

# Wednesday, April 8, 2015

## Concert Review: A Journey in the Dark

The 21st Century Orchestra and Chorus plays *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

by [Paul J. Pelkonen](#)



Sir Ian McKellen as Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*  
Credit: © 2001 New Line Productions/Wingnut Films. Screen capture by Pyxurz

The long tradition of concert music in Western culture has spent much of the last century intersecting with the motion picture industry, starting with composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold's emigration to Hollywood in 1935. On Tuesday night at Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theater, the 21st Century Orchestra and Chorus and their music director Ludwig Wicki took the next steps in that journey, performing the complete score to the 2001 movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* in concert with a screening of Peter Jackson's film.

*The Fellowship of the Ring* is the first part of Mr. Jackson's cinematic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, adapted from the award-winning fantasy novel by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien tells the story of a hobbit tasked with returning a Ring of Power to be destroyed in the dark land of Mordor, battling long distances and impossible odds in his quest. That quest is accompanied by a massive orchestra and chorus (250 players in total) and a rich and imaginative score by composer Howard Shore. The orchestra supplies triumph and dread, often at the same time, accompanying the journeys, battles and yes, humor in this three-hour film. (On Tuesday night, the film was shown with an intermission.)

Starting with a descending vocal line and a plaintive melody in the strings and woodwinds, this score fuses concepts from 19th and 20th century orchestral and choral music with Mr. Shore's own melodic sensibility. There are references to other composers but they are mostly stylistic. Mr. Shore uses a Wagnerian leitmotiv system that gives guideposts to the listener, and has the themes stack and comment on each other in later scenes. Conductor Ludwig Wicki drew a clarity of texture from his orchestra, allowing the alert listener to hear subtext and commentary even in the most bombastic moments.

The huge orchestra occupied the (covered) pit area and stage of the Koch Theater, under a hung projection movie screen. Although lights from the musician's desks dimmed the vividness of the film a little, the addition of the orchestra as a visual element had its own appeal. The choristers ranked behind the orchestra, and the film's dialogue and Foley effects were delivered through a PA system that flanked the players, with English subtitles added to make the dialogue clear if the orchestra drowned it out. A little folk ensemble (heard mostly in the Hobbiton scenes and not at all in the second half of the film) sat stage right, with hammer dulcimer, mandolin, accordion and Irish harp adding texture in the more rustic scenes.

Soprano soloist Kaitlyn Lusk sang into a microphone from behind the string section, adding her voice to key passages depicting the Elf-maid Arwen and the moving *Lament for Gandalf* in the film's last act. The men and

women of the 21st Century Chorus flanked by members of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. This seating allowed the singers to function like the block settings on a pipe organ, adding men's, women's and children's voices as needed. This arrangement mostly worked, especially as balance was achieved and fine-tuned in the tricky ballet-friendly acoustics of the Koch Theater.

The chorus was omnipresent last night, from supplying wordless melismas in the atmospheric prologue or chanting the Black Speech of Mordor as the heroes of were under threat or attack. These choral parts are challenging, dense and often multi-layered, ranging from gossamer-like figures (for the Elves) to a bass choir sounding not unlike a group of Russian Orthodox monks in describing the awesome Dwarven underground cities. (Mr. Shore's imaginative use of massed human voices repeatedly reminded this listener of Carl Orff.) The choristers served as narrative device and harbingers of danger, dividing when necessary and then coming together to form a huge wall of sound.

Leading this huge ensemble was Mr. Wicki, who worked with a score on his conductor's podium and a digital screen that carried a synced version of the projected film so he could look at the musicians and not up at movie screen that hung over the stage. The conductor added few flourishes to the music, and made the massive sound-blocks of this score move when necessary and match the action onscreen. The mostly young orchestra played the work with the right blend of enthusiasm and professionalism. Despite occasional moments of orchestral overkill, the orchestra was light and flexible, shrinking down to chamber size for lighter passages and then expanding to huge, proportionate size when mighty deeds were afoot.

As the movie came to its end, the audience applauded. Some got up and started to leave. Others stayed and listened to the orchestra and chorus play and sing through the long credits. Ms. Lusk sang "May It Be," the song written for the film by Irish singer Enya, and the players revisited some of the great moments of this score. Following the final credits and a grand orchestral flourish, Mr. Wicki brought Howard Shore out on stage. The composer and the players received a massive standing ovation, having completed the first stage of their journey through Middle-Earth.