

Seventeen hours of opera in seventy packed minutes of symphony

Richard Wagner is another matter. The Nibelung stories did not really exist in a cohesive narrative until Wagner assigned himself the task. He was a very gifted writer, as well as composer, conductor, and rascal. He spent nearly forty years completing this cycle of four operas, then he financed the building of a theater appropriate for their performance. Locally, Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra music director, Dirk Meyer, created a thirty minute monologue, retelling the highlights of the ancient Norse legend, according to Wagner. John Pierce dramatically shared the monologue, while Meyer led the DSSO in sharing at least thirty themes and excerpts from Wagner's imagination.

Then it was time to work hard. Back in the 1980s, renowned conductor Lorin Maazel challenged himself to 'compose' a long symphony, using only musical notes created by Wagner, capturing the abbreviated story of all four Ring operas in performance order. Those who knew their Wagner, would be able to follow the musical trail of the

story from the forging of the Ring to the destruction of Valhalla, with not a word being spoken. I am one of those listeners, and it was pure bliss.

This is very difficult music to play, with very little rest for the entire seventy minute performance. Four Wagner tubas were borrowed from the Minnesota Orchestra, anvils were borrowed from a Duluth blacksmith, and a shofar was added for some primitive horn sounds. All the instruments appeared in increased numbers, and the sound was glorious. From the rushing waters of the Rhine at the beginning, to the flooding, cascading Rhine at the conclusion, Symphony Hall was inundated with sound and emotion. Men and women died in confrontation, lovers engaged each other, and the Norse Gods were

devoured by their greed and the ever-powerful, flowing Rhine.

The DSSO players were recognized, and applauded, in order, and they were all exhausted. Meyer offered the most amazing display of conductor wisdom and cohesion I have seen since his arrival in Duluth. The orchestra outplayed themselves from beginning to end. While there were many empty seats in my section, I hope you were in yours. This kind of Wagnerian musical experience has not been shared by the DSSO since November, 1958, and it might be awhile before it happens again. I am very glad I was present in the house.

- Sam Black