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Lords of the *Ring*

The first rehearsal for the four-operas-in-a-week extravaganza

Behold the Lyric's 18-hour marathon of Wagner's epic opera! By GRAHAM MEYER

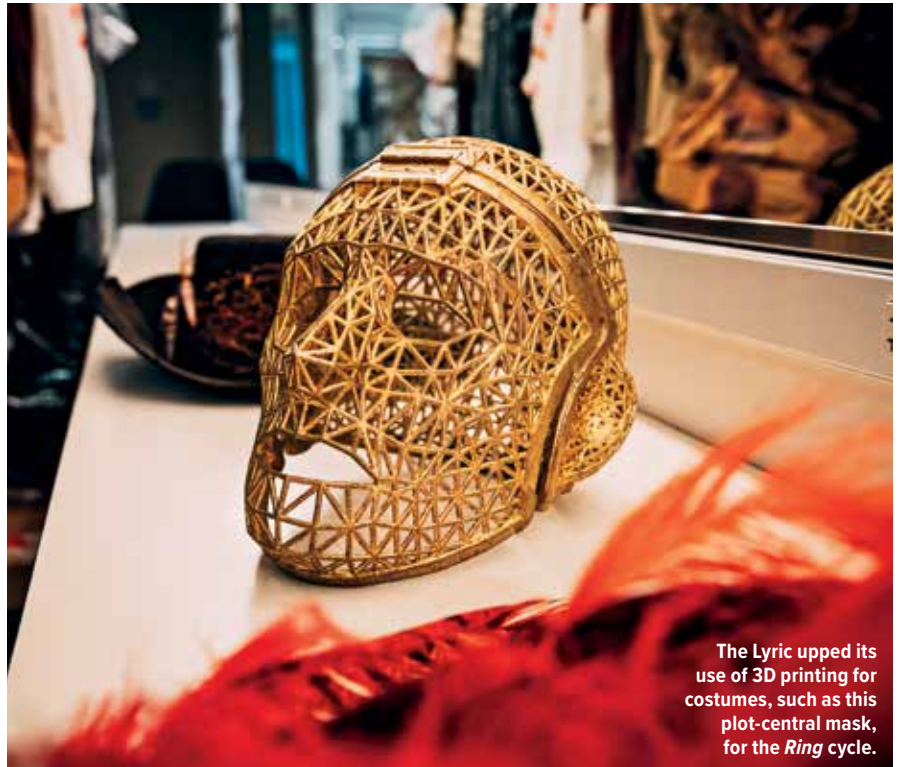
IT'S EARLY FEBRUARY IN THE labyrinthine hindquarters of the Lyric Opera House, and Wagner paraphernalia is everywhere. Giant silver horses on cranes loom above one side of the main rehearsal room, overlooking toys and a deflated dragon claw. Deep backstage, a five-ton wrecked building façade awaits its flight into the air over the stage. Near an enormous ruminant's skull, giant hands holding a fan and a hammer twiddle their thumbs, metaphorically, until their deployment. Below-stage lifts are already loaded with steampunk gears, and a pile of logs rigged to glow on command sits at the ready. In the costume room, where pell-mell racks of clothes leave passages that would chagrin a fire marshal, a woman says, "I'm on my 53rd vest."

This is what it looks like when it's T minus 57 days until the *Ring* cycle.

Richard Wagner's *Ring* saga – *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for long – is the largest challenge in opera, and maybe in all of live performance. The cycle consists of four operas: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. Together, they tell one epic story about an all-powerful ring forged from gold stolen out of the Rhine River. Valkyries fly, a hero emerges, and those few who are still alive at the end see the twilight of the gods. That's a near-laughable simplification of a story that lasts for 18 hours. *Rheingold*, the "short" one, takes two and a half hours, without intermission. The others each run about five – with intermissions, mercifully, for biological needs.

A Ring is a Brobdingnagian undertaking for an opera company. It's actually bigger than just (just!) putting on four operas, not only because three of them are nearly twice an average length, but also because they all have to cohere into one compound-German-word complete work. "It's the Mount Everest of the opera world," says Andrew Davis, the music director of Lyric Opera of Chicago and the conductor for the *Ring*.

The project began seven years ago, with early brainstorming led by the director, David Pountney. A year later,



The Lyric upped its use of 3D printing for costumes, such as this plot-central mask, for the *Ring* cycle.

Lyric publicly announced the production team, bass-baritone Eric Owens as Wotan (the king of the gods), and soprano Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde (the character who originated the opera cliché about breastplates and horned helmets). Over the several intervening years, Pountney was knighted, Davis announced his retirement from Lyric's music directorship, and the set designer, Johan Engels, died.

Lyric has parceled out the operas one per season over the past three; this production of *Götterdämmerung* premieres April 4, completing the cycle. But the experience that devotees wait for is when all four are crammed into six or seven days. Lyric's offering three such cycles this month in three consecutive weeks, and the Ringheads have duly come out of the woodwork, booking from all 50 states and, as of this writing, 28 countries.

Slotting a big Wagner opera into the regular season is one thing, logistically. Doing four in a week is another entirely. Leading up to it, Lyric will operate three rehearsal rooms at full tilt, governed by a byzantine spreadsheet color-coded by

opera and with the assistance of three times as many stage managers, joining the team right after they finish a sort of *Ring* boot camp. And then there are the sets. "My usual rule of thumb is we don't really want more than 24 trucks of scenery in the building," says Michael Smallwood, Lyric's technical director. "The *Ring* cycle alone is 25."

If that sounds like a lot of bells and whistles, then consider the performances a bell-and-whistle showcase. Smallwood says a normal production might have 20 "axes of automation," meaning elements that move, such as raising and lowering into the ceiling or on lifts. A big show has 40. The *Ring* has 112.

In its enormousness, the *Ring* has backed into the modern appetite for prestige TV series. "The *Ring* is *Game of Thrones*," Pountney says. "You're binge-watching the *Ring*." Or you will be, at least, once they forge the thing.

DETAILS The Ring Cycle Apr. 13–May 3: \$236–\$1,500 for four-opera package. Apr. 4, 11: \$99–\$319 for *Götterdämmerung*. Lyric Opera House. Loop. lyricopera.org