krupa in *Sing, Sing, Sing*. The

percussive elements of the score are many and significant, but this wasn't supposed to be a star instrumental soloist opportunity.)

I don't know if this is an acoustic problem with a house better suited for the smaller orchestras more typical of Italian operas. (The large orchestra pit extends deeply into the house, is entirely exposed, and not much lower than floor level.) That may be a challenge inherent in performing Wagner at la Scala, but it was a challenge Soddy failed to consistently manage.

(And I hate sounding overly harsh, but the la Scala horn section had more than a few muffed entries for a world class ensemble.)

I had the opportunity to hear this same orchestra under Esa-Pekka Salonen in a symphony program on one of my off nights, in a stunning performance of the Sibelius Symphony No. 5. A challenging work to pull off and certainly something the players have less experience with than Wagner. It sounded like a different orchestra. So I have to attribute a large part of the orchestral shortcomings of this *Ring* to Soddy.

While truly historic (a house that deserves to be on every opera lover's bucket list) and beautiful, the Teatro alla Scala is not a great venue for seeing opera. The orchestra (platea) level seating is only barely raked, and the seating is not staggered by row. Unless you are seated behind a very short person, you spend your evening ducking left and right to try and see around the head in front of you, and probably endlessly annoying the people seated behind you. Acquaintances seated in the balconies also reported limited sightlines.

This all sounds overly critical. Despite it all, it was a production and performance I was thrilled to have the opportunity to take in. When you are swept up in the power of the work (drama and music), as I was, these all fade away as mere quibbles. It was a great week.

## Das Rheingold

Seen March 1, 2026

This was the least effective entry of the cycle. Things got off to a thrilling start with the Rhine Daughters, hair swept back as if moved by the waters of the river and subtly oscillating in place conveying a real sense of being in the waters of the Rhine.

Alberich's exaggerated, reptilian fat suit was only mildly jarring. With the introduction of the gods in scene two, a colossal misjudgment in costuming took over. All the gods (male and female) were in Elizabethan dresses. Not Elizabethan dress, literally dresses, complete with exaggerated farthingales. Why? (The portly but vocally impressive Froh (Siyabonga Maqungo) has grounds for suing the costume designer for slander.)

Impressive stagecraft for the “effects” moments – Alberich’s transformation into a dragon, for example. And a well-executed use of a dancer embodying the gold.

This was a cast seasoned in their roles. Michael Volle as Wotan, Ólafur Sigurdarson as Alberich, Jongmin Park and Ain Anger as the giants. All (when they could be heard over the orchestra) were vocally impressive and that goes a long way in pulling off this opera.

All in all, costumes aside, a good and in some moments very good start to the cycle. But overall, a disappointment.

## Die Walküre

Seen March 3, 2026

A much more successful evening. In roles very much established through long experience and fine-tuned to their vocal gifts, Michael Volle (Wotan) was in full stride vocally and dramatically and Günther Groissböck as Hagen was all snarling but still musical malevolence.

Any disappointment over Elza van den Heever’s late withdrawal from the production was immediately erased by Vida Miknevičiūtė’s gripping and beautifully sung Sieglinde. She was a standout among the more veteran and better-known members of this cast.

David Butt Philip (Siegmond) was new to me, and I think less experienced in this role. He was vocally resplendent if a little tentative as an actor. I think he will grow into a really strong Siegmund.

Camila Nyland made a splendid Brünhilde.

The costumes were thankfully more subdued. Gods were now in robes, not dresses. (Particularly liked Fricka’s hair styled as ram’s horns). Human characters in dress suggesting no particular period. More consistent with the mythic tone, and certainly less befuddling.

The Valkyries’ horses were bare-chested dancers in skyrunner jumping stilts. The initial visual impact was effective. But they were overused to the point of distraction. And often intrusively noisy clomping about the stage.

But all in all a reassuringly effective performance after the somewhat lackluster staging of Rheingold.

## Siegfried

Seen March 5, 2026

The always vocally reliable Klaus Florian Vogt has grown more comfortable in the role than when I heard him in it in Bayreuth. This was a star-worthy performance.

Strength upon strength from Michael Volle as the Wanderer. Another strong performance from Nyland.

Others of my acquaintances were less favorable to Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacker's Mime than I was. He avoided caricature and vocal exaggeration, and I found him very effective.

A really good dragon, which is something one always hopes for and is too often disappointed by in this opera.

I left the theater feeling very good about this *Ring*.

## Götterdämmerung

Seen March 7, 2026

Early in my career as a Wagnerian, I found the Norn scene that opens the opera a bit of a drag – something to be got through before the real opera begins. Now I can't imagine how I ever felt that way. Olga Bezsmertna, Szilvia Vörös, and Christa Mayer were mesmerizing.

Mayer returned later in the act, stepping in for the indisposed Nina Stemme as Waltraute, and gave no reason for feeling cheated by the substitution. She was stunning.

Groissböck was back, this time as Hagen, and owned the role so critical to the dramatic impact of the opera. Russell Braun and Olga Bezsmertna were very effective as Gunther and Gutrune. These are by definition weak characters, which make it challenging to stand out. Happily, the director avoided the common approach of trying to make them more "interesting" by grafting extraneous dramatic aspects to their characters.

The staging of Siegfried's funeral music (such a powerful interlude that can stand on its own as a symphonic tone poem) was touchingly staged, with ghostly figures of Wotan, Siegmund, and Sieglinde mournfully gathering around Siegfried's body.

The staging of the finale was perhaps the finest moment in the production. It focused less on the fire and more on the overflowing banks of the Rhine. One truly got to see and appreciate that the ring had been returned to the Rhine daughters and Hagen's failed

attempt to seize it was less of a throwaway line – things that more often gets lost in the pyrotechnics.

I know some of my criticisms of this cycle's shortcomings seem harsh and might lead to a false conclusion. It is difficult to convey how deeply satisfying this production was, despite them.