

Hardcover: UK

In the red corner, Leonardo. In the blue, Michelangelo

Jonathan Jones superbly re-creates the rivalrous passions that drove the work of two of the Renaissance's greatest geniuses

BY **PETER CONRAD**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

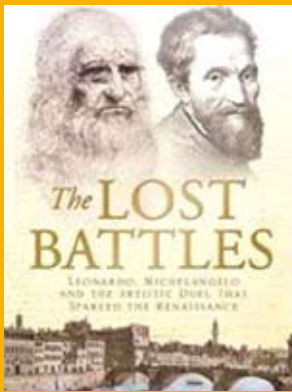
Genius prefers and perhaps deserves a monopoly: Shakespeare had no competitors among his contemporaries. But what if the geniuses or geni — the plurality is such an embarrassment that I'm not even sure what to call them — come in pairs, like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Verdi and Wagner, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, Picasso and Bacon? Great artists are unique and therefore incomparable, but that doesn't prevent them from resenting the incursion of rivals or snidely critiquing one another's work.

The duel Jonathan Jones writes about began with an exchange of words, when the young, bumptious and priggish Michelangelo insulted Leonardo da Vinci in a Florentine street, perhaps accusing him of bastardy and sexual bestiality, as well as of ineffectually designing a gigantic horse that he lacked the technical skill to cast in bronze. Leonardo, so far as Jones can tell from his reconstruction of the spat, didn't reply, but waited to take his revenge on Michelangelo's most strenuously heroic image. During a debate about Michelangelo's *David*, that proud icon of republican virtue, Leonardo sketched a parody of the figure, reducing the liberator to a muscled thug. He then suggested that when the statue was placed on display, its genitalia should be decently covered. The proposal, as Jones argues, was an act of emasculation, laughably hypocritical because it came from an artist whose anatomical drawings made detailed studies of the vulva and the elastic sphincter of the male anus. But when *David* was trundled out into the Piazza della Signoria, it did wear metal underpants — a thong of brass that supported a dainty, decent fringe of copper leaves.

It's revealing that the dispute focused on David's virility, since Jones believes that Michelangelo despised Leonardo's filmy, dandified dress and his habit of androgynously blending male and female beauty.

When the two artists imagined the infancy of Christ, they produced very different versions of the family romance. Leonardo's Jesus is petted by two maternal figures, and celebrated by a fetchingly effeminate Baptist; Michelangelo's version restores the missing figure of Joseph and gives him paternal priority in the household. The same innuendos pass

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE LOST BATTLES: LEONARDO, MICHELANGELO AND THE ARTISTIC DUEL THAT SPARKED THE RENAISSANCE

BY JONATHAN JONES

320 PAGES

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

back and forth between the *Mona Lisa* and Michelangelo's stridently energetic male nudes. Jones calls Leonardo's sly, witchy portrait the "hidden enemy" from whose seduction Michelangelo's gyrating, immobilized statues try to flee. Yet she has the last laugh: "Without stirring from her chair, Lisa del Giocondo banishes Michelangelo's men with a mocking smile."

The imaginative battle culminated with two battle scenes, epic designs that commemorated Florentine victories over nearby city states. Leonardo was commissioned to decorate the council hall with a massive account of the combat at Anghiari, while Michelangelo, allocated another section of the same room, worked on a mural about the engagement with Pisan forces at Cascina. Both works have vanished, but Jones makes it clear that the real clash was between the two artists and their contending visions of the world. Michelangelo idealized and pacified the scene, concentrating on the limbering up of naked soldiers: war for him was a gymnasium, a training ground for body and mind. Leonardo's battle was an obscene defamation of humanity, with scarred warriors rearing on horses that are as wild-eyed and eager for blood as their riders. The brown ink of the preparatory drawings makes the battlefield look like a "fecal pool." The result, Jones imagines, must have been as shocking

as Picasso's *Guernica* — a conscious attack on the civic self-righteousness that Michelangelo sought to uphold.

The feud intuited by Jones enables him to show familiar works in a new and startling way. Images here don't just converse with each other, as they're meant to do on the walls of galleries, but engage in barbed hostilities. This slanging match defines the Renaissance, as his book's subtitle claims, because competitiveness is a by-product of originality, that new and disruptive artistic aim which goaded individuals "to excel, which meant, literally, outdoing others."

Jones writes well about the period's intellectual novelty, though he's aware of its ambiguous nature: Botticelli's paintings convey a sense of the "new joy in the world," but the cynicism of Machiavelli and the rapacity of warlords like Francesco Sforza — who employed Leonardo to design military hardware and to fortify his castle — demonstrate the new violence of a world driven by the individual's quest for dominance.

There is sensuous finesse in Jones' descriptions of Michelangelo's stone flesh or of Leonardo's pictorial conundrums, like the "serious joke" of the "eye-fooling space" in the *Last Supper*. At times he hyperventilates. He gets a little swoony in the Milanese refectory when he's studying Leonardo's decomposing mural: "If pigment on plaster could flutter, it would be fluttering ever so gently in the motions of air that seem to emanate from its depths." And he totters from the strain of leaning backwards to look at the Sistine Chapel ceiling: what does it mean to say, "the unendingness of Michelangelo's art is that of the way we experience the world?"

But the only serious fault of his fine, daring book is that it's miserably under-illustrated. True, the battle murals that its title refers to are unviewable because they are lost. Even so, it's disappointing to have Jones expect us to think about them rather than looking at the sketches he analyses. The omission is nowhere more tantalizing than in his reference to Masaccio's depiction of Adam and Eve leaving Eden, copied by Michelangelo in red chalk. Adam has forgotten his fig leaf, and his genitals, according to Jones, are "robustly and somehow tragically portrayed." A robustly tragic or tragically robust penis? Now that I really want to see!

Classical DVDs

WAGNER ▼
The Copenhagen Ring
Siegfried
Decca 000440 074 3269 3



WAGNER
DAS RHEINGOLD
THE COPENHAGEN RING
Royal Danish Opera
Conducted by Michael Schonwandt
Production by Kasper Bech Holten



WAGNER ▲
The Copenhagen Ring
Das Rheingold
Decca 000440 074 3265 5

WAGNER ▼
The Copenhagen Ring
Die Walkure
Decca 000440 074 3266 2



WAGNER ▼
The Copenhagen Ring
Götterdämmerung
Decca 000440 074 3272 3



BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

"I know my ideas will perish but the *Ring* will remain. So why not be adventurous?" So says Kasper Bech Holten, director of this fabulous new version of Wagner's four-opera cycle in a bonus-track interview with Queen Margrethe of Denmark. And this version from the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen is indeed radically adventurous. But its strengths are the work's traditional strengths notwithstanding.

I don't usually take to over-innovative productions when they run counter to the intentions of the composer, as this one undeniably does. But the passion and enthusiasm of huge tracts of it more than make up for its deficiencies.

The project has a theory behind it. This is that the entire 15 hours of action are the result of Brunnhilde trying to understand what led to her betrayal by Siegfried halfway through *Götterdämmerung*. You see her racking through family records and flicking through photograph albums, even during the orchestra's playing of Siegfried's Funeral March. Indeed, the entire project has been dubbed a "feminist" *Ring*.

But what is most remarkable about it is that, unlike modernizing attempts elsewhere, it succeeds despite all this. When it comes to the greatest moments, theory is forgotten, and the production is true to the overriding spirit of the extraordinary music.

And the *Ring*, like all Wagner's mature operas, is extraordinary. You only have to consider what other composers of the day were writing to appreciate the imaginative reach and exceptional artistic daring that characterize these still unequalled creations.

That this version of the *Ring* leaps to near the top of the league is especially remarkable when you consider that none of the soloists was an international celebrity before it was issued, the Royal Danish Orchestra — whose playing is perhaps the production's overwhelming strength — was little known prior to this event, and that the Danish Opera itself had no tradition of Wagner production. This was their first *Ring* in almost 100 years.

What marks it out is its commitment and its passion. The Ikea-like furniture that features in many of the scenes is, as it were, kicked aside when it comes to the crunch. "To hell with all that," the singers seem to say. "This is Wagner, not Abba!" Then they proceed to belt it out for all they are worth.

This has been called the most passionately committed set of performances of the *Ring* since the centenary productions at Bayreuth in 1976 directed by Patrice Chéreau. These were the first to introduce a degree of non-period material, and they opened the floodgates to a whole string of far more irreverent productions in the so-called "Eurotrash" style. This Copenhagen version would have to be counted as belonging to that school, but its huge and unexpected strength is that it climbs over the rubble and assaults the Himalayan heights, quite forgetting its mundane and laugh-a-minute origins.

And there are some weird departures from the original. Even the hugely sympathetic Danish queen, one of whose cultural foundations funded the venture, balked at Sieglinde rather than Siegmund pulling the sword out from the tree in the first act of *Die Walkure*. It's one of the cycle's great moments, but the director explains that he didn't like the "Don't you worry your little

head with this, baby — leave it to the men" aspect of the story. Well, these things are all interconnected. Siegmund is able to pull the sword out because Wotan, who put it there and who is king of the gods, wanted him to pull it out. He was to use it to kill Hunding, Sieglinde's abusive husband, until Wotan's wife Fricka persuaded Wotan that family piety had to be respected, and it was Hunding, the betrayed husband, who should win the fight.

Wagner, in other words, had given the women their say all along. He gave Brunnhilde the last word, too, in her long, impassioned monologue that ends the whole cycle, and there wasn't really any need to tip the balance even further in her favor. But there are many other departures from the original plot, and when you consider them it becomes even more remarkable that the production is the overwhelming success it indisputably is.

These are some of the other breaks with Wagner's original: Wotan tears off Alberich's arm to get the ring from his finger in *Rheingold*; Hunding walks offstage with a sneering laugh after killing Siegmund at the end of Act Two of *Die Walkure* rather than being himself killed by a side-swipe of Wotan's spear; Wotan breaks his own spear in Act Three of *Siegfried* rather than it being broken by Siegfried; Hagen kills his father Alberich at the end of Act Two, Scene One of *Götterdämmerung*; and at the end of the cycle Brunnhilde, far from riding to her death into the flames, lives to hold up a new-born baby, her and Siegfried's child, for the admiration of the audience. Wagner would have turned in his grave.

Nor is it only departures from the plot that mark this production. The settings, too, are often laughably non-Wagnerian. The original audiences were astonished to see the vast stage of their newly-built opera house at first largely unused, with the action of Act One of *Die Walkure* initially taking place in a tiny modern living room, though it moves later up onto the roof. The same kind of interior is used for Act One of *Siegfried*, so that Siegfried melts the sword fragments on a kitchen stove while Mime concocts his sleeping potion on another cooker on the floor above (getting drunk as he does so).

And, in one departure from tradition I judged an unqualified failure, the three Norns at the opening of *Götterdämmerung* are displayed as zany comic modern women embedded in the audience. This conception is unfortunately far removed from the brooding resignation of Wagner's music at this point.

Why, then, with all these bizarre changes, does this version succeed? The answer is three-fold. First, the action almost invariably moves from the cozy settings onto grander, more spacious levels (both onstage and imaginatively) as the

action develops. Second, the commitment of the soloists is outstanding in virtually every case. And thirdly, the orchestral playing, and its recording, are quite simply out of this world.

The sound produced by the Royal Danish Orchestra under Michael Schonwandt is a revelation. It occurred to me that every instrument must have had a microphone embedded in it, so incisive and resonant was the effect. This can't have been the case, but nevertheless I wouldn't have believed such sound quality was possible before hearing it.

As for the soloists, the highest praise must go to just about all of them. Owing to problems of availability, different soloists sing Wotan in *Rheingold* and in the two succeeding operas. First comes Johan Reuter, then James Johnson. Both are superb. Similar problems resulted in Stig Andersen singing both Siegmund and Siegfried, with the result that he dominates the entire undertaking. But he is so marvelous, both as actor and singer, that this is no problem whatsoever. Lastly, Irene Theorin as Brunnhilde is beyond praise. The director puts her experience at the center of the proceedings, but her voice and presence would have put her there anyway.

There are many other impressive singers, and it would be tedious to list them. Mention must be made, though, of the Hunding of Stephen Milling. Such an ominous stage presence, and such a cannon's roar of a voice, rarely combine in the opera world. He is the undoubted successor to Matti Salminen, whose Hunding so honored Patrice Chéreau's *Walkure*, and who was so marvelous as both Fafner and Hagen in James Levine's 1989 New York cycle.

For the rest, there's a real pigeon for the Wood Bird (actually three were used, the director reveals), the costumes progress from the 1920s in *Rheingold* to the present day in the final opera, and much of the action in *Götterdämmerung* evokes the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. The transfer of power from the gods to greedy, partying, murderous humans is marvelously done.

As for other *Ring* cycles on the market, the 1989 New York Met version with its stellar cast is the most traditional and can be recommended as being the cycle as Wagner envisioned it (despite a strangely unsatisfactory Act One of *Die Walkure*). The 1976 Chéreau/Boulez version throws a wonderful freshness over the operas and remains incomparable. The Barcelona *Ring* of 2005, an updated version of an earlier Harry Kupfer creation, has its strong moments, but its eccentricities are not subsumed into any grander overall scheme. Only the Stuttgart version of 2004 must be dismissed outright. Some of its monstrosities (Siegfried in a kitchen apron) are repeated in this Copenhagen production, but Stuttgart's rendition never pays homage to Wagner's essential grandeur. No production that closes by simply projecting the stage directions to cover the orgasmic closing moments of *Götterdämmerung* can be seriously considered.

This Copenhagen *Ring*, then, closing with virtually the entire stage on fire, is a victory of achievement over theory. It may not be the first version for newcomers to these operas to acquire, but it can be confidently recommended as the second — after the Chéreau/Boulez one, or perhaps the New York rendition — and worthy of an honored place in anyone's collection.

There will be blood

S.J. Bolton's third novel, set in a remote corner of the Pennines, is the adept thriller writer's creepiest yet

BY **ALISON FLOOD**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

PUBLICATION NOTES



BLOOD HARVEST

BY S.J. BOLTON

432 PAGES

BANTAM

S.J. Bolton excels at summoning up the claustrophobic atmosphere of rural village life. Her third novel, *Blood Harvest*, is her creepiest yet. The setting is a village on the remote Pennine moors in northern England, where the villagers still slaughter all their own meat in a "blood harvest" ritual, "bone men" are burned on All Souls' Day and where a series of blonde little girls have gone missing in recent years. The Fletcher family, who have a beautiful fair-haired toddler of their own, Millie, are the newcomers who have "built their big, shiny new house on the crest of the moor, in a town that time seemed to have left to mind its own business" and — they should really have known better — in the middle of a graveyard.

At first, the children love their new home, but soon they start to hear voices from behind the gravestones and to glimpse a little girl with long hair and "something very wrong with her face" — initially in the church grounds, but then watching them while they sleep. "Millie, Millie fall," she tells 10-year-old Tom

in the middle of the night; he's terrified about his little sister's safety. Concerned he's showing symptoms of schizophrenia, his parents send him to Evi, a psychiatrist with a bad leg and

a pugilistic attitude who is the damaged heroine of this new Bolton book.

Harry, the new vicar, isn't so sure Tom's wrong. He's heard strange voices echoing around the church as well, and a series of events — blood in the communion wine, a smashed model of Millie on the church floor — point to the fact that newcomers aren't all that welcome in the village of Heptonclough. Then Millie goes missing.

It's a dramatic setup that in the hands of a less skilled plotter might have failed to satisfy, but Bolton keeps up the pace to the end. Her short chapters and perspective switches are classic thriller fare, but she uses them adeptly to deliver a mystery that twines its way to the secretive, rotten heart of the village and its skeletons (literal and metaphorical). This author doesn't need gruesome murder descriptions and gritty urban streets to ratchet up the fear; the unexceptional, small-town family life of Britain is her palette and she uses it to chilling, menacing effect. Just don't plan a trip to the Pennines after finishing *Blood Harvest*.