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JOHN TOMLINSON

Discussing the roles of Wotan and Hagen with Jessica Duchen

If sought-after Wagner interpreters had to be ranked on a rising scale of one to ten, John Tomlinson would score 20. He has been singing the role of Wotan since 1988, including ten years at the Bayreuth Festival; the current Ring cycle at Covent Garden is his third for the house. This is just the tip of an iceberg spanning the operatic globe.

One of the most challenging characters ever created by Wagner, Wotan is, says Tomlinson, “my favourite role, incredibly full and rich. The story of the Ring cycle is the story of Wotan and his attempt to create form and structure in human life. He’s built up a moral code, virtues and ethics on the basis of which he has ruled the world before the story begins. The cycle charts the collapse of that system because of his corruption.”

It’s true of all Wagner roles, Tomlinson agrees, that a singer grows into them across the years. “They’re extremely demanding: you need stamina and strength. And you need a voice with a core, very centred, in order to carry across the orchestra. Wotan also makes tremendous demands on you as an actor. The longer you sing the part, the more you realise its depth and complexity.

“The biggest challenge is to tell the story convincingly from beginning to end. In *Das Rheingold*, Wotan has to take us through a rather unpleasant tale in which he behaves very badly, experiencing great tension and anxiety as he realises the enormity of his problems. *Die Walküre* becomes much more emotional: his farewell to his daughter Brünnhilde is absolutely critical, containing great joy as he realises that she and Siegfried will one day save the world, but combined with that euphoria, there’s an immense sadness because she must leave him forever to become human. Wotan turns into a sad figure, supposedly powerful yet impotent because he is so entrapped by his godly obligations. He realises that his days are numbered. And in *Siegfried*, in which he appears as the Wanderer, he has begun to fade into the background. The key to the role is power: even when he sings *pianissimo*, there’s a tremendous intensity to it.”

Hagen, son of Alberich and the defeater of Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung*, represents “the other side of the coin,” Tomlinson says, “a dark, brooding, rather tragic character. He’s intelligent, powerful and calculating. He engineers all the events of *Götterdämmerung* in his efforts to get the ring for himself. It’s a huge part – in this production he’s on stage for three and a half hours – and he’s a malevolent, malignant force. Wotan always possesses a great energy, a positive life force; Hagen is the opposite.

“It will be fantastic to perform this cycle in one week,” he adds, “because the director Keith Warner is incredibly knowledgeable about the Ring and Wagner: the production is intricate and very tightly knit, both dramatically and visually. One of its hallmarks is the linkage of the whole story; the proximity of the four operas will make a great difference.” All in all, “it should be a riveting experience.”

Jessica Duchen