

## CONCERT CHRONICLES

### **THE VALKYRIE BY RICHARD WAGNER, IN CONCERT. GABRIEL BEBEȘELEA AND THE “TRANSILVANIA” STATE PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA DRESS REHEARSAL WITH AUDIENCE AND THE CLOSING CONCERT OF THE “CLUJ MUSICAL AUTUMN” INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL (OCTOBER 25-26, 2018)**

Wagner’s opera in concert draws the attention of Cluj audiences for the second time; it is definitely an accomplishment for symphonic and vocal-symphonic music lovers to make it through four hours of opera music, without intermission; nevertheless, just as last year (2017), the fully booked evening performance has encouraged organizers to widely open the gates of the dress rehearsal.

This interest followed by well-deserved success determines a few questions:

1. How can such elitist music fascinate mostly classically oriented audiences?
2. What does Gabriel Bebeșelea have that other valuable conductors do not?
3. What arguments can there be for an opera in concert?

We will try to answer them in the present article focusing on the young conductor Gabriel Bebeșelea and his Wagner project – the four opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The ring of the Nibelung*), initiated in 2017 in cooperation with the “Transilvania” State Philharmonic. In just a few years’ time, this magician of the baton has forever won the hearts of the Cluj audiences with his grand and innovative projects; among them, we mention only the most recent ones: Wagner – *Das Rheingold* (*The Rheingold*) (presented on October 27/28, 2017, at the closing of the Cluj Musical Autumn), Gesualdo – *Book VI of Madrigals* (February 23, 2018), as a first audition, Kalevi Aho – *Concerto for flute and orchestra* (May 13, 2018), Britten – *War Requiem* (closing concert of the season in Cluj) and, in the new season, Wagner – *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), (October 25/26, 2018, in the concert closing the Cluj Musical Autumn). Very well educated, Gabriel Bebeșelea is a pioneer who deliberately chooses the most difficult scores and studies them thoroughly in order to reveal the most subtle details of the composer’s intentions. He knows how to request the most distinctive tempos and nuances in order to obtain a powerful and subtle performance.

The first question is answered by the main character of the project himself, conductor Gabriel Bebeșelea: ... “the tetralogy raises great dilemmas over the human condition. Hidden beneath the mythical story, there are eternal problems of society and humanity... Wagner’s works are hypnotic and it is, therefore, natural for music history to be divided into ‘before’ and ‘after’ the tetralogy.”

The conductor is talented, knowledgeable, courageous as well as confident and trusting of his team. Approaching Wagner’s tetralogy in concert – for the first time in Cluj – is an act of bravery and, in one year’s time, the first two operas have been performed, *The Rhinegold* (2017) and *The Valkyrie* (2018). Wagner’s score demands for blasting sounds in the culminating moments, while the dramatic tension is amplified by the special orchestration indicated by the composer, with the tubas bearing his name. We, therefore, answered the second question.

In order to imagine the answer to our last interrogation we need to understand that, for important orchestras, having a diversified repertoire is a constant challenge, together with attracting knowledgeable, selective audience, open to new experiences. “The ‘Transilvania’ State Philharmonic is a continually growing ensemble, wishing to surpass its limitations, which can only be offered such challenges”, says Gabriel Bebeșelea. According to his stage vision, the musical impact is amplified by the visual one, hence the alternation of moments of complete darkness, where only the orchestra lights pierce through, in contrast with the stage drowning in light or in dreamlike colours. Moreover, the moments of tension, with the most intense sonority, in the beginning and in the end of Wagner’s opera, the lightning storm sound effects were apocalyptically amplified by light flashes, culminating with an immense circle of fire, embracing the entire stage. All of these have visually enhanced the dramatic effect, successfully replacing stage settings. This is the way to present a theatrical work in concert! Furthermore, the desire for a complete performance has introduced another essential character, usually concealed from the eyes of opera audiences: the orchestra.

### **On the message of Wagner’s opera**

The subject, just as that of his previous operas, is inspired by heroes of Norse mythology and reflects Wagner’s tempestuous personal life: the perpetual fight of the prodigy against the rapacious “gods” thirsty for wealth and power, expressed by the obsession for the “Rhinegold” and for the “Ring of the Nibelung”. Adding to all that, the sentimental plot is inspired by the composer’s personal life. Wagner spent his life haunted by his family’s secrets regarding his father’s identity and his mother’s biography, yet an unsolved mystery; these are the uncertainties faced by most main characters in Wagner’s operas. Another influence is the literary one: the tragic figure of byronic Manfred fascinated Wagner too: Siegmund and Sieglinde (a theme related to Æschylus’ *Oresteia*, as well as with the carol of the Sun and Moon from Romanian folklore)

and Wotan's bastard twins will be convicted by the gods to pay with their lives for their desperate love. The salvation of Sieglinde (who will give birth to Siegfried, the hero of the following part of the tetralogy) by Brünnhilde (Wotan's illegitimate daughter) will infuriate the god, who will fiercely punish his daughter for having rebelled by banishing her from the Valhalla and condemning her to be loved by a mortal. The plot of the Valkyrie ends with the image of an immense circle of fire requested by Brünnhilde – realized through an impressive light play which surrounded the stage in a spectacular way – meant to guard the sleep cast upon her by her ruthless father and which only a brave mortal would dare surpass.

### **On the conductor, the initiator of the project**

Gabriel Bebeșelea has a remarkable history, situating him among the most important conductors of his generation: winner of conducting competitions "Lovro von Matačić" – Zagreb (2015) and "Jeunesses Musicales" (2010), semi-finalist at "Donatella Flick" – London Symphony Orchestra (2014) and "Gustav Mahler" – Bamberger Symphoniker (2016), he collaborates with renowned orchestras in London, Berlin, Stuttgart, Belfast, Moscow, Zagreb and Budapest. In 2011 he won a scholarship at the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam and he worked with famous conductors such as Mariss Jansons, Bernard Haitink, Herbert Blomstedt, Cristoph von Dohnányi, Philippe Herreweghe, David Zinman and Eliahu Inbal. That same year he was named Principal Conductor at the Opera House in Iași, the youngest in Romanian history, and he received the title of "Best Conductor" (2014) at the Romanian National Opera Houses Awards. He is also Principal Conductor at the "Transilvania" State Philharmonic in Cluj-Napoca and he is involved in the reconstruction of George Enescu's manuscript scores.

### **The soloists**

**Corby Welch**, a prestigious tenor of the Düsseldorf Opera House, played the part of Siegmund. A dynamic presence, with a warm timbre, the Minneapolis born singer has a vast repertoire, having collaborated with the great opera houses in Hamburg, Essen, Lisbon, Amsterdam, Modena, Ferrara while participating in festivals in Schwetzingen or Aix-en-Provence.

**Ruxandra Donose**, in the role of Sieglinde, Siegmund's twin sister, is a famous mezzo-soprano, present on the stages of the most prodigious cultural centres of the world, among which we mention London, New York, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Madrid, Moscow, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dijon, Barcelona, Copenhagen and Tokyo. She impresses by her high quality voice, as well as by the candor of her performance.

**Heike Wessels**, in the role of Brünnhilde, Wotan's favourite daughter, has the technique and timbrality allowing her to equally approach the repertoire for mezzo-soprano and for dramatic soprano. Having studied in Essen and Strasbourg, she was a soloist in Wuppertaler, Braunschweig and, since 2008, in Mannheim. She proved to be a charming and dynamic presence, receptive of the mortals' pains.

The "Gheorghe Dima" Music Academy alumni sang side by side with the internationally acclaimed soloists: **Alin Anca**, as Hunding, Sieglinde's husband, is a baritone soloist in Berlin and, since 2013, in Hamburg; **Andrei Yvan**, as Wotan, the god of Valhalla, bass-baritone, is a soloist in theatres in Germany, Switzerland and, recently, Tel Aviv and Iași; **Orsolya Veress** – Fricka, Wotan's wife, a mezzo-soprano, is a soloist at the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca. Her strong and firm voice impressed in the role of protector of marriage. She will determine Wotan to change his attitude from protector of the twins' love to punisher and pleads for the death punishment.

**The Ride of the Valkyries**, where Wotan's daughters arrive, with a strong emotional impact, is one of the most famous scenes of the tetralogy. The composer imagined the moment by using the *cori spezzati* procedure, the eight singers being placed in the two lateral balconies, on both sides of the stage. The effect was, as foreseen, grand and overwhelming. The protagonists were six appreciated soloists from the two opera houses in Cluj and two guests from the music universities in Bucharest and Oradea:

The Valkyries, Wotan's daughters:

Oana Trîmbițaș (Helmwige) - soprano

Daniela Păcurar (Gerhilde) - soprano

Yolanda Covacinschi (Ortlinde) - soprano

Melinda Duffner (Waltraute) – mezzo-soprano

Valentina Pușcaș (Siegrune) – mezzo-soprano (Music University in Oradea)

Antonia Cosmina Stancu (Rosswisse) – mezzo-soprano (National University of Music in Bucharest)

Laura Essig (Schwertleite) - alto

Andreea Iftimescu (Grimgerde) - alto

The preparation of such a grand project involved intense musical study with experienced pianists such as Adina Mureșan and Alexandru Lazăr as well as the cooperation with a remarkable young conductor, Cristian Spătaru. We also have to mention the name of the lighting specialist, Attila Almási, who masterfully staged the light play.

Furthermore, great merit in revealing the message of the Valkyrie is attributed to translators Marius Tabacu, Roxana Stoenescu and Oana Andreica, also responsible for the high quality text in the concert leaflet.

*THE VALKYRIE* BY RICHARD WAGNER, IN CONCERT. GABRIEL BEBEȘELEA...

Few words can truly express the proper value of the exhausting effort put in, or the abnegation proven by artists confronting the score, but it all resulted in a magnificent performance, worthy of all the great stages of the world. "Following this experience, one inevitably becomes a better musician, more refined and with more attention to detail", says Gabriel Bebeșelea. On the whole, it may well be argued that congratulations and acknowledgments are definitely in order for the entire staff, conductors, soloists, orchestra, technical crew, along with the cultivated and appreciative audience.

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*Translated from Romanian by Roxana Huza*

