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LISA GASTEEN (BRÜNNHILDE)

“There’s no other role I can think of where you just feel great: part of this enormous volume of energy.” The Australian soprano Lisa Gasteen is reflecting on her role as Brünnhilde in Wagner’s Ring Cycle - one of the greatest challenges in the operatic repertoire but one that, for her, also brings the greatest rewards.

Gasteen has become widely associated with this role, and with good reason. From the beginning it was clear that she would become the ideal Wagnerian. Her voice has the steely power to soar through the composer’s toughest demands, yet also the sensitivity to melt and give, and her stage presence mingles gentleness, fire and strength in equal proportions.

From her first appearance as a rebellious, energetic youngster in Die Walküre, through her ecstatic awakening by Siegfried to her ultimate self-sacrifice at the end of Götterdämmerung, portraying Brünnhilde involves an emotional voyage of discovery on a phenomenal scale. “You see her from the beginning of her womanhood as a teenager, evolving into something greater,” Gasteen says. “And it doesn’t all happen on one night! It’s a wonderful role, very satisfying, and there’s plenty of scope for bringing out different elements of the character according to the director, the conductor or myself personally. Everybody can identify with the characters in the Ring story and I identify with Brünnhilde very closely. She is Woman. She embodies a woman’s journey. And it’s interesting and harrowing all at the same time, and joyous too.”

The part makes astonishing demands on its protagonist, of course. “There’s always the technical challenge of vocally performing it well and still being in good vocal health at the end. There’s the physical element, too: how to use your body cleverly so that you don’t injure yourself. That’s a real danger with dramatic roles because directors want to stretch you in every way they can and it’s our job to get through it without actually hurting ourselves! This is the most physical production of The Ring that I’ve ever done, certainly Act II of Götterdämmerung has been the most violent, and I do tend to throw myself into things. It’s not always to my own advantage, but I still do it! So I try very hard in Götterdämmerung to highlight Brünnhilde’s feminine side, to balance the physicality, the anger and the rage that’s brought out in Act II.”

But how does it feel to reach the end of such a gargantuan role and find yourself still having to sing the Immolation Scene? “There’s no feeling like it! It’s actually very calm, full of resolve, acceptance and hope.

Even if I’m tired when I begin the scene, it’s such great music that it picks me up and carries me.

“Getting the right balance is easier thanks to Tony Pappano and the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House: they’re fantastic. I feel really part of a team working on this piece with these people. And it’s a bit of an adventure. I think The Ring is always an adventure because every time you come to it, you come to it fresh.”

Jessica Duchon