

**Royal Albert Hall, London**

## **Classical review: Prom 15, Die Walküre, Daniel Barenboim, Berlin Staatskapelle**

\*\*\*\*\*

by Jessica Duchon, Wednesday July 24<sup>th</sup> 2013

Very occasionally you are lucky enough to encounter a performance in which a sort of mystical transformation takes place: when the music and the way it is performed simply embody the emotion that underlies it.

This was the culmination of *Die Walküre*, the second night of the Proms' heatwave Ring cycle. In the final scene, Wotan's Farewell and the Magic Fire Music, Daniel Barenboim and his Berlin Staatskapelle magnetised the capacity crowd with an apotheosis to the intimacy, beauty and tragedy of transgressive love. It would have been a moment to remember even if it hadn't topped five hours of roller-coaster marvels from one of the finest Wagnerian line-ups on the planet.

*Die Walküre* is where Wagner's Ring becomes human. The first act is an all-out love triangle: Siegmund and Sieglinde first fall in love, then acknowledge they are twins and fall in love anyway, despite Sieglinde's ferocious husband, Hunding (Eric Halfvarson, with a huge tone filled with myriad threatening nuance). Anje Kampe and Simon O'Neill offered respectively an impassioned and refulgent soprano, and a strong, steely tenor that could turn molten at high temperature.

Enter Act II and Bryn Terfel as Wotan. He owned the stage with his first stride, then proceeded to growl, roar, coax, seduce, whisper and thunder his way through the role, a god made of pure will-power yet consumed by self-loathing. Even with no actual ring in sight, Wotan must reject certain loves himself: first seeing his son Siegmund killed, then casting out his daughter, Brünnhilde, for her disobedience. How anybody could stand up to Terfel was hard to fathom, yet every battle of wills challenged him head on: first the imperious Fricka of Ekaterina Gubanova, but above all, Brünnhilde in the form of the glorious Nina Stemme: a phenomenal artist with an ideal balance of power, presence and tonal beauty – but more, so possessed by the music that her first Valkyrie call seemed almost to turn her inside out.

Barenboim spun from Wagner's score a range of emotional expression that knew no limits, with a sense of dramatic pacing that spoke of profound understanding and empathy. And the energy never flagged: the intensity in all its forms was sustained from first note to last. By Act III the temperature in the hall resembled a tropical rainforest, but this extraordinary evening was worth every second.