

In 1956 Knappertsbusch, who had shared the 1951 cycles with Karajan (Testament has issued his blinding 1951 *Götterdämmerung*, 10/99) returned to give what is generally agreed to be his most successful reading, taken as a whole. Unlike Krauss, Karajan and to a lesser extent Keilberth, the older conductor took a more measured view of the scores overall, one based on his preference for the long paragraph, well defined, almost pawky rhythms, and prominent *ritardandi* at points not always indicated in the score. At moments he seems to lose focus and let things run their own way where ensemble is concerned but, as a whole, especially in *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*, his epic view of the score is almost unsurpassed. Even in the two middle operas there are moments of alternating quiet reflection and earthy energy that are very special.

He has at his command an ensemble of dedicated singers who had built their characterisations to a peak of achievement by 1956. Practically all are German-speaking and all have the art of acting with their voices in an immediate and communicative way, not to forget that they each had voices of a Wagnerian power too seldom found today.

Throughout *Rheingold* I was astonished and delighted once more by the frightening power and presence of Gustav Neidlinger's trenchantly sung Alberich and by the detail, feeling and vocal authority of Hans Hotter's unsurpassed Wotan. Beside them an erstwhile Siegfried, Ludwig Suthaus, offers a Loge who gives every word, even syllable a distinctive colour and meaning, while Jean Madeira's Erda emits other-worldly authority. And any *Rheingold* that boasts Josef Traxel, then a leading lyric tenor in Germany, as Froh has a bonus.

Four singers heard in later operas are introduced here. Paul Kuen, another familiar figure, is Mime and provides character without exaggeration. Georgine von Milinkovic introduces us to an imperiously nagging Fricka and comes into her own in the next work. Josef Greindl is a formidable if unsuited Fasolt, later a granite Hunding and a fearsome Hagen: no wonder, given so much work to do, he sometimes tires a little. Gré Brouwenstijn, a properly worried Freia, then gives us a Sieglinde who develops, in glorious tones, from an introvert to an extrovert when love strikes her. Beside her is Wolfgang Windgassen, standing in at the last moment for an ailing Vinay, and singing a Siegmund who is at once *bel canto* in line yet intensely eloquent. Incredibly, the next evening he is a tirelessly effective Siegfried.

Hotter is magnificent in Wotan's Act 2 monologue, here made to seem at the very heart of the whole cycle, and as ever deeply moving in his Act 3 Farewell, forgiving signs of vocal weariness at the start of the act. By then we have met and admired Astrid Varnay's very womanly yet heroic Brünnhilde. She occasionally overdoes the histrionics but by and large she has the character in her voice and bones in a way few other dramatic sopranos have managed.

In *Siegfried* Hotter manages ideally the humour of his Act 1 colloquy with Mime, his face-off with Neidlinger's Alberich in Act 2, and his desperation when meeting Madeira's implacable Erda at the start of Act 3. The awakening of Brünnhilde is not one of the conductor's best moments but the lovers give their all in the closing duet.

All the momentous climaxes of the cycle's finale find Kna at his most potent and involved, just as in 1951, and Varnay seconds him with her projection of all Brünnhilde's joy and sorrow. She also – incredibly – took on the Third Norn, at very short notice, Mödl having been taken suddenly ill. Madeira is heard again to advantage as both First Norn and Waltraute – would any singer do both today? Act 2 is simply tremendous. In this work Brouwenstijn returns as a vocally comely Gutrune, and Hermann Uhde, as in all the 1950s cycles, is an unsurpassed Gunther. With the Immolation one rightly feels that the earth has moved and that one has been through a life-enhancing experience, which is as it should be.

Alan Blyth, *Gramophone* magazine, 2006 (*excerpt*)



disc one
(54:09)

PROLOGUE

1. Welch Licht leuchtet dort? (6:57)
2. Treu beratner Verträge Runen (2:19)
3. Es ragt die Burg, von Riesen gebaut (8:49)
4. Zu neuen Taten, teurer Helde (6:25)
5. Willst du mir Minne schenken (6:33)
6. O heilige Götter! (2:43)
7. Siegfrieds Rheinfahrt (5:51)

ACT ONE
SCENE ONE

8. Nun hör', Hagen (2:24)
9. Wen rätst du nun zu frein (8:15)
10. Jagt er auf Taten wonnig umher (3:54)

disc two
(68:28)

SCENE TWO

1. Wer ist Gibichs Sohn? (2:17)
2. Begrüße froh, o Held (4:01)
3. Willkommen, Gast, in Gibichs Haus! (3:10)
4. Deinem Bruder bot ich mich zum Mann (4:34)
5. Blühenden Lebens labendes Blut (4:10)
6. Frisch auf die Fahrt! (2:52)
7. Hier sitzt' ich zur Wacht (9:27)

SCENE THREE

8. Altgewohntes Geräusch (8:23)
9. Höre mit Sinn, was ich dir sage! (10:09)
10. Welch' banger Träume Mären (7:59)
11. Was leckt so wütend (1:54)
12. Brünnhild'! Ein Freier kam (9:32)

Chorus and Orchestra of the Bayreuther Festspiele
conducted by Hans Knappertsbusch

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wagner

götterdämmerung

CAST

Brünnhilde - Astrid Varnay
Siegfried - Wolfgang Windgassen
Hagen - Josef Greindl
Alberich - Gustav Neidlinger
Gunther - Hermann Uhde
Gutrune - Gré Brouwenstijn
Waltraute - Jean Madeira
Woglinde - Lore Wissmann
Wellgunde - Paula Lenchner
Floßhilde - Maria von Ilosvay
1st Norne - Jean Madeira
2nd Norne - Maria von Ilosvay
3rd Norne - Astrid Varnay

Chorus and Orchestra of the Bayreuther Festspiele
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Total duration: 4hr 33:28



disc three
(77:07)

- ACT TWO
1. Vorspiel (2:57)
- SCENE ONE
2. Schäfst du, Hagen, mein Sohn! (9:27)
- SCENE TWO
3. Hoiho, Hagen! Müder Mann! (2:25)
 4. Heiß' mich willkommen, Gibichkind! (4:08)
- SCENE THREE
5. Hoiho! Hoihohoho! (10:04)
- SCENE FOUR
6. Heil dir, Gunther! (3:11)
 7. Gegrüßt sei, teurer Held (4:06)
 8. Einen Ring sah ich an deiner Hand (3:38)
 9. Heil'ge Götter, himmlische Lenker! (6:17)
 10. Helle Wehr! Heilige Waffe! (3:10)
 11. Gunther, Wehr' deinem Weibe (3:15)
- SCENE FIVE
12. Welches Unholds List liegt hier werhohlen! (3:56)
 13. Vertraue mir, betrog'ne Frau! (4:12)
 14. Auf, Gunther, edler Gibichung! (9:13)
- ACT THREE
15. Vorspiel (2:05)
- SCENE ONE
16. Frau Sonne sendet lichte Strahlen (5:05)

disc four
(73:44)

1. Ein Albe führte mich irr (4:02)
 2. Was leid' ich doch das karge Lob! (1:30)
 3. Siegfried! Siegfried! Siegfried! (9:04)
- SCENE TWO
4. Hoiho! (4:07)
 5. Trink', Gunther, trink'! (2:35)
 6. Mime hiess ein mürrischer Zwerg (4:49)
 7. In Leid zu dem Wipfel lauscht' ich hinauf (5:15)
 8. Brünnhilde! Heilige Braut! (4:27)
 9. Trauermusik beim Tode Siegfrieds (5:54)
- SCENE THREE
10. War das sein Horn! (2:36)
 11. Hoiho! Hoiho! (3:03)
 12. Nicht klage wider mich! (2:17)
 13. Schweigt eures Jammers (3:55)
 14. Starke Scheite schichtet mir dort (8:32)
 15. Mein Erbe nun nehm' ich zu eigen (2:31)
 16. Fliegt heim, ihr Raben! (9:05)

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KNAPPERTSBUSCH, BAYREUTH FESTIVAL 1956

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