

MUSIC

Review: In ‘The Lord of the Rings in Concert,’ Musicians in Sync With a Soundtrack

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM APRIL 10, 2015

Imagine a musical version of the orcs, Tolkien’s enslaved former elves, made to serve the cult of an all-powerful moving image under the baton of a brainwashed wizard.

It’s true that none of the 250 fine musicians who provided the live musical accompaniment for a screening of “The Fellowship of the Ring,” the first installment of Peter Jackson’s “Lord of the Rings” film series at the Lincoln Center’s Koch Theater on Tuesday had fangs or were engaged in the murderous pursuit of hobbits. But far from celebrating the artistry that goes into film music, this marathon “Lord of the Rings in Concert” only underlines the abnegation of artistic privilege that genre requires.

The films (the complete trilogy is again presented over this weekend) are shown to live musical accompaniment by the 21st Century Symphony Orchestra and Chorus as well as members of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, led by the Swiss conductor Ludwig Wicki. This worldwide tour of “The Lord of the Rings in Concert” is buoyed by the cultish veneration Mr. Jackson’s films have sparked. It’s also billed as a celebration of Howard Shore’s seething score, which won Oscars, for the first and third films of the trilogy.

But in performance the interdependence of sound and image becomes painfully obvious. The film’s moments of innocent levity would not be nearly as bucolic, its battles between good and evil not half as scary, without the music. And Mr. Shore’s pastiche — a bit of Bruckner, a bit of Grainger, and Glass to weave them together — cannot stand on its own, either.

It was both impressive and sobering to watch the skill with which Mr. Wicki synchronized the music of this vast score to the movie. On a small screen in front of him a moving vertical line indicated the approach of a scene break and it was

that digital “mind” which ultimately held the controls.

Night after night on this juggernaut tour, orchestral soloists measure out their lines in milliseconds with none of the freedom to let a phrase breathe that is the mark — and magic — of a concert performance.

The sound was powerful but not always entirely acoustic. It’s understandable that certain solo instruments, like a Celtic flute that plays one of the principal themes, required some help to assert themselves against the orchestra and the film’s spoken dialogue. But at times of heightened tension, it felt as if the overall sound was being cranked up aggressively.

My 9-year-old son sat through much of the film with a finger thrust in each ear.

The concerts continue on Saturday and Sunday at Lincoln Center, and from Thursday through April 19 in San Jose, Calif. Other coming performances are at howardshore.com

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