

Books

Wagner's Eternal Ring: The Complete Production at the Metropolitan Opera
Photos and text by Nancy Ellison; preface by Eva Wagner-Pasquier; contributions by Otto Schenk and James Levine; foreword by Peter Gelb
Rizzoli; 240 pp. \$85

This Ring-sized coffee-table book follows the final Met presentation of the Otto Schenk-Günther Schneider-Siemssen-Rolf Langenfass production of



Wagner's cycle, from the first sighting of the Rhinemaidens to their final retrieval of their treasure, all seen from the personal viewpoint of photographer Nancy Ellison. A veteran of thirty-plus years behind the camera, Ellison has already given us a book called *In Grand Style: The Glory of the Metropolitan Opera*, as well as one called *In Classic Style: The Splendor of American Ballet Theatre* and yet another, *Romeo & Juliet: The Love Story in Dance*. This lady likes long tides, but the introductory, explanatory and concluding texts of the *Ring* book are succinct to the point of minimalism: this is a picture gallery, and as such it "reads" easily and well.

Presented in an extra-wide format, the work occasionally opens to a twenty-seven-inch spread that bears comparison to wide-screen cinema. Printed on super-heavy stock, the pictures are superbly reproduced. White borders, though pretty much mandatory for pages that show more than one frame, are used very sparingly, so the darkness of the production is a predominant motif, giving the book an eerily nocturnal cast. Though meticulously composed and edited, the shots are all from live performances, so they catch motion, expression and the sense of immediacy as well as the poetics of the overall concept. One has to know the stories of the *Ring* dramas to follow these pictures, but the sweep of events is there.

Casts and credits for this enactment of

the cycle are printed on the first full spread, followed by introductory notes by Otto Schenk and James Levine, the director and conductor. In Ellison's introduction, only slightly longer, she writes, "Overwhelmed by the emotional, undulating circular power of Wagner's music, I wasn't merely ready to begin a photo session; I was beginning a journey." Pages 231 through 239 at the end of the book contain the only production pictures not taken by Ellison. These illustrate a helpful, condensed skeleton history of the *Ring* at the Met, tidily put together by Robert A. Tuggle, director of the house's archives.

The overview runs from the *Walküre* of April 2, 1877 ("the first *Ring* work performed in America") through the cycle shown in the book, which began its intermittent run on September 22, 1986, and ended on May 9, 2009.

Like every other *Ring* at the Met (or probably anywhere else), the Schenk-directed production has taken its lumps from the critics and the ranks of amateurs. Ellison's book has two strong statements to make on this *Ring's* behalf: it was often startlingly beautiful, and to a degree it took Wagner's visionary stage instructions seriously, limiting the production innovations to technical ones. For times going forward, an artist-photographer has caught and held many of the moments that made this experience memorable.

JOHN W. FREEMAN

Re-reading Poetry: Schubert's Multiple Settings of Goethe

By Sterling Lambert
Boydell Press; 292 pp. \$105

Franz Schubert was a prolific composer in a variety of musical genres, but many of his best-known works fall into the category of lieder. The relationship Schubert built between text and music and between solo voice and piano has been studied extensively by scholars and performers alike. In this first book by St. Mary's College assistant professor Sterling Lambert, the complexities of Schubert's compositions are examined through the lens of his settings and re-settings of Goethe's poetry.

Lambert argues that Schubert's having set some of Goethe's poems more than

once demonstrates both the composer's technical versatility and his sensitivity to the nuances of the poetry. Returning to the same poems — sometimes on the same day as his original setting, sometimes years later — Schubert showed that words on a page have a multiplicity of potential readings. Subsequent settings were not necessarily written to improve upon earlier ones but instead to serve as modifications of Schubert's original reaction to the poetry. Lambert examines the fine line between Schubert's creation of freestanding works and those that can be seen as revisions of the original settings.

Including an audio CD with the book would have made the copious musical examples referenced in score form easier for the casual reader to intuit, and some readers may be scared away by a long, dense book on such a seemingly esoteric subject. That said, those who decide to take the plunge will be pleasantly surprised. The considerable scholarship contained in this volume has implications beyond its immediate focus. Through his exploration of Schubert and Goethe, Lambert illuminates the dynamic relationship between the disciplines of literature and music more generally and demonstrates that taking a close look at well-written material has endless rewards.

Lambert's passion for his subject matter is contagious. He cares deeply for his material and its implications, as evidenced by the painstakingly thorough theoretical analyses of the musical material, as well as his enthusiastic introduction and conclusion. The most interesting writing comes in Lambert's discussion of Schubert's treatments of portions of Goethe's second novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, the examples he gives demonstrate Schubert's work on the ballads sung by Mignon and the Harper. The character-based approach that Lambert assumes for these chapters helps to drive his arguments for the value of multiple readings by showing Schubert's explorations of the characters both in the context of the novel and on their own. It is fiendishly difficult to analyze genius based in subtle nuance, but the angle Lambert takes allows him to make a valiant attempt and a true contribution to the field.

LILY KASS

