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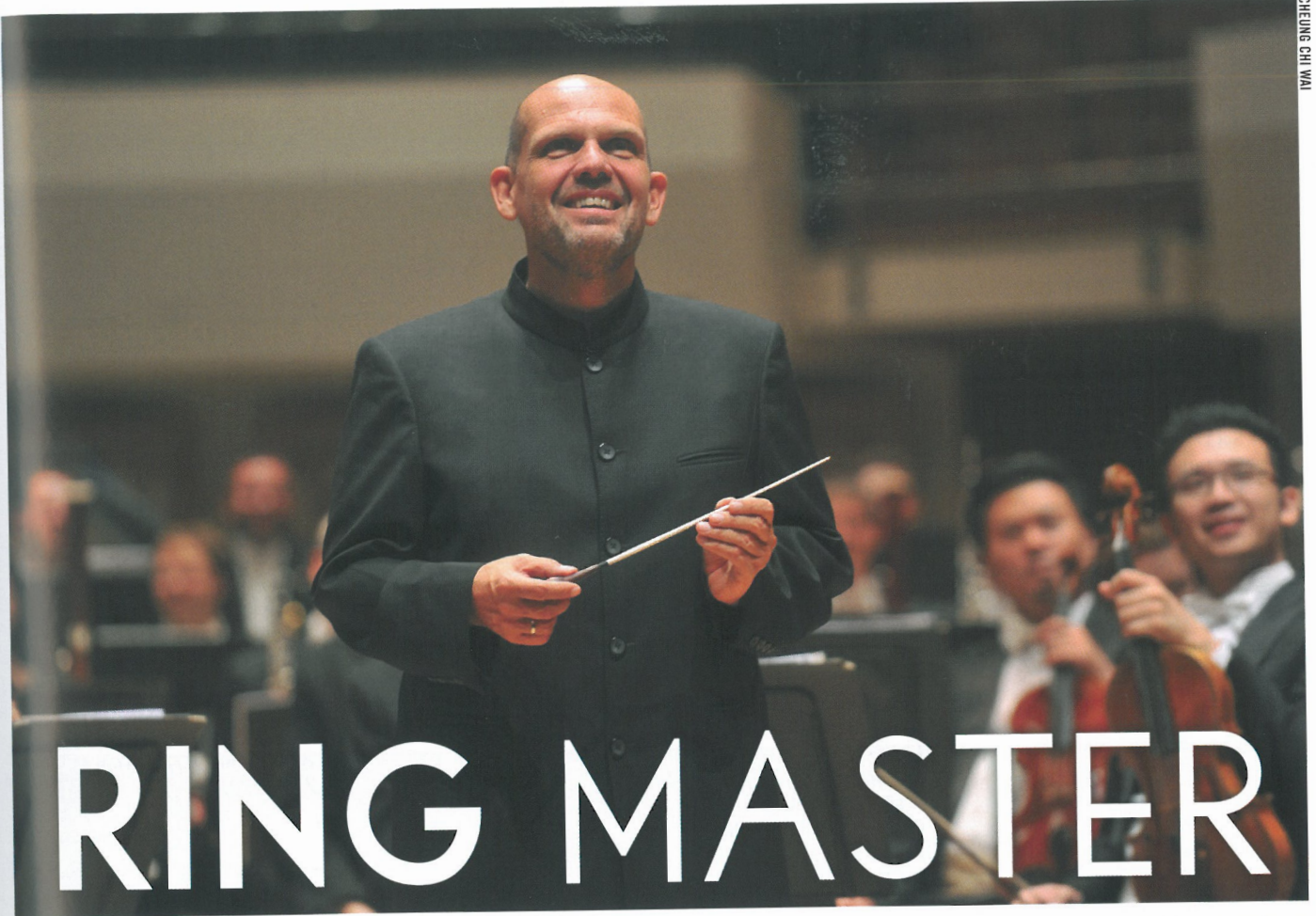
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▲ Jaap van Zweden: 'The Hong Kong Ring was a risk that has paid off'

With the release of *Götterdämmerung* on Naxos Records this month, the completion of the Hong Kong Philharmonic's *Ring* cycle has transformed the fortunes not only of the orchestra but also of its maestro, Jaap van Zweden. *Ashutosh Khandekar* discovers how Wagner's music has taken the accomplishments of orchestra and conductor to new heights, putting Asia on the map as a Wagnerian force to be reckoned with

If you have ever doubted the power of the *Ring*, then the story of transformation that unfolds within the newest 14-CD boxed set of Wagner's epic cycle should leave you convinced of its special properties. Four years ago, the Hong Kong Philharmonic set out on a journey not just to conquer a Wagnerian summit, but also to build a reputation for itself as a world class orchestra. This month, with the release of *Götterdämmerung*, their journey is complete. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, recorded at a series of live performances at the Hong Kong Performing Arts Centre, is an incredible achievement

for the HK Phil as well as for its steadfast recording label, Hong Kong-based Naxos Records, which has grown in tandem with the orchestra over the past three decades.

For more than a century, trade and finance have been the drivers of Hong Kong's phenomenal success; as one of Asia's most dynamic international hubs, it seemed high time that the city should leverage its cultural institutions to enhance its status as a 21st-century global city. That was the thinking behind the appointment in 2012 of Jaap van Zweden as music director of the Hong Kong Philharmonic. The ►

Dutch conductor and violinist had been establishing a formidable reputation in the US as music director of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. (In the same year as his Hong Kong appointment, Van Zweden was named *Musical America's* 2012 Conductor of the Year.) He is known as someone with total dedication to his work, and with an approach that is direct, fearless and totally business-like – qualities that go down well in Hong Kong.

The maestro was a seasoned Wagnerian when he arrived in Hong Kong, with *Die Meistersinger*, *Lohengrin*, *Parisfal* and *Tristan* already under his belt. He's not a fan, he admits, of the *Flying Dutchman* (too much potential for punning headlines for the Amsterdam-born jet-setter, perhaps?). In spite of his Wagnerian track record, Van Zweden was still a *Ring* novice and his choice of the Hong Kong Phil – an orchestra with little experience of Wagner – as his companion in this monumental debut was perhaps risky. He had his reasons, of course: the *Ring*, he says, requires a special set of conditions – a particular kind of preparation over time, and an uncomplaining stamina that you don't often get with an established symphony orchestra. 'One of my provisos when I started discussing this project with Michael Macleod (HK Phil's CEO) and Klaus Heyman (founder of Naxos Records) was that we should take things slowly. This is a young orchestra which is not only performing the cycle for the first time, but also recording it for posterity. They are very

'Every orchestra that wants to take itself seriously should be able to perform all the Wagner operas'

exposed, but also refreshingly open to exploring new ways of doing things. It's been a challenging journey; but with *Götterdämmerung*, we can congratulate ourselves on the most fantastic critical success.'

Apart from its sheer length, what is it about the *Ring* that makes it such a watershed for an orchestra? 'Frankly every orchestra that wants to take itself seriously should be able to perform all the Wagner operas,' says Van Zweden. 'The way he writes across the palette of the orchestra is quite unique: the orchestral sound changes once you've done Wagner, and that's not just to do with how you play as an individual, but how you listen to others across the whole orchestra – there's no other music like that.'

▼ The assembled forces at the Hong Kong Centre for Performing Arts





Headings the cast of the Hong Kong Ring (from l to r): Gun-Brit Barkmin as Brünhilde, Michelle DeYoung as Waltraute, Daniel Brenna as Siegfried and Shenyang as Gunther



It is this sense of a communal achievement that comes across so well in Naxos's recordings as the *Ring* has progressed year on year. Unlike the cast of singers, which has varied according to availability, the orchestral personnel in the HK Phil has remained constant through all the recordings: 'We've worked incredibly hard on creating a sense that the orchestra is a single character, an

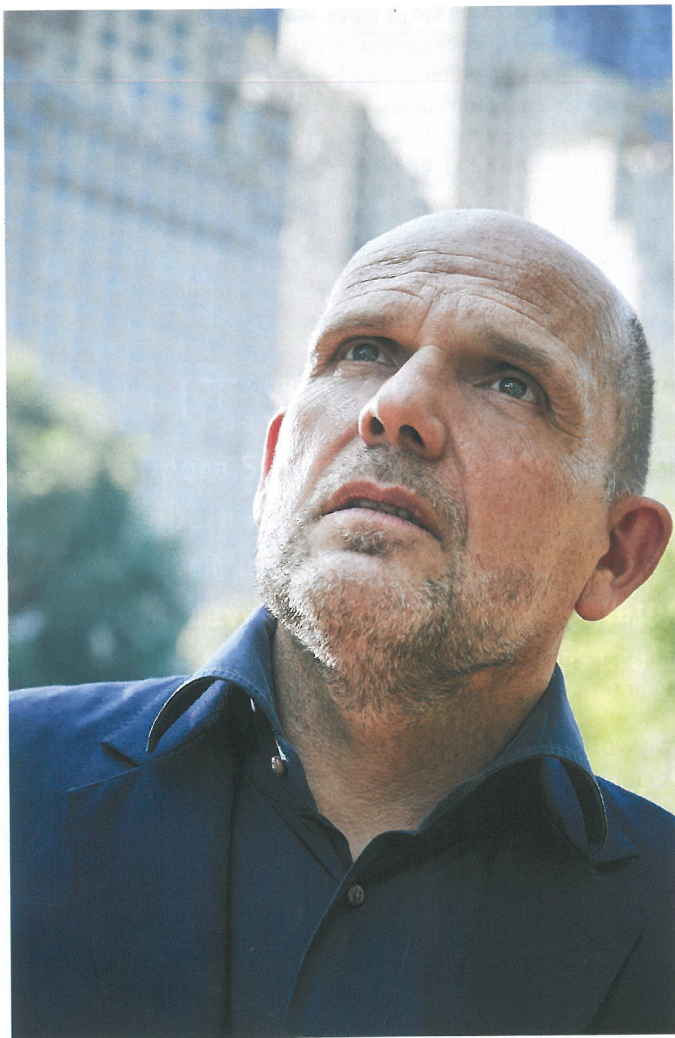
organism that responds to every colour of the musical narrative. Every section and every player needs to know when to step into the spotlight and when to go back. It's this give and take that makes Wagner so fundamental to the development of a modern orchestra. In rehearsals, I'd say to a player, *you* are very important, a voice in your own right at this point; but then sometimes you're just a background colour. I think that's something we learnt to accomplish as we went along. I don't think we achieved that in *Das Rheingold*, but we did it by the time we arrived at *Götterdämmerung*.'

The proof of the pudding came at the Beijing Music Festival last year, shortly before rehearsals for *Götterdämmerung* were due to begin. The Hong Kong Philharmonic was invited to play in a 50th anniversary reconstruction of Karajan's 1967 Salzburg Festival production of *Die Walküre*. During the performance, Van Zweden noticed something distinctly different about the sound of his orchestra: 'I felt that I was conducting a *real* Wagner orchestra, one which has Wagner in its blood. We'd taken the music for *Götterdämmerung* with us to Beijing, and although we were all exhausted after a programme of *Walküre* and Bruckner Eight, I really wanted to press on and play through the final instalment. We had already begun getting into the darker hues of Wagner and understanding the spaces in between the phrases – so it was the right time to start rehearsing *Götterdämmerung*.'

In 2016, as performances of *Die Walküre* were underway in Hong Kong, it was announced that Jaap van Zweden had been appointed music director of the New York Philharmonic, one of the 'Big Five' US orchestras and a job that he will undertake concurrently with his post in Hong Kong. The new role, which began in September this year, turns this small-statured maestro into something of a colossus in the classical music world, straddling cultures and continents and giving Wotan himself a run for his money (it's rumoured that between New York and Hong Kong, Van Zweden is one of the top five highest-salaried classical musicians in the world).

The New York job comes heavy with expectations – some would say baggage – as Van Zweden steps into the footsteps of Mahler, Toscanini, Bernstein, Masur, Maazel and a host of other luminaries who have conducted the NY Phil through its long history. Tying his two professional worlds together, Van Zweden chose 'Ride of the Valkyries' as the encore at his inaugural concert at David Geffen Hall. His approval rating with the audience was high, though some critics noted a tendency to push the orchestra too hard, over-egging the effects of the brass – especially in the Wagner.

Perhaps it will be a case of adjusting to New York's more brashly opulent and super-confident sound after the less experienced, more eager-to-learn ethos in Hong Kong. Does Van Zweden feel he will have to develop a split personality to work with these very different creatures? 'As a conductor you have to exert your influence,' he says. 'You need to have something to say to any orchestra, otherwise they won't be interested in you. The Hong Kong Phil is 42 years old; the New York Phil's roots go back 175 years. There is a big difference between the two. The NY Phil has a massive ego – but they've worked for it and they deserve it! They're enormous characters, but they are still hungry to work and prove themselves. That's why they are a great orchestra – they give their lives to the music.'



◀ Jaap van Zweden: a classical music colossus

bringing an unaffected, clean-toned directness to her character and a superb nobility to her final sacrifice. Her Siegfried is the ebullient American singer Daniel Brenna, a refined Heldentenor with a youthful glow that tended to be masked at times on the concert platform but comes across vividly in the final cut on Naxos's recording. American mezzo Michelle DeYoung almost steals the show as a voluptuous, urgent Waltraute, following in the wake of her glamorous-voiced Fricka earlier in the cycle. Chinese bass-baritone Shenyang brings a dramatic edge to his usual elegance in the role of Gunther.

With the *Ring* now firmly established as part of the Hong Kong Phil's legacy, what are the plans for the future? 'We have some big operatic plans ahead of us,' says Van Zweden. 'We'll keep going on with our statement of playing operas, because I'm a hundred per cent sure that a knowledge of operatic scores and the ability to work with singers makes a symphony orchestra play better in all its repertoire.'

The ultimate aim with the *Ring* would be, of course, to present the cycle in its entirety: 'I would love to bring it all together,' says Van Zweden, 'but it's very important if we ever do, it should take place within, at the most, 10 days. We're still hoping that there will be a new world-class opera house in Hong Kong, and this would make a fitting opening. In the current conditions, this might take a bit more time than we hoped; but if there is a will in Hong Kong, then I and the orchestra are ready to step up to the mark.'

Meanwhile, the scores of Wagner's *Ring* are being packed away and the Hong Kong Phil gets on with its regular diet of Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Brahms and Mahler over the current season. 'Is it sad to end a project such as this,' says Van Zweden, 'but I get more and more invitations for Wagner now – there are some really interesting opportunities ahead of us. I don't see this as the end of something; it's a springboard for bigger things.' **ON**

'The HK Phil is younger and its ego is less dominant; but it means that you really have to work to build the confidence in the playing and the personal signature in the sound. There are two sides to every coin. The ego gives tremendous excitement and drive to the orchestral sound: once you've mastered it will take you to extraordinary places. When there's less ego to deal with, you can reach where you want to go very quickly – there's no opposition.'

It's certainly remarkable what Van Zweden has achieved in Hong Kong in four short years. The new *Ring* stands as a testament to the determination and focus that has utterly transformed the HK Phil into certainly the best orchestra in Asia and one that can hold its own on any international platform. This is a disciplined yet flexible and sonorous ensemble that follows the architecture of Wagner's narrative in long, beautifully phrased arcs of music. It can sustain pin-drop pianissimos without compromising the clarity of the musical line. (Any orchestra can blare out deafening fortissimos for effect; it's the quiet playing that is the real sign of distinction.)

Meanwhile the cast of the Naxos *Götterdämmerung* is full of its own rewards, chief among them the clarion singing of German soprano Gun-Brit Barkmin in her role debut as Brünnhilde,

With the release of *Götterdämmerung*, the Hong Kong Philharmonic's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* conducted by Jaap van Zweden is available in its entirety on Naxos as a special boxed set. Containing 14 CDs, the box also features a USB card loaded with extra content, including the libretti to all four operas, concert photos and a behind-the-scenes video.

naxos.com/hkphil.org

The New York Philharmonic's first season with music director Jaap van Zweden features a number of vocal and operatic offerings: Schubert and Strauss songs with Matthias Goerne (December); Brahms' *Requiem* with Ying Fang and Goerne (February 2019); *The Wound-Dress* by John Adams, with Goerne (March); and in June, the world premiere of David Lang's opera *Prisoner of the State*, directed by Elkhanah Pulitzer with Julie Mathevet, Alan Oke, Jarrett Ott and Eric Owens nyphil.org

