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### Opinion: Three Things We Learned from Peter Gelb Today

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That seismic thud you heard this morning was Anthony Tommasini's exclusive interview with Peter Gelb landing on millions of doorsteps in the *New York Times*.

With Tommasini, Gelb **takes the opportunity**, under no uncertain terms, to refute the criticisms that have been lobbied against the Metropolitan Opera's general manager since he assumed the post in 2006; most notably those criticisms surrounding the company's new *Ring* Cycle, which turned on a dime from flashy to dull in the hands of director Robert Lepage. It's no coincidence that this article ran mere weeks after Alex Ross wrote of the same *Ring* in the *New Yorker*: "Pound for pound, ton for ton, it is the most witless and wasteful production in modern operatic history."

The *Ring* makes its first complete run as a four-part cycle this month, starting tonight with a soft re-open of its prelude, *Das Rheingold*. It's the strongest of the four installments to be sure, though even that is like Mrs. Lincoln saying that, despite everything else, the theater wasn't half bad. As an overture to the *Ring*'s overture's...well...overture, here are three things we learned from Peter Gelb today:

#### 1. The Production is Fine; It's the Marketing that Failed

The catchphrase for this new *Ring* has, since its inception, been "revolutionary." As early as 2006, the word was bandied about along with the name Robert Lepage and whispers of Cirque du Soleil. A video that the company showed at its 2010-11 season press announcement showed acrobats bounding off walls, parallel to the floor. It was going to define the terms of the Wagnerian "gesamtkunstwerk," or total art work. Of course, we all saw how well that turned out.

Yet, all said and done, in Tommasini's words, Gelb still "sees the Lepage 'Ring' as emblematic of his mission to bring the latest theatrical thinking and technology to the Met," and he described the production as "a remarkable experience... Robert Lepage may be the first director to execute what Wagner actually wanted to see onstage." Like any good marketer, he firmly believes in his product, even if no one else does. Points to Gelb for that.

When Tommasini presses the matter, Gelb has begun to retract the R-word, noting in retrospect that it "was perhaps 'not the right word' to describe it." For all of the failings of Lepage's *Ring*, perhaps the greatest was the build-up versus the reality. We came to the Met expecting to see Santa with a Norway Spruce unable to shield the mountain of presents buried underneath. Instead, we saw a silvered fake tree being sparsely filled by our parents in the middle of the night on December 24. Gelb's faltering on semantics this week is the equivalent of those same parents saying 18 months later that perhaps it's possible that St. Nick does not, in fact, exist.



A scene from *Die Walküre* at the Met. Photo: Ken Howard

## 2. Quality Takes a Back Seat to Quantity

Provided, in Gelb's own caveat, that he's not fired before completing his first decade as general manager in 2016, the Met will present 62 new productions, including 17 works totally new to the company (be they new works, like Nico Muhly's *Two Boys*, or simply works that had yet to enter the Met repertoire, like Shostakovich's *The Nose*). In the previous ten years (1996-2006), which saw a much healthier economy, the company managed 45 new productions and 12 Met premieres under its previous GM, Joseph Volpe.

Some adventurous new works are on the horizon: a revamped *Tristan und Isolde* with Nina Stemme and Gary Lehman staged by Willy Decker (*La traviata*), the return of William Kentridge (*The Nose*) for a new *Lulu* starring Marlis Petersen and a long-overdue New York premiere of Messiaen's *St. François d'Assise*, starring Eric Owens and helmed by Robert Lepage.

Gelb uses these numbers to indicate, in a law of averages sort of way, that with more productions comes the "increased chances of success and disappointments." That may be the case, and there certainly are some operas in the Met's arsenal that could benefit from new productions. But how the final numbers will look in 2016 may not tell the exact story currently in Gelb's estimations. How many of those 62 new productions will be successful? And how does that compare with the success rate of the 45 productions mounted between 1995 and 2006?



Jay Hunter Morris in Siegfried. Photo: Ken Howard

That concern, of course, isn't addressed, but Tommasini points out one obvious child: For all of Gelb's talk of "taking risks" and providing more activity at the company "since World War II," there aren't too many risks actually being taken. "[M]any productions during the Gelb years have been found wanting," wrote Tommasini, "not because they are outrageously modern but because they are essentially traditional takes spiffed up with contemporary trappings."

## 3. Thou Shalt Have No Other Director Before Gelb

Tommasini **suggested last year** that Gelb supplement his business acumen with a second in command to take the reins on artistic planning, bringing back the onetime Met title "director of productions."

"I'm the director of productions. I hope you'll accept that," Gelb retorted in print today. Very little editorializing need come with that quote.

However, it does reveal some of the hairline fractures in the edifice of the New Met. If the arts isn't a world best equated with socialism, there is at least a democratic approach to the genre that fields input from artists, patrons, audiences and administrators. Good art interacts with its consumers, responds to its environment. In taking what were once multiple hats and fashioning them into one jaunty chapeau, Gelb's Met bears the mothball-like scent of an oligarchy.

Take, for example, Gelb's reassurance that he has been "complaining bitterly" about the noises created by the *Ring*'s creaky set, nicknamed "the Machine." However, no mention is made in Tommasini's

article about the safety risks that have already manifested into **accidents** involving the Cycle's performers. But at least we now know where the priorities are, and who unequivocally controls them.



*Deborah Voigt and Jay Hunter Morris in Götterdämmerung. Photo: Ken Howard*