

Robert Hale

# Leader of the gods

by PAULA BAKER



**H**he soft notes slither from the bassoons. The timpani take up the beat. The tension mounts as the great gold stage curtain of the Metropolitan Opera House opens to the clank of a blacksmith's anvil. "Siegfried," the third in Richard Wagner's four-opera cycle of "Der Ring Des Nibelungen" is under way.

Members of the audience pitch forward in their seats. Some have paid as much as \$800 to participate in the 19 hours of music theater known as the "Ring." For this experience, they have come to New York City alone and in tour groups, convening from small American towns and large European cities to experience the Met's "Ring." Some have seen the "Ring" cycle 20 or 30 times and will begin saving for their next "fix" as soon as they return home.

Journalists have dubbed these enthusiasts "Ringniks," asserting that no other audience in the world—except, perhaps, Deadheads at a Grateful Dead concert—can match a

"Ring" audience in fanaticism and diversity. A group from Munich arrives in the often-caricatured horned helmets of traditional "Ring" productions. Others select garb ranging from evening dress to blue jeans for their group homage to this landmark of Western Civilization.

The "Ring" audience anticipates an evening of hypnotic, cresting music that chronicles the struggle for a ring which guarantees world domination. Richard Wagner wove Teutonic and Norse myths into his own libretto, which features gods, dwarfs, giants and a dragon in a great romantic epic about power, greed, love and the establishment of a new era.

The audience excitement on April 22, 1993, is heightened by a last-minute announcement. The evening will mark the debut of a new Wotan, leader of the gods and the peak role for a dramatic bass baritone. Debuts are part of operatic one-upmanship. Opera-goers like to view first performances, and each "first performance" in a different role in a different

**Called for his Met debut without benefit of stage rehearsal, he experienced one of those magical moments, complete with standing ovation.**



*In 1964 Robert Hale, right, returned to the scene of his collegiate triumphs to visit his former voice coach at OU, Orcenith Smith.*

house counts as a debut.

The circumstances are dramatic in the best theatrical tradition. Bass baritone Robert Hale, who received a master's in music education from the University of Oklahoma in 1963, is appearing on six hours' notice to sing in the place of the ailing James Morris. Hale has been in New York City for the past three weeks. He has been "covering" Morris at night and rehearsing by day for his intended debut as Wotan, scheduled for the third "Ring" cycle the following week.

Based in Zurich, Hale already is known as Europe's pre-eminent Wotan. For the past decade, he has conquered capital cities with his versatile singing and intelligent acting. Berlin, Cologne and Vienna know his Wotan. Aspects of his portrayal are familiar to American audiences from performances in Washington, D.C., San Francisco and Cleveland. However, this is his first appearance as Wotan in the United States' leading opera house. In the week-long "Ring" cycle, Hale is to depict Wotan's change from the ambitious young god in "Das Rheingold" to the wrathful but grieving father in "Die Walküre" to the weary truth-

seeker known as the Wanderer in "Siegfried." Only "Götterdämmerung" occurs without Wotan.

The audience watches and listens for 30 minutes while the blacksmith and his foster son, Siegfried, quarrel before the smith returns to his anvil. Eyes are drawn to the left center wing of the Met's enormous stage as a spear tip appears. The diagonal of the shaft commands attention to a dark-robed figure whose face is partially obscured by a broad-rimmed hat and an eye patch.

The spear and the eye patch are diagnostic for "Ringniks." They know that no matter what the costume concept may be, the god who carries the ash-tree spear rules the mythological Norse world. Wotan's eye patch covers a socket gouged when he sacrificed an eye for knowledge. The pilgrim's hat provides Wotan's earthly guise as Wanderer, the truth-seeker.

Robert Hale has arrived—for the performance and for Metropolitan Opera history.

He has been on the Met stage before. The singer made his Met debut with two performances of the title role of "Der Fliegende Holländer" in January

1990, but quickly returned to Europe.

The call for his Wotan debut came at noon of the night he was to appear, Hale says during a series of telephone interviews from his New York apartment.

"I was in the house at 4 p.m. to have Morris' costumes downsized for me. Curtain time was 6 p.m., and I was onstage at 6:30 p.m.—without ever having had a stage rehearsal! But it turned out to be one of those magical evenings, and I got a standing ovation."

The standing ovations continued through Hale's regularly scheduled performances the following week, according to OU music professor Thomas Carey. A devoted "Ring" follower, Carey reported on the third cycle "Siegfried."

"I have been following Robert Hale since I arrived at OU in 1968," Carey says. "I heard him give a concert of sacred songs at the First Baptist Church of Norman when he and tenor Dean Wilder were touring with pianist Ovid Young. In 1989, I drove to Washington, D.C., to see him perform Wotan in the Deutsche Oper Berlin 'Ring' at Kennedy Center."

Carey admitted that he wondered

how Hale's voice would carry in the cavernous Metropolitan auditorium, which seats nearly 4,000 people. The vocal projection difficulties across the gilt and red plush expanses have ruined reputations well on their way to major stardom.

"I never dreamed that his voice would carry so well," Carey admits. "He was magnificent as Wotan, and his German diction was impeccable. (Carey's own ear for the German language was tuned during his voice studies in Germany, which included work with Hans Hotter, the dominant Wotan of the mid-century.) I could understand every word and nuance. A new tenor, Wolfgang Schmidt, who also made his debut, is promising to be the Siegfried of choice in a couple of years. But I can tell you, Robert Hale has already arrived."

There was more than one OU-connected singer on the stage the night Carey was in the audience. Dame Gwyneth Jones sang Brunnhilde, Wotan's favorite daughter. The Welsh soprano was a student and close friend of the late Dame Eva Turner, OU professor of voice from 1949 to 1959. Dame Gwyneth helped organize and sang at the 1991 memorial services for Dame Eva in Westminster Abbey. Tenor William Johns, the Siegfried, studied drama as a graduate student at OU in the spring of 1963. Part-way through the opera, Johns was replaced by his "cover," Met newcomer Wolfgang Schmidt.

Memories of the Kennedy Center "Ring" remained with opera expert Matthew Gurewitsch, author of a feature on Hale appearing in the April 10, 1993, issue of *Opera News* magazine.

"Four years after the fact, my notes on Hale's Washington performances reflect impressions that in my mind are still vivid," Gurewitsch wrote. "Here was an artist whose voice, good face, noble bearing and telling gestures expressed the promptings of a deep imagination, an artist who commanded not just the notes of his part but the spirit, from the tragic grandeur to ironic detachment, from flooding tenderness to grim rage, all breaking forth with the immediacy of real life. It was almost too much to hope for. Even his silences were eloquent. Before he made a sound, he was making music."

Making music has been part of Hale's

life from his early days. The singer chuckles when asked about publicity blurbs identifying him as a "tall, dark Texan from San Antonio." Although born in Texas, Hale was nurtured in Louisiana and Oklahoma. His regional partiality is evident when he speaks of the advantages accruing to Southwestern singers.

"Southwesterners have the vocal advantage," Hale contends. "Their vowels are more open. Also, they are used to singing in church. A lot of my early knowledge and performing experiences came from my upbringing in the church. I sang in groups and quartets and performed my first solo in church.

"I was born in Kerrville, Texas, which I told one interviewer was near San Antonio," Hale recalls. "Kerrville had a good hospital where my father, who was a disabled American veteran, was being treated for lung damage. I spent my first 11 years in Louisiana. My mother and father were regular churchgoers, and my mother was bent on her children having a Christian college education (at Bethany Nazarene College, now Southern Nazarene University). So, my father sold his lumber business, and we moved to Bethany, Oklahoma.

"I was always thankful for my parents' support," Hale says. "I give my mother a lot of credit, especially after my father died. She saw us through. Four of the five children graduated from SNU, the other from a California university."

Hale honors his parents, John and Olie Hale, and their dedication to the Christian education of their family, with a voice scholarship endowed in their names at SNU.

He earned a bachelor's degree in music from the Bethany college before entering the U.S. Army as a music specialist—in French horn!

"I had received a good grounding in music theory and voice," Hale recalls, "but little encouragement for a 'theatrical' career."

As luck or destiny would have it, he was sent to Germany, where he began singing opera with an American group that performed in "Amerika Haus" venues. These cultural centers were established after World War II to promote better U.S.-German relationships through the availability of books, magazines and programs.

"I was singing Italian opera in En-



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Hans-Joachim Lieske

*Robert Hale's other signature role is the Dutchman in "Die Fliegende Holländer."*

glish and discovered I had a flair for performance," Hale recalls.

The years in Germany gave him an advantage that he considers a must for an aspiring opera singer—exposure to the culture of Europe.

"An opera student absolutely should go to Europe," he says, "to study with European coaches, to see performances where the operas were written and see what's happening in terms of languages and cultures. Students should have a firm grasp of Italian, French and German and the exposure of being surrounded by them as they are spoken. I wish there were some way to enforce language study. A knowledge of other languages is so important, not only for singers, but for all areas of life. I speak German fluently and get by in French and Italian."

Hale emphasizes his beliefs through the scholarship he endowed. Applicants must perform in four languages, and the scholarship winner must enroll in foreign language study.

After completing his military obligation, Hale returned to Oklahoma and enrolled for graduate work at OU. He chose the music education curriculum because he could complete it in two

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*A principal part of his repertoire for 30 years, since he first debuted the role in the OU Opera Theater, Robert Hale, ever the "dark and leanly handsome" toreador, appears as Escamillo in Bizet's popular opera "Carmen" at the Wien Staatsoper.*

years and earn a living while he explored a singing career. During his OU years, Hale lived in Oklahoma City, where he was music director of the First Nazarene Church, and commuted to classes in Norman and to Bethany, where he taught voice at SNU.

Hale moved toward his goals with an accelerating tempo, performing the bass baritone leads in all OU Opera Theater productions of his era. Holmberg Hall Auditorium audiences saw his Alfio in "Cavalleria Rusticana," Billy Bigelow in "Carousel," Jabez Stone in "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and Escamillo in "Carmen." The toreador role became one of his early successes at the New York City Opera and continues as a repertoire staple.

The "dark and leanly handsome Hale," as he was described in an OU News Services release of '60s, portrayed the Emile DeBeque role in "South Pacific" in the ballroom of the Oklahoma Memorial Union.

The musical was played in a semi-round staging, with masking platforms at either side for entrances and exits. The cast had a few breathless entrances, exiting behind a masking platform, going through the ballroom kitchen, running down to the second floor and

back upstairs again to enter through the ballroom door on the other side.

"Those were good times," recalls Jane Barnes Sneed ('61 B.F.A.), of Tulsa, who sang Nellie Forbush to Hale's DeBeque and Julie Jordan to his Billy Bigelow while she was a graduate student and her husband James ('63 J.D.) was in law school. Later, the Sneeds visited Hale backstage following his performance of "La Bohème" with the New York City Opera.

"We knew Robert Hale was special even then," says T. Roy Carmichael, of Chickasha, who earned a '65 OU bachelor's and a '71 master's in music. Carmichael was the perennial comic sidekick in productions of that day.

Russell Mathis, emeritus professor of music and opera theater, remembers that he made his OU debut conducting a program that featured Hale.

"I had just arrived on the campus as director of choral activities when the director of the OU School of Music, C. M. Stookey, called me into his office," Mathis recalls. "He announced that he had selected the program for my first concert on campus. I was to conduct the OU chorus and orchestra in Borodin's 'Polovetzian Dances,' and Hale was to join them in the coronation scene from

Mussorgsky's 'Boris Godunov.'"

Stookey assured Mathis that he would enjoy working with the bass singing Boris because he had a beautiful voice and had won a lot of voice competitions.

Some 15 years later, Mathis had the serendipitous pleasure of hearing Hale's wife, the renowned soprano Inga Nielsen, make her American debut as Adele in "Die Fledermaus" with the New York City Opera. Born in Copenhagen of Danish-Austrian parents, Nielsen is a household name to European opera lovers. She recently was awarded the title of "dame," the equivalent of knighthood, by Queen Margrethe of Denmark.

Reflecting on his days as a Sooner, Hale says: "I'll never forget those wonderfully exciting days at OU when things were already beginning to move so swiftly. I cherish the memory of those formative years and all that OU and its faculty did to send me off well prepared on this fairyland adventure.

"I had the right combination of Dr. Orcenith Smith as voice teacher and Dr. David W. Scott as opera theater director," Hale continues. "Dr. Smith began entering me in contests right away—and I always won or placed. I got the idea that I just might have something, and I decided to give it a try."

Smith is deceased, as is another of Hale's coaches, emeritus professor Margaret Simpson Swain. However, Hale still sees Scott at Salzburg and other European summer festivals. Head of voice and opera at California State University, Northridge, Scott coaches Carol Vaness, with whom Hale frequently has sung.

Catching up with recent OU music news, Hale heralded the establishment of the OU Opera Guild, which among its other activities, provides scholarships for students to attend professional performances.

"Giving students exposure to professional performances is one of the best things you can do for them," he says. "I'll never forget going to the Tulsa Opera when I was studying at OU. I saw Frank Guarrera and Roberta Peters in 'The Barber of Seville' and got to meet them afterwards. I was deeply inspired by this experience."

Hale was pleased to learn of OU's new music theater program, which combines courses in the schools of music and drama.

"I wish I had taken acting at OU,

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Hale says. "I have always been fascinated by acting. I took classes in acting, fencing and stage combat when I first went to New York City."

While at OU, Hale won the Wilson Award of the Bloch Young Artists auditions and the Amarillo (Texas) Symphony Award. Also during this time, he was chosen Singer of the Year by the National Association of Teachers of Singing in open competition in Los Angeles. The NATS award opened the door to more study. Hale earned an artist's diploma from Boston's New England Conservatory of Music while teaching at Eastern Nazarene College. First place in the New England auditions of the Metropolitan Opera competition led to a year-long tour with the Boris Goldovsky Opera Theatre Company of young artists.

"Boris Goldovsky has done more for young American opera singers than any other individual in this century," Hale says. "I well remember lectures and his way of analyzing a talent's potential for a career. He told us to make a list of positives and negatives toward a career—going from zero to 10. If there were any zeros—forget it. Health and a voice with good potential were essential, but other areas could be brought up to compensate. People who lacked in certain areas could compensate with intense study, intelligence and perseverance to become consummate artists."

Hale's year with Goldovsky segued into a contract with the New York City Opera. He made his City Opera debut as Colline in "La Bohème," sang Figaro his first spring and "Don Giovanni" soon after. Later roles included the title role in "Giulio Cesare," Count Almaviva in "Le Nozze di Figaro," Mephistopheles in "Faust" and Golaud in "Pelleas et Melisande." He performed with prominent singers such as Joan Sutherland, Leontyne Price, Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo and Beverly Sills, a close friend with whom he has sung hundreds of performances during his time at N.Y.C.O.

Hale built a solid career in the French/Italian repertoire in New York and San Diego and as a soloist with the orchestras of Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., Toronto, Cleveland and Montreal, as well as with the festivals of Ravinia,

Tanglewood and Wolf Trap.

Thoughts of Wagner repertoire first were seeded some 20 years ago. He sang Wotan's farewell and excerpts from "Tristan und Isolde" in concert performances with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under William Steinberg. The conductor told him he had the right color and sound ("fach") for the heldenbariton repertoire. Later his wife and his coaches began encouraging him to consider Wagnerian roles.

"The time was going fast," Hale

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## **Wagner has brought him great success, but Hale doesn't want to be "only" a Wagnerian.**

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recalls, "and I began to see the necessity of going to Europe. I made my Wagnerian European debut as the Dutchman in "Die Fliegende Holländer," which has become my signature role, along with Wotan."

He celebrated his 100th performance portraying his demonic Dutchman at his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1990. Since then, he has performed the opera 50 times more, recording it on CD with the Vienna Philharmonic under Christoph von Dohnanyi. A video of the Munich production with Wolfgang Sawallisch conducting has been newly released.

"I was hesitant about undertaking Wotan," Hale says. "I tried it out in a small city (Wiesbaden). It was an instant success."

One success led to another as Hale has ruled over "Rings" in Berlin, Cologne, Munich, Hamburg and Vienna. Götz Friedrich's production for the Deutsche Oper Berlin was performed in Tokyo and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

A "Ring" series in San Francisco in 1990 drew these comments from Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

"Hale's dramatic intelligence and technical command helped him make Wotan a riveting figure, both tempestuous and tragic.

"With impressive subtlety, Hale traced Wotan's psychological progress through the first three operas, projecting the overweening ambition of the young god in 'Das Rheingold' and building convincingly to the weakening but still formidable figure of 'Siegfried.' In the third act of 'Die Walküre' he let the audience feel the forcefulness of Wotan's wrath—it was a genuinely frightening display—as well as the depth of tenderness in his feelings for Brünnhilde."

Hale sings the role of Wotan/Wanderer in a variety of concepts. Götz Friedrich's concept for the Deutsche Oper Berlin places a futuristic "Ring" in a "tunnel of time," a subterranean setting suggested by the subway system of Washington, D.C., presumably after a nuclear disaster. The San Francisco opera views the saga over an enormous span of time from classic to Victorian. The Met's version is termed "romantic realism."

Hale supports directors who refuse to be bound by the conventions Wagner established when he built the "Festspielhaus," a special theater for the "Ring" at Bayreuth in southern Germany. In one trendy version of "Walküre" staged in Geneva, he had to fight the director of the production for every additional inch of cloth in the towel he wore around his hips in the second act, staged in a hot tub.

"I don't mind if an opera is updated," he says, "if it tells the story honestly and reinforces the composer's intention. Directors have different ideas, and I like to remain open-minded about each individual staging and hopefully add a new dimension to my evolving character portrayal."

This flexibility and intelligence has been used for some 50 complete "Ring" cycles and dozens more "Walküres." Today some 85 percent of Hale's roles are Wagnerian, but he would rather not be called "only" a Wagnerian. He also is known for his portrayals in Richard Strauss' works, such as "Elektra," in which he sings Orest, and "Die Frau ohne Schatten," where he portrays Barak. He will debut on the

nationwide Metropolitan Opera broadcast system on December 18 when he sings the prison chief Don Pizarro in Beethoven's only opera, "Fidelio." Hale's portrayal was proclaimed "triumphantly evil" when he sang it at Salzburg and "elegantly dangerous—half macho, half despicable" in Berlin. The same Berlin critic described Hale as the "favorite of the Berlin public—half Hollywood's Don Ameche and half Mozart's Don Giovanni."

Hale is still slim and cuts a dashing figure as Escamillo in "Carmen." Another French role, Mephistopheles in "Faust," occasionally provides the opportunity to sing opposite his wife as Marguerite. Otherwise, their differing repertoires keep them separated much of the time.

Nielsen is a specialist in Mozart and the Italian/French repertoire. Her Salzburg Festival performance as Constanze in "Entführung aus dem Serail" ("The Abduction from the Seraglio") was captured on video and televised in the United States on the PBS Great Performances series. Sooners may have seen her in the Santa Fe Opera production of "The English Cat" in the summer of 1985. She completed a clean sweep of premieres of that Hans Werner Henze's opera in three languages. She sang the title role in the world premiere in the Schwetzingen Festival in Germany and at the Paris Opera Comique in French. She has sung in the opera houses of La Scala, Covent Garden, Vienna, Paris, Munich, Zurich, Berlin, Hamburg, Copenhagen and Oslo, to name a few.

Shortly after his April Metropolitan appearances, Hale sang his Mephisto in "Faust" opposite Nielsen in Berlin. Then immediately he was set for all the Wotans in Berlin and in Vienna. Mid-summer, Nielsen shared a concert with Placido Domingo in Copenhagen. Hale will make his debut as Amfortas in Domingo's "Parsifal" in Madrid and another in Cologne.

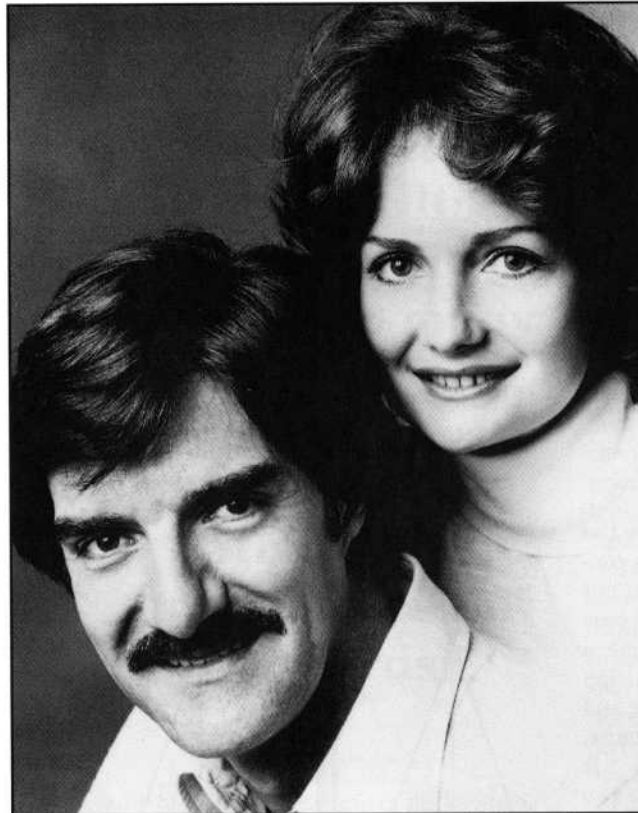
And so it goes. Constant travel is the downside of an international opera star's career. Or perhaps "upside" is

the operative word. Hale and Nielsen keep their Swissair and Lufthansa frequent flyer mileages operational at some 60,000 miles a year.

"We greet each other in airports a lot," Hale laughs, "and keep in touch by telephone."

The arduous demands posed by Wagnerian roles require constant pacing and training.

"I have no special routines for performance days," Hale says, "but some



*Differing repertoires mean frequent separations for Robert Hale and his renowned soprano wife Inga Nielsen, who recently had the title of "dame" added to her name in her native Denmark.*

performers push the casual approach too far. You need terrific stamina for a Wagnerian role, and your voice has to be able to bounce back between acts. I am conscientious about finding a training center wherever I am performing. I have my own fitness center in my home in Zurich. It is important to be in good physical training and as healthy as possible for such strenuous roles."

Hale's schedule reaches into 1996, which he says is about as far in advance as he cares to go. Bookings so far in advance are necessitated by the complexities of opera house schedules and singer availability.

Future plans with the Met include nine performances as Fidelio in the fall of 1993 and the December 18 broadcast, as well as Orest in "Elektra" in January 1994. Other plans are awaiting announcement from opera officials.

In the meantime, American audiences may anticipate the CDs and videos that are documenting Hale's ranking as a premier heldenbariton. Most important is the forthcoming Decca/London Records "Ring" series with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Christoph von Dohnanyi. "Der Fliegende Holländer" is upcoming with Dohnanyi and the Vienna Philharmonic. Handel's "Messiah" and the Verdi Requiem already are available, and videos have been made of the Munich "Ring" and "Holländer."

During his final day in New York City in April, Hale interrupted his return-to-Europe packing to respond to some final questions about his triumphal week at the Met. How did he feel?

"Great and a bit tired," he says. "I've given four major performances in a week, wearing heavy robes and carrying a heavy long spear and working through approximately 16 hours of music. But what music and what an experience!"

The exhilaration of success quickly drowns out a note of fatigue.

"I had a feeling of rightness—that I was where I belonged," Hale says. "The audience response was phenomenal.

The applause was unbelievable, and the opera gift shop was besieged with requests for my photo. James Levine (artistic director of the Met) was great to work with, and the vibrations from other officials were really positive.

"I've had other successes, but it was nice to come home and have this success at the Met.

"I knew I had a pretty good voice," he muses, "but what I once only dared to hope for, namely having an opera career of this magnitude, has become a realized dream. I feel fulfilled, blessed and thankful." @