

Elizabeth Bainbridge's Erda!
 Donald McIntyre's Wotan!
 And George Shirley's brilliant Loge played as a sassy streetwise dude. There was a certain irony that Norman Bailey was Donner in Bow Street, rather than, as in St Martin's Lane, a Wotan who was probably, the *New York Times* said, 'the best in the world today, in any language'.

By 1990 the Royal Opera was sharing productions, among them that year's *Ring* borrowed from the Deutsche Oper Berlin, by Friedrich again, with René Kollo a moving Siegfried and Gwyneth Jones an imposing Brünnhilde. Those of us who wanted to hear the sublimely



■ Emily Magee as Sieglinde and Stuart Skelton as Siegmund in the Royal Opera's 'Die Walküre'

musical Brünnhilde of Anne Evans at that point had to go to Bayreuth. The real joy was hearing Bernard Haitink as he turned into a great Wagnerian before our very ears, deepening his understanding of the work with every performance over his 15 years as music director, through to the Richard Jones production of the mid 1990s (Haitink's baffled reaction to some of the designs was thankfully and hilariously recorded for us by television) which was graced at last by Evans.

This autumn saw the third revival of Keith Warner's production, first seen as a whole 11 years ago. It has not improved with age. Since this was also the last time it will be seen there isn't much point in listing its tiresome deficiencies and distractions, with all its clever-silly designs. But one point I would make: we sometimes think of *Regieoper* as having arrived from East Germany in the 1970s, but well before that the late Brigid Brophy had dilated on the opera director who cannot bear to leave the audience unattended even for a few bars in the presence of Mozart's music—or Wagner's.

Warner is an egregious offender here, believing that the mime show he parades during every orchestral passage will tell us something the music isn't telling us anyway. If one had to name the most gloriously enriching *Ring* performances in recent years one would have to include the concert performances by the Berlin Staatskapelle under Daniel Barenboim at the Proms, by Opera North under Richard Farnes and by the Hallé under Mark Elder, not forgetting the performances by the Royal Opera at the Albert Hall under Haitink when Covent Garden was closed in 1998. I cannot be the only one left wondering uneasily whether we actually need staged Wagner.

The fulcrum of any *Ring* is the conductor, and here I felt that I had somehow come full circle. Disparate as they are in so many ways, Antonio Pappano, like Solti, is a highly accomplished musician who somehow lacks the final stamp of Wagnerian greatness. His *Ring* certainly took time to get going, with *Rheingold* and *Walküre* both distinctly