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Music**The Met's problem-plagued *Das Rheingold* unfolds without a hitch**

Robert Lepage's Wagner production returns to New York with sublime singing

Norbert Ernst and Wendy Bryn Harmer in '*Das Rheingold*' at the Metropolitan Opera © Ken Howard

George Loomis 8 HOURS AGO

Its 24 planks resembling the white keys of a piano still look clunky, and regardless of the configuration they transform themselves into, they remain recognisable as planks. But thanks to extensive technical work, the massive set designed by Carl Fillion for Robert Lepage's problem-plagued production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* may at last have been brought under control, judging from *Das Rheingold*, which initiated a revival of the four-opera epic last seen in 2013. Apart from a couple of minor creaks, the performance unfolded without an apparent technical hitch, including the climactic entry of the opera's mythical gods into Walhalla over a rainbow bridge so steep their bodies looked stretched out horizontally.

Here and elsewhere, Lepage's staging strives for special effects by exposing the singers (or their acrobatic doubles) to an apparent risk of bodily harm. The distracting tendency was part of a larger problem when the production was new: an emphasis on technical wizardry over cogent direction. Now that the technical wizardry seems to be functioning as planned, the question is whether Neilson Vignola's direction of the current revival will bring a depth to the core drama missing previously. As the *Ring*'s prologue, *Das Rheingold* does not suggest definitive answer. But there are encouraging signs, particularly in the final scene when characters subtly react to the chief god Wotan's ill-fated scheme to extricate himself from a bad bargain.



Carl Fillion's set for 'Das Rheingold' © Ken Howard

Tomasz Konieczny's sensational Alberich is gorgeously sung yet full of menace. Another Met debutant, Norbert Ernst, melds lyricism and acute verbal nuance for an outstanding Loge. Greer Grimsley's ably sung Wotan projects the young god's confidence as well as flashes of apprehension. The splendid cast also includes Günther Groissböck as the giant Fasolt, memorably poignant in giving up the goddess Freia.

Philippe Jordan leads a *Ring* performance much like those he has conducted in Paris and Zurich: lucid, well balanced and precise (apart from some brass transgressions), but it could benefit from more fire. At curtain calls, the Met's extensive technical crew took a deserved bow. But no opera production should ever again be as complex as this *Ring*.

★★★★☆

To May 6, metopera.org

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