

**Road Trip —****Michigan Opera: Yuval Sharon stages*****Twilight: Gods* in its parking garage (Oct. 20)**

by Nicholas Stevens



Michigan Opera Theatre's *Twilight: Gods*, an adaptation of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, rends the Ring Cycle's proto-cinematic fog to render six scenes differently, but no less powerfully. Critics have hailed it as a relief from 2020's live-performance drought, also singling out specific ways in which it transfigured its staging site, the Detroit Opera House's parking garage, into an

otherworldly horizon without sacrificing relevance to our tired-yet-twitchy American moment. The performance under review took place on Tuesday, October 20, and assured this reviewer that opera-lovers in Northeast Ohio will find future MOT productions more than worth the drive.

Yuval Sharon, announced as the company's first Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director weeks prior to the run of *Twilight: Gods*, has earned praise for the vision behind the project, full of surprises yet conceptually seamless. His direction, seen in productions of *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *Pelleas et Mélisande* for The Cleveland Orchestra, hinted at a future in which opera's endless velvet seats go the way of horse-drawn cabs and gaslit cobbles. He cut and translated the libretto as well. Yet the truest masterstroke here was saving Wagner's dramatic ends from his means, and the epic story from itself. Rather than attempt to transcend the local, utilitarian, everyday, and personal, Sharon and company took these as foundational values.

Staff and volunteers greeted arrivals in a street-level lot. MOT President and CEO Wayne Brown visited each car, Sharon at his side. Program books gave clear directions as well as notes by recognized experts. The atmosphere of personal welcome expanded as dignitaries, such as the mercifully non-kidnapped Michigan Governor Gretchen

Whitmer, offered remarks via outdoor projection screen. Before the first subgroup of cars pulled into the garage, Detroit poet Marsha Music, in character as the Ring's earthmother Erda, delivered a spoken prologue in a video by Jason H. Thompson and Kaitlyn Pietras. One of several moments in which narration stitched the heavily cut tale together, Music's summary aired out Wagner's narcotizing poems with strategic camp, wit, and colloquialism; at one point she referred to herself as Wotan's "side goddess."



On level one, placard-bearing guides advised drivers to park in a row, stop their engines, and tune their radios to a particular frequency. Before cellist Jinhyun Kim launched into arranger Edward Windels's distillation of the score, guests watched mezzo-soprano Catherine Martin fret in silence as Waltraute. Soon, Kim — out of view — launched into what sounded like a lost Bach cello suite, Wagner's waves of harmony lent quasi-Baroque clarity. Listeners barely had time to savor Martin's despondent low range and Kim's virtuosity before moving on, electronic music by Lewis Pesacov rising in the wake of Scene 1's plea to Brünnhilde to come home.

Driving between artificial saplings, listeners could easily land on real FM stations while dialing down to Scene 2's frequency — a likelihood that Sharon no doubt savored. Yet John Sterbenz, James Simonson, and J. William King soon introduced the Wagnerian...*accordion, electric bass, and bass clarinet?* Windels's pungent orchestration suited the action (and Fuchs) shockingly well, as baritone Donnie Ray Albert's Alberich badgered bass Morris Robinson's Hagen into conspiring to kill Siegfried. The low singers brought more than sinister gravity to the scene: the father-son

tension felt palpable as Robinson paced, at points making eye contact with drivers — one of several times that performers, likely at Sharon’s encouraging, met listener gazes.



Scene 3 consisted of narration by Music, with electronics by Pesacov and guides tagging deceased Ring characters’ names in chalk. Scene 4 opened with Maurice Draughn’s harp, John Dorsey’s marimba, and David Taylor’s vibraphone playing music of the Rhine, and three stellar Rhinemaidens — soprano Avery Boettcher and mezzos Olivia Johnson and Kaswanna Kanyinda — in thrilling harmony. Strong yet nuanced as Siegfried, tenor Sean Panikkar proved that he can not just hold his own in, but also bring genuine personality to the role. I turned down the radio volume, and there was his voice, still vibrating in my windshield even as the instrumental sounds all but vanished.

In Wagner’s funeral march for Siegfried, just after a triumphal peak, the brasses fade over a sequence of paired notes. Hearing them groove in Pesacov’s Motown-inspired arrangement, it was hard to resist singing, *à la* Smokey Robinson, “I’ve got sunshine when the clouds are gray,” etc. Crowned in glory beside a gramophone as Erda, Music appeared in the flesh. Her poetry in memoriam Siegfried previewed her daughter Brünnhilde’s imminent demise, while slyly referencing crises in the real world outside. Singing with a lovely (non-operatic) tone, she interpolated *I’ll Fly Away* as listeners prepared to greet the sky above.



The mere fact that drivers saw a mural reading “Detroit Opera House” upon arriving on the roof for Scene 6 proved among the production’s simplest yet most perfect details. Wrecked cars loomed as a nonet of orchestral players struck up Brünnhilde’s immolation music and the Valkyrie herself — played by soprano Christine Goerke — pulled up in the ten-millionth Ford Mustang, loaned to MOT for the occasion. At best, words can only attempt to capture the feelings conjured as the powerful, golden-voiced Goerke set the corrupt old world ablaze, while a plane towing a VOTE EARLY banner flew by.



A recording of *Götterdämmerung*’s final bars played under Music’s narration as unlucky Detroiters attempted to use the half-functioning garage, operagoers streaming by behind them. The signal wavered, as it had between floors earlier. To drive around afterward was to remain in a haze, the city transformed into a site of epic feats, which of course it always had been. To pause for a pedestrian was to think, *was he in the opera?* To drive over a bridge was to recall the music of the gods. The first thing I saw upon leaving the garage elicited an awed murmur: “young Siegfried, the hero.” It was a mural of Stevie Wonder.



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