

Bayreuth 2026 Reviewed

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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.

