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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.
### AIDA

**Giuseppe Verdi**

**2018 October 23/24/25/26/27/28**

**Conductor:** Daniel Oren  
**Stage Director:** Francesco Micheli  
**Set Designer:** Edo Frigerio  
**Costume Designer:** Franco Squarciapino  
**Lighting Designer:** Vincenzo Cheli  
**Projection Designer:** Sergio Metalli  
**Choreo Master:** Attilio Tommasello  
**Revival Director / Choreographer:** Alessandra Panayotova  
**Aida:** HE Hui / SUN Xiaowei  
**Radames:** Carlo Ventre / Warren Mok  
**Amonasro:** Daniela Barelli  
**Ramfis:** YANG Guang  
**The King:** Sergey Morozov / ZHANG Feng  
**Priestess:** HAN Jiang TIAN / Giorgia Giannopoli  
**The Messenger:** WU Wei / HUANG Yiheng  
**ZAIDA:** ZHANG Xia  
**MOSES:** KOU Jing

### DON GIOVANNI

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

**2018 November 27/28/29/30 December 1**

**Conductor:** LU Jia  
**Director/Set Costume Designer:** YAMADA Koikosu  
**Amatic Collaboration:** ANNE BLAULANDER-KOIKOSU  
**Lighting Designer:** VINCENT Cheli  
**Choreo Master:** MENG Hua  
**Don Giovanni:** Vittoria Prato / ZHANG Yang  
**Leporello:** Carol Leaper / LI Ao  
**Donna Anna:** Francesca Dotto / XU Xiaoqing  
**Don Ottavio:** Davina Rodriguez / DONG Fang  
**Zerlina:** Juan Francisco Garbelot  
**Don G startup:** Francesco Maraviglia  
**Masetto:** Marina Mastroi / XUE Xiaozi  
**Marcellina:** Thomas Tailor / MEI Jie  
**Bianca Thor Kristiansson / ZHAI Ming

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**THE LONG MARCH**  
**YIN Qing**

**2018 November 6/8**

**Librettist:** ZOU Jinhui  
**Conductor:** ZHANG Xian  
**Stage Directors:** TIAN Qian / YANG Xiaoyang  
**Set Designer:** MA Yiyong  
**Costume Designer:** SONG Li  
**Lighting Designer:** HE Yaohui

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**LAN HUA HUA**  
**ZHANG Qianyi**

**2018 December 20/21/22/23/24/25**

**Librettist:** ZHAO Daming  
**Conductor:** LI Jia  
**Stage Director:** CHEN Xinyi  
**Set Designer:** LI Xingong / YANG Qi  
**Lighting Designer:** GUAN Zhijie / YANG Yi  
**Projection Designer:** XUE Hua  
**Choreo Master:** ZHANG Yingxi / LI Yang  
**Lan Fairy:** ZHANG Hua  
**Wang Xiaoxiang:** LIU Song  
**WANG Xiaoxiang**

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Dutch conductor and violinst 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, Parsifal 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 presenter, 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 companions in this monumental debut was perhaps risky. He had had 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 Mazur (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 exposed, but also refreshingly open to exploring new ways of doing things. It's been a challenging journey; but with Goedewaagen, 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.'
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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 Kajser's 1967 Salzburg Festival production of Die Walküre. During the performance, Van Zweeden 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 - 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 Zweeden 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 Van Zweden himself a run for his money (it's rumoured that between New York and Hong Kong, Van Zweeden 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 Zweeden steps into the footsteps of Mahler, Toscanini, Bernstein, Masur and Messel and a host of other luminaries who have conducted the NY Phil through its long history. Tying his two professional worlds together, Van Zweeden 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.

It is this sense of a communal achievement that comes across so well in Naxos' 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 throughout 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 foundational 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 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 Zweeden 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, 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 Shen Yang 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 Zweeden. ‘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 Zweeden, ‘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 Zweeden, ‘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.’

With the release of Götterdämmerung, the Hong Kong Philharmonic’s Der Ring des Nibelungen conducted by Jaap van Zweeden 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 librettos to all four operas, concert photos and a behind-the-scenes video.

naxos.com / hkphi.org

The New York Philharmonic’s first season with music director Jaap van Zweeden features a number of vocal and operatic offerings: Schubert and Strauss songs with Matthias Goerne (December); Brahms’s 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 Elizabeth Puitzer with Julie Mathiavet, Alan Oke, Jarrett Ott and Eric Owens.

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