

A Ring forged in Hong Kong comes to a fiery end

classical

Jaap van Zweden *Götterdämmerung*

Naxos

★★★★☆

Siegfried, the hero, is treacherously speared. Brünnhilde, his lover, immolates herself on his funeral pyre. Lacking any fire alarm system, the hall of Valhalla, home of the gods, burns

down alongside. For the central participants, Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the final part of his *Ring* cycle of operas, does not have a happy ending.

Comparable calamities never strike this last push in the budget label Naxos's own great operatic venture, recording the cycle live in Hong Kong — the company's home base, but an area unlikely to have been on Wagner's radar. The

Dutch conductor Jaap van Zweden, *left*, the music director of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, deserves an award for steering his players through initially unfamiliar music with such a firm hand and sustained panache. Trophies should equally go to the musicians for their warmth, robustness and precision. When the horns call out before Siegfried's fateful return to the Rhine forest in Act II, or in the Act III prelude, you're hearing one of the best Wagner orchestras in the world.

Admittedly, some blemishes exist. One is the tricky acoustic of

Hong Kong's Cultural Centre Concert Hall, which tends to place the music-making at arm's length. Eric Halfvarson's bellicose, villainous

Hagen appears to sing from his own echoing tunnel. Others in the motley cast hit the notes supremely well, but lack sufficient force or colour to keep their characterisations on the boil. With regret I'd put Gun-Brit Barkmin's Brünnhilde in that camp. Beautiful singing, yes, but when someone is crying "*Betrug!*" (trickery) with what Wagner describes as "appalling pain", something more than beauty is required. Michelle DeYoung's

Waltraute, meanwhile, could benefit from a stay in the vibrato clinic.

Even so, Van Zweden's way with the four and a half hours of Wagner's score is so tight and sensible that you keep listening past the blips and land securely on the dramatic highlights, all backed up by the orchestra's glory and the honourable Siegfried of Daniel Brenna — the hero who should never have taken Gutrune's spiked drink or worn that dangerous magic helmet. Yet had he refused, *Götterdämmerung* would have been quieter, less effective and much shorter.

Geoff Brown

