



WAGNER  
SOCIETY  
NSW

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CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

# WAGNER QUARTERLY

**IN MEMORIAM** Elke Neidhardt (1945-2013) and Arthur Carter (1934-2013)

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Welcome to the fourth Wagner Quarterly for 2013.

This has been an amazing year for Wagner lovers. This, of course, is hardly a surprise: by definition, bicentenary celebrations happen only once, and we are extremely fortunate to have been able to enjoy this one. There have been Ring performances all over the world, to a degree that I suspect has never been seen before, and probably will not be seen again for a very long time...perhaps not for another hundred years!

The one extremely sad note during the course of the Melbourne Ring Cycle festivities has been the death of Elke Neidhardt. Elke became an icon to Wagner lovers after the unveiling of her amazing production of the Adelaide Ring in 2004. There were aspects of her production—the “Wunderbar” amongst them—which will always be remembered as creating the benchmark for certain scenes from the Ring. It is a tragedy that her production will never be seen again.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT *Continued page 3*

## VALE ELKE NEIDHARDT – Tributes Below



Opera director Elke Neidhardt on the set of her acclaimed 2004 Ring cycle. Picture: Toby Zerna

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/a-trajectory-from-actress-to-visionary-of-the-opera-stage/story-e6fgr8n6-1226770790656>

## TRIUMPH FOR WARWICK FYFE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW MEMBER AS ALBERICH IN OPERA AUSTRALIA'S MELBOURNE RING CYCLE

Alan John's in Limelight: “let's face it, it is Warwick Fyfe's show. Shambling on as the anoraked fat boy from school, hopelessly in lust with the showgirls who prick-tease him then mercilessly mock him, he grows in vocal stature as the scene progresses until we are in no doubt that this nerd's revenge will be terrifying and vast. The loopy, allpowerful, psychopathic lord of the Nibelungs that he gives us in scene 3 and its chilling, down-but-far-from-out flipside in scene 4 are among the great characterisations of the Australian operatic stage and the powerful, multicoloured, if at times wild voice is a dominating force in the production.



Warwick Fyfe as Alberich. Photo Jeff Busby – Opera Australia  
[http://melbourneringcycle.com.au/media\\_centre/images/das\\_rheingold](http://melbourneringcycle.com.au/media_centre/images/das_rheingold)

## VICTORY FOR OPERA AUSTRALIA'S RING CYCLE? SEE REVIEWS BELOW

Patron:

Simone Young AM

Honorary Life Members:

Mr Richard King

Prof Michael Ewans

Mr Horst Hoffman

Since our last Quarterly, the Society has held only one event: On 6 October Susan Bullock and her husband Richard Berkeley-Steele gave a highly illuminating and entertaining talk on "Singing Wagner." As most of you know, Susan Bullock is Brünnhilde in the Melbourne Ring, and Richard is Loge in *Rheingold*. It is a great pity that they never get to be on the stage at the same time, or even in the same opera. But at least each of them gets the opportunity to be in the audience and to watch the other.

This is going to be a shorter letter than usual, given that I am currently in Melbourne, midway through the Opera Australia Ring Cycle. It seems to me that Sydney must be virtually deprived of Wagner lovers, because everywhere I turn in this city—particularly at the opera—there is a familiar face from home. It is a very great pity that the opera hall at the Opera House could never host a performance such as this. Apart from everything else, it would be impossible to fit more than half of a normal Ring orchestra into our pit.

This is not the place to enter into a detailed critique of the Melbourne Ring, but I can say that in general it has been a great success. From a musical point of view—which is by far the most important—it has been excellent. The orchestra, in particular, has been extraordinarily good, particularly given the fact that it was a "scratch" orchestra, which had never previously played together. Moreover, for most of its members this was their first Ring Cycle. In this regard, all credit goes to the young Finnish conductor, Pietari Inkinen, who came in at relatively short notice and has attracted universal praise and acclaim for every aspect of his management of this monumental task. The singing is generally of a very high order indeed. Amongst other stars, Stuart Skelton has been a memorable Siegmund; and Deborah Humble, who was sponsored by our society, has excelled as Erda and Waltraute. Terje Stensvold has been a very moving Wotan and Wanderer, and Stefan Vinke an amazing and athletic Siegfried. The production has, as is almost invariably the case, had its detractors. But it thoroughly achieves what Neil Armfield, the director, set out to do....namely, it tells the story very clearly, as well as depicting the shifting relationships between the various parties. This, in my view, is extremely important. With a number of current productions of the Ring, particularly in Europe, it would be virtually impossible to

discern what it was all about if you were not already thoroughly familiar with the work.

Finally I would like to give our heartfelt thanks to the printers of our Newsletter and Quarterlies, B.E.E.Printmail, for adapting to the new style, and for printing and distributing the Quarterly in an incredibly efficient and speedy manner and for their generous help in presenting you with a full colour wrap-around to commemorate Elke Neidhardt and celebrate the Melbourne Ring Cycle.

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## COMMITTEE 2013 - 2014

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## FOR YOUR DIARY

2014

	No Wagner performances scheduled by Sydney Symphony Orchestra or Opera Australia	
Sunday, 10 August 7.00pm	Jonas Kaufmann – concert of arias by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet and “others” with conductor Jochen Rieder	Sydney Opera House

## COMING EVENTS 2014 - STARTING TIMES MAY VARY.

PLEASE CHECK THE SCHEDULE FOR DETAILS.

DATE	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	TIME & LOCATION
2 FEBRUARY	<b>After Melbourne: First time Ring cast and creative team report back:</b> followed by Welcome Back Party 12:30 Act 1; <i>Tristan and Isolde</i> . Glyndebourne 2007 Lehnoff production with Nina Stemme, Robert Gambill, Rene Pape and Bo Skovhus. LPO/Jiri Belohlavek	Goethe Institut 2PM
2 MARCH	Dr David Schwartz: <b>Valkyries of the Wagner Clan: Family Dysfunction set to music</b> 12:30 Act 2; <i>Tristan and Isolde</i> . Glyndebourne 2007 Lehnoff production with Nina Stemme, Robert Gambill, Rene Pape and Bo Skovhus. LPO/Jiri Belohlavek	Goethe Institut 2PM
6 APRIL	Dr David Larkin: <b>R1 and R2 – The Two Richards: Strauss &amp; Wagner</b> 12:30 Act31; <i>Tristan and Isolde</i> . Glyndebourne 2007 Lehnoff production with Nina Stemme, Robert Gambill, Rene Pape and Bo Skovhus. LPO/Jiri Belohlavek DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
25 MAY	<b>Annual General Meeting</b> followed by Recital and Wagner’s Birthday Celebration   12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
15 JUNE	Simon O’Neill: <b>Heldentenor from the Southern Hemisphere</b> 12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
SUNDAY IN JULY	Date and function TBC   12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
SATURDAY 23 AUGUST SEMINAR	Dr Antony Ernst: <b>Beyond the <i>Twilight of the Gods</i>: Wagner’s musical legacy.</b> (How Humperdinck, Strauss, Verdi, Respighi, Debussy, Chausson, Elgar, Mahler, Schreker, Pfitzner were influenced by Wagner) <b>NB: FUNCTION ON SATURDAY NOT SUNDAY</b> 12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
SUNDAY IN SEPTEMBER	Date and function TBC   12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
11 OCTOBER	George Gilmour & Sarah Louise Owens: <b>In pursuit of choral perfection: insiders’ views of the Bayreuther Festpiel Chor</b> 12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM
9 NOVEMBER	<b>Recital and Christmas Party</b> 12:30 DVD PRESENTATION	Goethe Institut 2PM

Advice about changes to the Program will be emailed to people who have given their email addresses to the Society’s Webmaster; the latest updates will also be available on the Society’s webpage: [www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au). Admission to each event will be \$20 a Member, and \$25 per non-Member, unless otherwise indicated.

**Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)**

## ELKE NEIDHARDT REMEMBERED

by Peter Bassett



Elke Neidhardt in *Mordnacht* in Manhattan 1965

Elke Neidhardt died in Sydney on 25 November 2013. She was an opera director of rare stature and originality whose productions were characterized by wit, clarity and a strong sense of dramatic themes. Her greatest achievement, and the one for which she is most likely to be remembered, was the direction of Australia's first complete *Ring* Cycle in Adelaide in 2004. It was hailed by international critics for, amongst other things,

the intelligence and distinction of her *Personenregie* (direction of performers). She asked me to be her Dramaturg for that production and I found her to be open to ideas and possessed of a strong sense of humour and style. She was determined to engage with audiences and, for her, boredom was a crime. She did not subscribe to the self-obsessed school of directing or the trend towards ugliness that disfigures many contemporary German productions. Her *Ring* was hailed as visually resplendent – and it certainly was. She will also be remembered for another first – the Australian premiere production of *Parsifal*, also in Adelaide, in 2001, and for her provocative and hugely entertaining *Tannhäuser* for Opera Australia. Her *Il trovatore* for the Opera Conference, which has never been out of the repertoires of Australian companies, will be staged again by West Australian Opera in 2014.

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## ELKE NEIDHARDT – A CAREER CELEBRATED by Terence Watson

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Neidhardt was born in Ludwigsburg in 1941 and studied at the State University of Music and the Performing Arts in nearby Stuttgart. She had a taste of opera, assisting on a production in Zurich, but was initially drawn to acting. She based herself in Vienna and was quickly in demand for stage, television and film work. Upon completing her studies, she left Germany, where she did not live again until a stint with the Cologne Opera as principal resident director in the 1990s.

Her Australian acting credits included the television series *Skippy*, *The Link Men* and *Shannon's Mob* and the films *Alvin Purple*, *Libido* and *Looking Out*. Neidhardt lectured at NIDA and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music was a judge on the ABC reality television show *Operatunity* in 2006.

In 1977 Elke joined The Australian Opera as Resident Director where, until 1990, she directed and re-staged a wide variety of the Company's repertoire. She had never directed before, but her wit, intelligence and experience of European theatre convinced Moffatt Oxenbould, its artistic administrator and later its artistic director, to give her a chance.

Headhunted in 1990 by Michael Hampe, who had come to Sydney to direct *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* in 1988, she took the job of principal resident director of the Cologne Opera. While there, she directed three productions of Richard Wagner's *Ring* Cycle. Six years later, a new management team made a clean sweep and Neidhardt found herself without a job. She returned to Australia.

In 2001 she directed the first Australian production of Wagner's *Parsifal* for State Opera of South Australia which prompted an invitation to direct *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for the same Company. Both productions were highly praised by critics writing for publications all over the world.

The *Ring* production received almost all Helpmann awards for 2004, including one for her for best direction. The first home-grown *Ring*, it was an audacious project, the intelligent narrative and spectacular staging of which owed everything to her own profound understanding of the material, along with

the prodigious talents and unflinching determination of her production and design team.

Neidhardt directed other memorable Wagner productions. For Opera Australia she directed *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*; for Opera Victoria she directed *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Lohengrin*.

But, speaking to the Sydney Morning Herald about Wagner's work in 2008, Neidhardt said: "Wagner was tainted - he was an evil man in our household." "Such an anti-Semite and altogether a nasty person," she said. "I much prefer his orchestral stuff to the sung side of matters. Mozart is just so incredibly beautiful to listen to, the genius of what he's written."

Neidhardt was also caustic about Australia's cultural backwardness in its reaction to her 2008 production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*: "She finds the prudishness of Australians frustrating – a shower scene in *Don Giovanni* required a nudity warning, something she says would never happen in Europe: 'If someone should complain about seeing two pubic hairs when he steps out of the shower, they can say, "But we warned you". No one in Europe would complain. This is a bit infantile. But what can you do? It's puritanical.'"

She was awarded an Order of Australia in 2011 "for service to the performing arts as an opera director and producer, and through the tuition and mentoring of young emerging artists". She also took special pleasure in nurturing young artistic talent and lecturing at NIDA.

Sources:

[http://opera.org.au/aboutus/our\\_artists/creative\\_teams/elke\\_neidhardt](http://opera.org.au/aboutus/our_artists/creative_teams/elke_neidhardt)  
[www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-26/theatre-director-elke-neidhardt-dies-at-72/5117428](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-26/theatre-director-elke-neidhardt-dies-at-72/5117428)

[www.smh.com.au/comment/obituaries/elke-neidhardt-a-passionate-life-lived-in-the-arts-20131206-2ywk7.html](http://www.smh.com.au/comment/obituaries/elke-neidhardt-a-passionate-life-lived-in-the-arts-20131206-2ywk7.html)

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# THAT WAS THE YEAR THAT WAS

by The Events Committee

2013, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wagner's birth, provided the Wagner Society in NSW with a great opportunity and a great challenge. To celebrate this significant year, we asked for the support of our members and many assisted us with donations to ensure we made 2013 a year to remember. The committee determined some priorities. We wanted to provide members with opportunities to prepare for the 2013 Opera Australia Ring in Melbourne. We sought to form partnerships with other organisations to make sure that attention was paid to the contribution Wagner's drama and music has made to Australian musical culture. And we wanted to assist young artists and young companies to gain experience in Wagnerian repertoire.

## CELEBRATING THE MELBOURNE RING

**Leading Ring-Leaders:** We collected \$42,000 from society members who became part of a ringleader team for the Opera Australia Melbourne Ring. In return they were able to select tickets for a cycle of their choice. The money collected sponsored Deborah Humble, a member of our Society, who is singing the roles of Erda and Waltraute. It also enabled Opera Australia to get a Wagner Tuba for the production.

**Preparing for the Melbourne Ring:** We invited Dr Antony Ernst to come from Strasbourg to conduct a workshop called *Forging Meaning out of Music; Heritage, Complexity and Vision of the Ring*. This took place over the weekend of 9-10 February, had 180 attendees and was a spectacular success. Indeed it generated income which we were able to channel into other initiatives, as well as providing a stimulating introduction to Wagner's masterpiece. Our preparation for the Ring was also enhanced by presentations through the year by director Neil Armfield, leading singers Susan Bullock (Brünnhilde) and Richard Berkely-Steele (Loge) and Tony Legge, Assistant Musical Director as well as Lisa Gasteen, Australia's previous splendid Brünnhilde).

**wagnerlicht:** This imaginative installation, based on responses to The Ring, was awarded \$3,000 support. Committee member Michael Day worked with University of Technology Sydney design and architecture students and staff as well as overseas participants to prepare boxes showing lighting and stage designs for The Ring. Now the wagnerlicht light and sound installation continues to spread its beams around the world. After its launch by the Governor on Wagner's birthday, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music display continued through June. The exhibition was then on display at the Bachhaus Museum in Eisenach where it was seen by over 25,000 visitors. It had wide media coverage and received very positive feedback. Two and a half years after its initial conception as the Wagner Society's major contribution to the Bicentenary celebrations it has moved to the State Theatre foyers at Arts Centre Melbourne on 15 November as part of the Melbourne Ring Festival. The German Government generously sponsored two students to fly to Melbourne to install two new works not seen in Sydney. Two artists each from Sydney and Melbourne also

displayed spectacular new works. Sixteen of the artists came to Melbourne to be present at the opening. Invitations have been received to return the exhibition to Germany next year to three separate locations.

## PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS TO HIGHLIGHT WAGNER'S ACHIEVEMENTS

**Grant to Fine Music 102.5:** We awarded sponsorship of \$4,400 to feature programs on Wagner. Barbara Brady's twelve episode Wagner and Friends was played on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays of each month from January to June. At the recent Fine Music AGM, a listener's response was read: "Many thanks to the Wagner Society & 2MBS for the meticulously prepared and scholarly presentations of the recent Wagner specials heard on Sunday mornings. I hope these important programmes can be archived and frequently replayed." In addition, Colleen Chesterman programmed Wagner's ten mature operas for presentation on At the Opera on Wednesday nights at 8 pm. The range of recordings, conductors and casts were welcomed by many, with particular praise to the reissue of Joseph Keilberth's Siegfried from his famous 1955 Bayreuth Ring Cycle.

**Grant to Sydney Eisteddfod:** We granted \$1000 for a Wagner Society in NSW Award with two prizes: one for the "best" singer of a Wagner song or aria, and one for the "best" singer of a German language song or aria. This major musical event put Wagner's works and German language repertoire in front of a serious audience and serious singers, mostly from NSW, who might not have thought of singing Wagner before. The German lieder prize went to Regina Daniel who is going to LGNOS and the Wagner prize to Rachel Bates. Both have offered to sing for us in 2014 (see further details below in Leona Geeves' article on the Society's support for young singers).

## ASSISTANCE TO YOUNG COMPANIES AND YOUNG ARTISTS TO DEVELOP EXPERIENCE IN WAGNERIAN REPERTOIRE

**Grant to Sydney Chamber Opera:** We gave \$18,000 to Sydney Chamber Opera (SCO) to present *Climbing Toward Midnight*, a new opera based on the meeting between Parsifal and Kundry in Act 2 of Parsifal. The funding enabled SCO's music director Jack Symonds to develop Wagner's libretto, adding poems by Austrian poet Georg Trakl, and to write a new score for an instrumental quartet, which he conducted from the piano. Reviewing the four performances at the National Institute of Dramatic Art over Easter, *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer Peter McCallum praised the "nuanced textural variety" Symonds developed around the central kiss and the vocal strength of principals Lucinda-Minikata Deacon and Mitchell Riley. Murray Black in *The Australian* emphasised how director Netta Yashchin's interpretation "laid bare the original works intrinsic dislike of women", with Kundry embodying dangerous female sexuality and "Parsifal's cold-hearted judgmental response Jack(ing) —

any sense of compassion or individual responsibility.” He also praised the power of the principal singers. We hope that this new opera has a strong future. (*Should we feature a photo?*)

**Grant to Harbour City Opera:** We gave \$3000 to Harbour City Opera to support their production of Act I of *Die Walküre* at NIDA in August. A Limelight online review said that “Although sung extremely well by three talented vocalists, without a full orchestra the music lacked Wagner’s trademark density, feeling a little thin at times.” But there was high praise for the three young singers, Sarah Sweeting, who was ...” vocally in her element, with chocolaty warmth in the lower register and a delightful spin providing life to the top”, “David Corcoran’s Siegmund (who) began fantastically, proving a more than adequate match for Anthony Mackey’s Hunding.”

**Grant to Sydney Youth Orchestra:** A grant of \$1000 supported the Orchestra that accompanied Teddy Tahu Rhodes in a concert in which he sang Wotan’s Farewell, thus giving these young musicians the opportunity to play an demanding and moving extract from Wagner’s most popular opera *Die Walküre*.

#### Scholarship for NSW singer to attend Lisa Gasteen

**National Opera School:** The Committee presented Lisa Gasteen with \$500 to support the operations of the Lisa Gasteen National Opera School, which provides intensive coaching to young opera singers for a three-week period. The School made a later approach to the Society, asking us to consider a scholarship to a singer from NSW, since many cannot afford the expenses of the course. The Committee agreed to this request for 2013 and the School selected Christopher Richardson, the only Bass-Baritone in this year’s intake. Christopher has therefore become the Recipient of the Wagner Society in NSW Scholarship of \$4000. Christopher has offered to sing for the Society in 2014.

#### CONCERTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG SINGERS

Society Vice President Leona Geeves organised a number of events to showcase unusual repertoire related to Wagner using singers who were exploring this area. Please see Leona’s report below.

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## WAGNER SOCIETY’S COMMITMENT TO YOUNG SINGERS by Leona Geeves

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The Society has two main aims which are to promote the music of the Meister and promote young Australian musicians. This year we managed to do that on several occasions at two concerts, one seminar and two recitals.

As well we offered two prizes in the **2013 Sydney Eisteddfod** to celebrate not only the Meister’s 200th anniversary, but the 80th anniversary of the Sydney Eisteddfod. We plan to do this every year.

These two prizes were won by **Rachel Bate** – the Wagner Prize – for her singing of Elsa’s Dream) and **Regina Daniel** for the German singing prize for Zerbinetta’s aria. These prizes were \$500 each. We hope Rachel and Regina will sing for the Society in 2014.

Regina, coloratura soprano, has been performing in Oz Opera and some of the boutique companies around Sydney, such as Pacific Opera, Rockdale Opera, Opera Bites and Pacific Opera. She is currently studying at the Lisa Gasteen Summer School under such luminaries as Giovanni Reggioli and Siegfried Jerusalem. (Last year we also helped soprano, **Amanda Windred**, with her fees there and this year we are supporting young bass, **Christopher Richardson**.)

Rachel, a former South Coast lifesaver, comes from three generations of coal miners. After her studies at the Sydney Con and winning many prizes here, she recently returned from one year at the Cologne Opera, where she sang Contessa Ceprano in *Rigoletto* as well as roles in the Childrens opera. She has sung in concerts in Sydney, the South Coast of NSW and Cologne.

Our first concert in 2013, *Faeries & Vampyres*, included arias and songs by Carl Maria von Weber and Heinrich Marschner both of whom influenced Wagner heavily, so much so that

when Richard Wagner’s brother sang in a performance of Marschner’s *Der Vampyr*, Wagner rewrote an aria for him – both those arias were sung in the Wagner Society concert by **Bradley Cooper**. Other arias were sung by bass, **Luke Stoker** and soprano, **Sarah Ann Walker** from Harbour City Opera.

We had given the two emerging singers sums of around \$500 for German coaching.

**Bradley**, tenor, after performing in Germany, is singing in the Opera Australia chorus and covered and appeared as **Albert Herring** to much acclaim recently. Luke went on to win the German Opera Award which gives him one year at the Cologne Opera – where he has already sung roles, most recently in *Eugene Onegin*.

**Sarah Ann Walker**, the Founder and Artistic Director of **Harbour City Opera** (HCO), recently starred in *Soeur Angelica* as the wayward nun. She had just prior staged Act One of *Die Walküre*, directed by Wagner Society committee member, **Paulo Montoya**. The Society gave HCO \$3,000 to defray some expenses.

*Swords and Winterstorms*, our second concert at the Mosman Art Gallery, featured **David Corcoran**, a young tenor who is moving into the German heroic repertoire. David has been covering Siegmund and Loge in the Melbourne Ring and performed in many of the final rehearsals until Stuart Skelton arrived.

**Bradley Gilchrist**, a young repetiteur and accompanist and choral conductor, has played for all our events and we are hoping that he will still find the time to do so in 2014.

In our *Riding the Storm* seminar on *The Flying Dutchman*, a vast selection of singers was sought, but two finally appeared at short notice, **Eugene Raggio**, Renaissance Man – organist,

film-maker, and bass, sang the Dutchman's first aria "*Die Frist ist um...*", a piece he also sang in the Eisteddfod. He is in Melbourne at the moment where he gained a place in the semi final of the **Wiesbaden German Opera Award**. We wish him toi toi for that and the rest of his career.

**At the Seminar, Emilie Lemasson** sang Senta's Ballad with warmth and feeling. She was born in France and has after studying at the Sydney Conservatorium won several awards, including some Helpmann awards. She is a soloist for the Joubert Singers at Hunters Hill and also performs in the Resonance series at Christ Church Lavender Bay.

After the 2013 Wagner AGM, many of you will have heard soprano, **Qestra Mulqueeny**, sing an ambitious program, including some Richard Strauss and the seldom heard Wagner aria written for Maria Stuarda – "Les Adieux de Marie Stuart." She recently appeared as Donna Anna in Sydney **Independent Opera's** *Don Giovanni*, directed by her fiancée and fellow Wagner Society committee member, Paulo Montoya, and had also sung Musetta in Harbour City Opera's *La Boheme*, as well as appearing in concerts. She went to Europe for coaching and to audition. She is now in the Czech Republic and is now through to the final of the Dvorak Singing Competition and we wish her the best of luck.

Those of you who attended the Wagner Birthday Dinner at the Royal Automobile Club, would have heard melodious mezzo, **Emily Edmonds**, sing. Or you might have heard her on Maggie Beer's last Christmas special - Emily is the Maggie's "fave" singer." For our dinner, Emily sang some Schubert, Berg and Strauss as well as one of Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*.

**Matthew Reardon**, tenor, who had trained at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts after working abroad in journalism, received a grant from the Society for German tuition.

We hope these young singers will delight us in 2014 with similar programs of seldom heard Wagner compositions and music composed by his contemporaries as well as those whom the Meister influenced.

## IN MEMORIAM:

Arthur John Hilton Carter (1934 - 2113)  
Member No 324

Arthur passed away peacefully in his sleep due to natural causes and was buried in Melbourne beside his father.

## DONATIONS

Anonymous (we would like to acknowledge all donors by name).

## NEW MEMBERS

Rhonda Dalton (1121), Rowena Cowley (1122), Ricky Davis (1123), Kurt Looser (1124), Lee Edwards-Crane (1125), Barbara and Andrew Dowe (1126), Ian Marsh (1127), Jennifer Emmerton (1128), Mr William McLeod Johnstone (Bill) and Mrs Eva Johnstone (1129), Minnie Biggs (1130).

## NEW MEMBERSHIP FEES

Please note the decision of the Management Committee on membership fees for 2014.

Single	\$65
Shared	\$95
Shared pensioner	\$56
Single pensioner	\$36
Student	\$25

There is a new facility on the Society's Home page ([www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au)) for credit card payments using PayPal.

## FLAGGING A SIGNAL EVENT IN AUSTRALIA'S WAGNERIAN CELEBRATIONS -

Photos of Opera Australia's Ring Banners by Terence Watson



## OPERA AUSTRALIA'S MELBOURNE RING CYCLE 2013 -

Melbourne State Theatre - Cycle 2 - November 27, 29, December 2, 4

**Creative Team:** Conductor Pietari Inkinen, Director Neil Armfield, Sets Robert Cousins, Costumes Alice Babidge

**Performers:** Terje Stensvold [Wotan/Wanderer], Warwick Fyfe [Alberich], Susan Bullock [Brünnhilde], Stefan Vinke [Siegfried], Deborah Humble [Erda/Waltraute], Jud Arthur [Fafner/Hunding], Daniel Sumegi [Fasolt/Hagen], Graeme Macfarlane [Mime], Jacqueline Dark [Fricka/Second Norn], Stuart Skelton [Siegmund], Miriam Gordon-Stewart [Sieglinde], Richard Berkeley-Steele [Loge], Lorina Gore [Woglinde], Jane Ede [Wellgunde], Dominica Matthews Flosshilde/Schwertleite], Hyeseoung Kwon [Freia/Helwige], Anke Höppner [Gerhilde/Third Norn], Elizabeth Campbell [Grimgerde/First Norn], Andrew Moran [Donner], Andrew Brunsdon [Froh], Meryln Quaife [Ortlinde], Sian Pendry [Siegrune], Roxane Hislop [Rossweisse], Taryn Fiebig [Forest Bird], Barry Ryan [Gunther], Sharon Prero [Gutrune].

**Original:** Richard Mills [conductor], Juha Uusitalo [Wotan], John Wegner [Alberich], Gary Lehman [Siegfried], Shane Lawrence [Fafner], Warwick Fyfe [Donner]

## THE FOLLIES OF GODS IN DECLINE

by Katie French

In *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in Neil Armfield's Melbourne Ring, he juxtaposes two worlds. There is the entertaining world of follies, of magic, of dazzling fantasies and wizardry. Then there is the stark and empty world full of aching human frailties, vulnerabilities and pain. He reveals that, far too frequently, it is the careless world of razzle dazzle and misuse of magic powers which inflicts unintended (and sometimes even unintended) painful consequences on the vulnerable and the innocent.

This is not just the Wagnerian myth-magic of spears with runes, dragons, gods and poison potions. Armfield has visually and playfully extended this to include the circus and magic tricks. Alberich becomes the Master Magician with his fluffy assistants, and a Disappearing Machine. There are the feathers and froth of the Folies Bergere, and Wotan, his power in decline, attempting to deceive us as a mythical Busby Berkeley. He and his Babes choreograph a kaleidoscopic feathered fan dance which culminates in an ephemeral illusion of a Rainbow Bridge, his Stairway to Paradise. (And all except Loge are dazzled!)

However, the core of the production, the hard reality of Armfield's Ring is located in the humanity and frailty of all the characters, and their weaknesses and blunders, which members of the audience recognise all too clearly in themselves. That focus is clearly made in the opening of *Das Rheingold*, where the huge reflective eye of an overhead mirror depicts a mass of humanity, sprawled and squirming like micro-organisms in a drop of water - or Aussies on a sun-drenched beach. All is as innocent and naive as the three Folies-feathered, fun-loving Rhinemaidens, until they take their teasing to a cruel extreme, and a Bullied Dwarf sets the whole Ring rolling.

These are first impressions after having seen only the first two performances of the first Ring of the Cycle, however, it is a pleasure to highlight that Warwick Fyfe, as that only too 'human' Bullied Dwarf, provides the standout performance to date.

His is a very different interpretation from the overwhelmingly virile and savage Alberich of the remarkable John Wegner (in the 2004 Adelaide Ring Cycle directed by the late Elke Neidhardt-Editor), a version so many of us



Opera Australia's Valkyrie concert parade to celebrate the start of the Melbourne Ring festival. Photo: Joe Armao - The Age

have seen. Warwick is physically fearless on stage, exploiting a physique very different from John Wegner's. Stripped down to his undies, and with his grimy old singlet pulled over his head by the teasing Rhinemaidens, he touches our hearts as a bullied bloke, hard done by. Here his voice is somewhat stentorian, (one would expect him to bellow!), but there is a weaselly viciousness, a whine, in the style he uses occasionally, which warn us that he, too, is capable of being a Bully Boy himself. His performance drew roars of approval.

The productions have moments of breath-taking simplicity: white petals of snow falling on Hunding's house, which quite magically turn into green leaves falling on Siegmund and Sieglinde as they discover they are kindred spirits: the use of shadows, which turn the desperate Siegmund, in search of a sword, into a veritable Titan when he sees Nothing.

There are moments of 'how did he do that?' magic, as Hunding's revolving box-like house suddenly becomes lit from inside and the back wall disappears.

There are strikingly powerful gestures as a theatre backdrop of a Byzantine-like fortress, an extinct wonder of an ancient world, is blasted through by two powerful Giants, huge in their cherry pickers. (So much for the fortress of Valhalla!)

There is the sheer delight in watching Susan Bullock's expressive face and body. She springs down the spiral at the stage centre of *Die Walküre*, boyish, with prickly hair and a Hojo to ho, and you just love her, as Wotan does. This night there is not the same warmth in the voice, but we are wrapped in the warmth of her performance. The image of a broken Wotan, collapsed and sobbing at her feet, as he says his farewell, is another one not to be forgotten, nor is the image of him lying on the platform beside her, stroking her hair, lulling her into a dreamlike sleep. It is as heart-breakingly human an image as that of Brünnhilde, Siegmund and Sieglinde, standing together in a single down-light, all blighted by their Father's follies.

Still, there are 'flat' moments in '*Das Rheingold*' and in *Die Walküre*. Directorial 'black holes', where that stage is too vast for an intimate 'chamber' scene shared by two people. After the visual triumphs of Acts 1 and 2 of *Die Walküre*, people will be disappointed, if not mortified, by the perfunctory depiction of the iconic Ride of the Valkyries.

The Conductor guides that orchestra incredibly lovingly, (yes, tenderly even!) enabling the narrative to be centre stage. It may at times seem slow, however, it enables sensitive voices to tell their tales beguilingly, and when heft is required, it is there. When one leaves a performance, and the buzz is all about the next performance, one knows one is on a roll. Flawless it is not, but the entire audience is willing it to succeed as they are living through those characters on that stage

#### ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

In an overwhelmingly splendid evening of music-theatre, in *Siegfried*, Neil Armfield, brings his two worlds of *Das Rheingold* and '*Die Walküre*' together. The world of the follies and fantasies of power-hungry Gods, Giants and Dwarfs becomes enmeshed quite deliberately with our own very human world, under that most typical architectural sign of theatre: the proscenium arch. Its back wall is pushed hard downstage, right into the faces of the audience. (No more Directorial 'black hole' expanses here!) Clearly now, our own world is on Armfield's stage, in a rather cramped bedsit, and any remaining comforting thoughts that monstrous betrayals and disastrous urges for power occur only in the world of myths, are clearly blown away.

This becomes a night of theatre of powerful voices and powerful, no-holds-barred imagery. For example, the very favourite moment of children's pantomime theatre - the slaying of the dragon - is accompanied initially by a loud whoosh, a showering of blood red paper droplets, which inspire a kind of childlike glee. And then, agonisingly slowly, Jud Arthur, as the real, living giant, Fafner, who so spectacularly murdered his brother for possession of the Ring, appears spectacularly himself, naked, riven by the sword of the bumptious young Siegfried, soaked in blood from head to toe. His judgements are delivered thunderously, both visually and vocally. The repercussions of Alberich's curse on the Ring are truly shocking.

Terje Stensvold, as the Wanderer, also carries the scars of these repercussions. More comfortable now in this

incarnation of Wotan than in the two previous operas, and still a giant of a character, though now a bare-chested, more notably human Wotan, he wears the long, grey locks of a painful learning experience. He has grown in monumentality, in both his movements and his voice.

However, his consultation with Erda provided another of those shatteringly powerful moments of self-recognition, with two former great powers in decline. Erda, is fragile, in a wheelchair, Deborah Humble her 'black-shadow' voice, as her carer. The gorgeous grandeur of Deborah Humble's voice is such a poignant reminder of what this now-frail Earth Mother once was, and a devastating reminder of what we will all become.

However, the spectacular for the evening, is provided by the emergence of a hormone-fuelled teenager on the brink of manhood – Siegfried - and his powerfully sensual and joyously voiced encounter with the newly awakened and equally gloriously voiced, Brünnhilde.

This boy/ potential hero (Stefan Vinke) locates Brünnhilde (Susan Bullock) on her rock, in a shipping packing crate. She is taped to its base, shrouded in plastic, looking much like one of those stuffed animal trophies that were the signs of Wotan's power and glory. (How ironic that his most-loved 'creature' should become just another trophy from his follies.) Absolutely radiant, awakening to the warmth of Siegfried's kiss and the rays of the sun, Susan Bullock embodies Brünnhilde as a sensuous Venus Reborn. She is now lusciously blonde-haired - all those years for it to grow! The electricity between these two glorious humans, the magnificent power of their two astounding voices, is totally exhilarating.

This is indeed the 'magic moment' of the production to date. Forget about the feathers and the frippery: this is what we came for.

#### APOCALYPSE ... NOW?

What does it signify when, after four nights of sometimes splendid music-theatre, one hears oneself saying, 'It needed more 'apocalypse'? Where did this saga of epic proportions seem to lose its way?

'Team Armfield's' Ring has, until now, seemed to have a firm hold onto two core concepts. One, inherently Wagner's own, has been the irresistible allure of power, the deceitful subterfuge and magic that can be employed both to acquire it and to camouflage it, and the hideous transformations that take place in those who lust after it.

The accompanying, more creative concept, has been to provide visible evidence of power, of deceit, of hideous transformations, which has enabled the audience to participate in the production, and be carried along at its heady pace. Wotan's trophy animals, including his "cryovaced" daughter, his dazzling feathered stairway to paradise, the twisted and tormented Alberich, even Fafner's superficial power lying in his theatrical makeup, have evidenced this concept, and allowed the audience to draw swift conclusions.

But where are these concepts carried forward in *Götterdämmerung*. Where is that 'arc of development' that holds the Cycle together? If the perfunctory depiction of the Norns is any indicator, the concepts have sunk into the

Rhine River. This scene takes prime position at the forefront of *Götterdämmerung*. It is not just inconvenient 'back fill'. It marks the end of the eternal, established order, and should convey terror and awe. Instead, we get three mending ladies, one singing sharp, one singing flat, and one somewhere in the middle. When they've completed their incomprehensible needlework, they gather up their failed workpiece, and unceremoniously lug it off stage.

Too harsh? But what a disappointment after the sheer pleasure of having seen the traditional ugly duckling, *Siegfried*, transform itself into a magnificent swan in the previous performance. Expectations are now high. So, let's dispose of the disappointing impressions first, and then revel in the highlights.

Will Set Designers never learn that one can't throw all singers onto a huge, bare stage - save for the framework of an aircraft hangar - and expect them to extract their voices from the rear of the stage, the wings, and the flies, and throw them across the top of an orchestra that, until now, has been kept on a firm leash, and is straining to let go? Powerful singers like the irrepressible Vinke, and the heroic Bullock can do it. Singers in that stark environment, like Guttrune (unfortunately depicted, yet again, as Bimbo Barbie), and to a less extent, Gunther, are hung out, seeming to be mouthing their lines.

And while we're grumbling, so many in the audience are tired of these "flash mob" crowds of humanity, who flood onto the stage just in case people are incapable of visualising Siegfried's Rhine Journey, and turn the whole affair into a group aerobics class, despite this being one of the most gorgeously evocative equivalents to a tone poem ever written! And let's try to forget that remarkable transformation of Siegfried's dead body, only to have the shattering scene invaded by crowds who want to turn the spot into a temporary memorial for the victim of some road accident by spreading around plastic flowers! (Directorial Teams have to learn to trust their audiences as well as to trust their singers.)

So, where were the highlights, (and yes, sadly this became the usual stringing together of highlights)?

Alberich's transformation into a virtual Dracula brings a magic touch of gothic horror to his inhabiting of Hagen's nightmares. One can almost hear the sucking sounds of the interchange of bile between these two, and Warwick Fyfe continues to be in his element - aided no doubt by the 'sounding board' of the marquee which he and the powerful Daniel Sumegi, as Hagen, have been given as assistance.

In stark contrast, the chest-thumping shock, the heart-rending tenderness, of the ritual bathing of the hero, Siegfried's, body, is totally arresting. It is a transcendent moment where all of Time comes together, and stands still. (Such is the perfect antithesis of the ephemerality of those magic tricks, the hallmarks of power.)

There are the pleasurable delights of three out-of-work Rhine gurlies, headdresses awry, holes in stockings, still plying their trade with an almost susceptible Siegfried. And then, there is the Wedding! (Why is it that such gatherings bring out the bad in people?) One thinks of Muriel when one beholds the tarty Bridesmaids, and there are terrifying traces even of *Dimboola* as these newly conjugated individuals stare each other down in front of mortified 'family'.

Susan Bullock is again formidable, mascara smudged, wedding hair in disarray, hobbled by the strictures of that horrible formal gown. Beware of any oath she swears on the muzzle of a gun! Stefan Vinke continues to astound. (Both were betrayed directorially by the Immolation set.)

The orchestra and the chorus, now permitted to let rip, provide standout performances.

So why does one yearn for more apocalypse? It seems to lose its way: the Team fails to carry us with them on their conceptual wave. The opportunities are there with trophy wives and even more potions, but they throw us no lifelines to assist us in overall understanding, and the audience is too occupied in holding onto the narrative to unravel those connecting links for themselves. Still, this 'Ring' is never less than really good, and sometimes is marvellous, but it could have been really great.

## POSTSCRIPT

Having now seen the 'Ring' through two Cycles, the following comments may be in order. First, a mea culpa. It was quite incorrect to give the impression that the Cycle lacks an 'arc of development'. Clearly, to have Alberich on stage during the Immolation scene (seemingly frozen in a state of shock and awe at the apocalypse he had set in motion), and to have the Rhinemaidens, their Ring rightly restored, accompanying the sacrificial couple, is a completion of that circle commenced in 'Rhinegold'

The hunting scenes in the Gibichung's gym also continued the trophy motif first seen in Act 2 of *Die Walküre*, as did the Paintball hunting 'games' in *Götterdämmerung*, (among other images.)

Secondly, clearly overwhelmed by the powerful performance of *Siegfried*, and thoroughly underwhelmed by both the depiction and performance of the Norns, I seem to have damned Acts 2 and 3 of *Götterdämmerung* with faint praise. There were indeed splendid moments in both Acts (as outlined in the original impressions), the swearing of oaths being amazingly powerful.

Which brings me to the most (personally) powerful scene of *Götterdämmerung* - the ritual bathing of Siegfried's body. Such was the power of this scene, and its lasting impact (with Siegfried's body, ritually anointed, standing erect through the entire Immolation scene), that the final scene seemed such an anticlimax. (Hence the plea for 'more apocalypse'.) This impression was not helped by the final Wedding Cake tableau, with Brünnhilde holding aloft an Olympic torch of arum lilies, which subsequently burst into flames.

It was also remiss not to mention the role of the surtitles in carrying the narrative from beginning to end. For 'Team Armfield', conveying the 'story' was a key focus. This was assisted by the pared-down production, and also by the sensitive and superb handling of the orchestra by Pietari Inkinen.

**However, the surtitles, (from Barry Millington in *Rhinegold* and *Die Walküre*, and Peter Kreiss in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*), were exceptional. No signs of archaisms to convey a false gravitas; they were in simple, largely conversational English, and were a vital part of the success of the production.**

Overall, after two viewings, we have a 'Ring' which is splendid both vocally and musically, and sometimes conceptually.

## REVIEW

by Richard Mason

It is worth stating the enormous achievement of Opera Australia in finally performing the Ring, after many years of waiting and an embarrassing false start 30 years ago. As the replacement list shows, there were a number of hurdles to overcome on the way. Doubtless, many of the audience were Ring neophytes and, hopefully, Ring converts. The State Theatre proved a fine venue, with a clear singing acoustic and a lush orchestral sound.

To start with the best: the conducting and orchestra. Throughout the conducting was extremely beautiful, with fine details in the wind and brass. After becoming slightly bogged down in the Loge-Alberich exchange in *Rheingold*, Pietari Inkinen improved in *Walküre* to create drama, passion and fine tension. *Siegfried* is a notorious trap for conductors – play the Riddle scene too slowly and *Siegfried* can exceed *Götterdämmerung* in length; play it too quickly and the opera becomes exciting, but superficial. Inkinen judged the tempi perfectly, and again produced a beautiful and rich account of the score. The *Götterdämmerung* tempi were also well judged, although by Act III the brass section was showing signs of wear.

Terje Stensvold struggled with the higher notes in *Rheingold* and *Walküre*, but had a strong voice, more suited to the lower-pitched Wanderer. He avoided the twin evils of the bark and the wobble. He had a reasonable legato and dark colour, but was very monochrome and relied on a limited vocabulary of gestures for acting. There was no character change or ageing between the first two operas, and minimal adjustment for *Siegfried*.

Susan Bullock was a disappointment as a singer: her loud notes were very harsh, sometimes a squawk. She was somewhat improved in *Siegfried* with a fine awakening. Her acting in *Walküre* was dramatic in a tomboy fashion. In *Siegfried*, she woke up well, with convincing acting to the end and had discarded the tomboy gestures. She convincingly made the transition to a mature, vengeful woman in *Götterdämmerung*, and her harsh voice was suited to the dramatic confrontations of Act II. Her Immolation scene was powerful, notwithstanding some more harsh notes towards the close.

Stefan Vinke had a peculiar voice: the top half a fine heroic tenor; the lower half thin, coarse and sometimes slightly flat. There were pitch problems also with the transition between upper and lower voices. He sang the forging song well and had some fine passages in the final scene, particularly “Sei mein.” He gave a convincing portrayal in *Siegfried* as an irrepressible teenager. His acting in *Götterdämmerung* was reasonably convincing, apart from an inexcusable rude gesture in Act III. Also in Act III, he suffered more prolonged pitch problems but, paradoxically, produced a more even colour across the range.

Warwick Fyfe dominated *Rheingold* with a strong vocal characterisation of Alberich and a rounded dramatic account. His performance in *Siegfried* was magisterial, sinister and manipulative in *Götterdämmerung*.

Deborah Humble produced a very rich sound for Erda, powerful and expressive. She continued an effective vocal characterisation in *Siegfried*, notwithstanding the impeding of the eccentric staging. Her Waltraute was the high vocal point of the cycle, dark, dramatic, doom-laden and mesmerising.

In other roles: Stuart Skelton was a magnificent heldentenor, with a long, long “Wälse,” dramatic and sympathetic. Miriam Gordon-Stewart acted Sieglinde well and had a good middle voice with touches of harshness at the top and weakness at the bottom. Jud Arthur was a grim voiced and effective Fafner and Hunding. Barry Ryan sang and acted well as Gunther. Richard Berkeley-Steele gave a slick characterization as Loge, but his extreme wobble made his narration difficult to listen to. Graeme Macfarlane was exaggerated and whiny as Mime, with pitch in the upper part of voice very approximate. Jacqueline Dark failed to make much vocal impression in either appearance as Fricka. Daniel Sumegi had an unpleasant occluded tone throughout and was notably unsympathetic as Fasolt. Sharon Prero was a harsh Guttrune.

The production was a confused jumble of ideas, with little cohesion. Each opera had a different style, as if designed by a committee. The Valkyrie rock, which with appearances in each full opera is an important unifying element for the cycle, was staged entirely differently on each appearance.

*Das Rheingold* was glitzy, relying on the Dame Edna formula of colour and movement: the Tarnhelm magician's box, rainbow dancing girls, the showgirl Rhinemaidens.

In *Die Walküre* there was excessive use of the stage revolve as a substitute for an idea. Act I displayed a good set for Act II of *La Fanciulla del West*, complete with snowstorm and red-haired Minnie. Act II was staged on the spiral staircase of a museum, like the Guggenheim (critics unfairly compared it to a multi-storey car-park), effective at allowing characters to move, an intelligent solution to the problem of a meeting place for gods and mortals. The Act III stage was virtually bare, with a modest fire.

*Siegfried* was a random collection of effects: an irrepressible teenager in a curly ginger wig, the Wanderer as an ageing hippy, an invisible dragon, Fafner naked after being stabbed, an annoyingly omnipresent woodbird, Erda sung by a nurse wheeling an elderly woman in a wheelchair who mouthed the words, the magic fire a glittering theatre curtain, a false proscenium arch with lightbulbs in each act, Brünnhilde in a wooden crate.

*Götterdämmerung* produced a more unified staging, with a house framework, which served for Brünnhilde's cave and the Gibichung hall. The most effective act in the entire cycle was Act II, staged as a wedding banquet: it caught well the dramatic interrupted ceremony. Act III was an anti-climax, another jumble of random ideas. At least the fire was convincing.

There were a few good dramatic ideas scattered around: Fricka dressed in the same material as the Rheingold, the appearance and theft of the Rheingold, Alberich swearing his oath on Wotan's discarded spear, the spiral staircase in Act II of *Die Walküre*, the wooden crate confining and protecting Brünnhilde, Siegfried's childhood security blanket, which comforted Brünnhilde, Guttrune as a mutton-dressed-as-lamb bridezilla.

To summarise, the production had quite a few good ideas, but these were thinly spaced. I am reminded of Verdi's criticism of the Paris Opera as a “Department Store” – good work here and there, but no controlling will.

## ARMFIELD'S POOR - NOT CHEAP - THEATRE RING CYCLE

by Terence Watson

The concept of "poor theatre" as applied to the Melbourne Ring Cycle, has for many attendees been synonymous with "cheap theatre," especially since many people found the range of costumes from the formal to the bathing costumes of the "Sea of Humanity" reminiscent of a visit to an Op Shop, and the minimal use of spectacular stage effects a way of saving Opera Australia money. However, as Armfield's references to "poor theatre" and "simplicity of means" should alert us to a more serious intention.

I was grappling with Armfield's concept and the prevailing disappointment in the style of the production until I remembered from my studies of theatre and drama that it was coined by the Polish Director Jerzy Grotowski in the 1960s to describe his rejection of the lavish productions of state-subsidised opera and theatre in Europe (and the equally elaborate privately sponsored productions in the USA), and his contention that theatre should also not attempt to compete with the resources and techniques of film, but focus on the essential elements of theatre, especially the acting. According to Andy Merrifield "rich theatre:"

...depends on artistic kleptomania, drawing from other disciplines, constructing hybrid-spectacles, conglomerates without backbone or integrity".... one is dazzled by grandiose sets and décor, by star actors, by high-tech lighting, by flashing colors and ornate costumes and heavy make up, by lightening quick changes of scenery, all of which is image-driven, says Grotowski, all of which frequently fosters audience passivity rather than empathy [<http://antipodefoundation.org/2013/10/18/intervention-encountering-paratheatrical-space-by-andy-merrifield-2/>].

In 1968, Grotowski and Lutwik Flazen (regarded as one of Poland's most renowned theatre writers and thinkers) wrote the ground-breaking book, *Towards a Poor Theatre* in which they claim:

Theatre - through the actor's technique, his art in which the living organism strives for higher motives - provides an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks .... Here we can see the theatre's therapeutic function for people in our present day civilization...the actor accomplishes this act...through an encounter with the spectator - intimately, visibly, not hiding behind a cameraman, wardrobe mistress, stage designer or make-up girl.... The actor's act - discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up - is an invitation to the spectator. This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings.... [Jerzy Grotowski (19 June 2004). "Source Material on Jerzy Grotowski's *Statement of Principles*"].

This "stripping away" of inessential components of "rich theatre" and focusing on the actor is consistent with Wagner's own theories about the stripping away of inessential aspects

of the mediaeval legends and romances and the centering the dramatic action on the crucial actions of the protagonist in his or her world.

1968 was also the year of Grotowski's debut in the west. As Director of the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole Poland, Grotowski took Stanislaw Wyspianski's confronting play *Akropolis/Acropolis* to the Edinburgh Festival. From this debut, Grotowski's ideas rapidly became popular with more socially radical theatre groups in the west. I would take a punt, given Armfield's use of the "poor theatre" term and his characteristic theatrical style, that Grotowski was a major influence in the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) in the early to mid-1970s when Armfield was learning his theatre craft and theory, especially in reaction against the academic focus on texts and their interpretation. Armfield graduated from Sydney University with honours in 1977.

On 12 August 2012, in an interview with Elissa Blake for the Sydney University's "Profiles" of important graduates, Armfield described the emphasis in the 1970s on dramatic texts, rather than theatrical practice: "Most of the energy and the pleasure of university was directing with SUDS over and over and over again," he says. "...performance wasn't a subject and drama was studied as texts in the English department. So we put on shows and bonded with people who were obsessed and loved it. We did it all ourselves with little or no mentoring from teachers. That was a great thing. We learned from our mistakes."

He also gave Blake a definition of the concept of "poor theatre" that he has been applying to the Ring Cycle:

I always aim for a simplicity of means. I get rid of any decoration or embellishment and place the performer in a space where there is concentration on the human body and the clarity of the story," Armfield says of the house style he forged at Belvoir. "The theatre here is a rare space where the audience breathes the same air as the actors. It's a handmade, intimate experience.

In the 1970s, though, Grotowski moved on to a more socially inclusive concept of theatre *Paratheatre* that also seems to have found its way into Armfield's theatre practice and his view of the Ring Cycle:

The main ideas inspiring the paratheatrical work were... overcoming the division between participants and spectators; working towards suspending social roles and ...finding the human dimension of one's existence in action and experiment; encounters involving other people and nature... and gradually leading to fundamental transformations in culture.... The fundamental principle of paratheatrical work...was the principle of gradually opening up the experiments and including in them ever more groups of people expressing an interest in them [[www.grotowski.net/en/node/1904](http://www.grotowski.net/en/node/1904)].

Armfield almost paraphrases Grotowski's view of theatre in "an empty space" in giving us an entry point into his conception of the Melbourne Ring Cycle with his comments on Peter Thompson's ABC Radio National program "Talking Heads," on 12 July 2007, about the need to engage in a radical re-think of theatre in contemporary life when he took over as Artistic Director of the famous Company B at Belvoir Theatre in 1994:

When we bought this theatre, I argued that the theatre was somehow exhausted as a space. My suggestion was that we start again, that we needed to rip the seats out, to take all the structure out and open it up as a warehouse and find a new kind of architectural energy. Just make it an empty space and perform in front of it and realised how incredibly versatile this space is imaginatively so the audience could be taken anywhere by the simplicity and the lack of scenery, really.

In the Melbourne Ring Cycle, this idea finds expression in the constant use of a bare, black stage.

In the interview with Westwood, Armfield voices his sympathy with Wagner's revolutionary ideas about the social purpose of theatre:

...Armfield regards the Ring, in part, as a work of people's theatre – 'that's how it was written' - and has approached the production with the economical stagecraft that is a hallmark of his theatre work. He is alert to the incongruities of the Wagner tradition: 'Wagner was an opera composer who was trying to put a bomb under contemporary arts practice,' he says.

There are in fact many similarities between Wagner's theorising about the "true" nature of theatre in his *Art and Revolution* and *The Artwork of the Future* and Grotowski's ideas that are too complex to go into here, but are worth following up if you have the inclination (all of Wagner's essays are easily accessible at The Wagner Library <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/>).

Also speaking with Thompson, Armfield gives us, perhaps, an insight into how his view of the power of theatre shaped his Ring Cycle production: "Well, it's the pleasure of putting on a show, it's the pleasure of gathering people together, it's the pleasure of hearing an audience rolling with laughter or an audience kind of genuinely heartbroken or shocked in silence. There's nothing more thrilling than being part of that crowd." Merrifield again helpfully explains Grotowski's emphasis on the actor-audience relationship:

...there is only one element of which film and television cannot rob the theatre: the closeness of the living organism. It is therefore necessary to abolish the distance between actor and audience by eliminating the stage, removing all frontiers. Let the most drastic scenes happen face to face with the spectators so that they are within arm's reach of the actor, can feel his/her breathing and smell the perspiration."

Hence Armfield's practice in the Ring Cycle of bringing his characters as close to the front of the stage as possible; it is a bonus for the singers, too, of course, since they do not have to project as exhaustingly as from the back of the set.

In a perhaps unintended rephrasing of Wagner's maxim "Kinder, macht es neue," that Elke Neidhardt was fond of quoting, Armfield speaks in the interview with Blake of the importance of theatrical renewal: "I think there's a constant rejuvenation in the experience of an audience receiving a performance and I think that there's a thrill of something being right and funny or communicative and meaningful in all sorts of ways. I take pleasure in other people's pleasure."

To Thompson Armfield also offered the thought: "I think theatre has the potential to be like a space of both contemplation and active engagement. It can be funny and it can be beautiful and it can be heartbreakingly sad. It's an essential kind of human activity, the acting out of story." We can read here strong echoes of Grotowski's view of the actor's relation to the spectator being an "act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings."

With these theoretical ideas in mind, we can see how Armfield's concept of "poor theatre" is far from cheap, despite the deliberate use of "ordinary" clothes for most characters. Armfield's production focusses very strongly on the interaction between the performers (given the extra constraints imposed on them by the physical requirements of singing – such as not deafening your lover by bellowing the love duet in his/her ears!). There are memorable moments, such as Fricka throwing herself on the ground in Wotan's path in a juvenile tantrum; Wotan lying next to his daughter and stroking her hair as she falls asleep, and, in a triumph of imagination, the ritual bathing of Siegfried's body (to mention only a few).

Armfield builds on this basic notion of Grotowski's with a version of the earlier director's "paratheatre" by introducing what has been called the "sea of humanity," apparently in reference to the crowd of people's first appearance as the Rhine River. Instead, we would gain a better idea of Armfield's approach by remembering Grotowski's hope for a newly engaged social theatre: "overcoming the division between participants and spectators; working towards suspending social roles and instead finding the human dimension of one's existence in action and experiment; encounters involving other people and nature." We are, I think, meant to take the crowd of people as our representatives, and their "ordinariness" is supposed to make it easier for supposedly egalitarian Australian audience members to identify with them and, by extension, the named characters who enact the main story.

In an informative comment, Westwood also reports "Armfield started thinking about how he would stage Wagner's allegory of wealth and power in the global energy capital. During the several years the production was discussed, Armfield saw it would have to address the oil industry, and environmental catastrophes such as the Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill, 400km southeast of Houston." The cancellation of Houston Grand Opera's involvement in the project seems to have given Armfield licence to re-think his approach and to build on his investigations of Australian history and culture in such works as the stage adaptations of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. Instead of a

critique of rampant despoiling capitalism, he has given us a whimsical and affectionate picture of ourselves through the lenses of various Australian traditions and symbols.

It is also worth remembering Wagner's own view on the relationship between the hero of a tragedy and the community out of which he emerges: the hero is played by an actor within a community of actors who, through an imaginative identification with the hero of a particular myth directs the troupe of actors in enacting that myth for the moral improvement of the larger society through the overcoming of egoism:

Only that action is completely truthful...on whose fulfilment a man had set the whole strength of his being, and which was to him so imperative a necessity that he needs must pass over into it with the whole force of his character. But hereof he conclusively persuades us by this alone: that, in the effectuation of his personal force, he literally *went under*, he veritably threw overboard his personal existence, for sake of bringing to the outer world the inner Necessity which ruled his being. He proves to us the verity of his nature, not only in his actions...but by the consummated sacrifice of his personality to this necessary course of action. The last, completest renunciation (*Entäusserung*) of his personal egoism, the demonstration of his full ascension into universalism, a man can only show us by his *Death*; and that not by his accidental, but by his *necessary* death, the logical sequel to his actions, the last fulfilment of his being.

*The celebration of such a Death is the noblest thing that men can enter on.* It reveals to us in the nature of this one man, laid bare by death, the whole content of universal human nature.

In his *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski summarises Wagner's position as "The actor, at least in part, is creator, model and creation rolled into one" [<http://owendaly.com/jeff/grotows2.htm>]. Both theorists have a very strong moral understanding of the purpose and effect of the theatrical experience.

The status in Wagner's analysis of the community of artists is akin to Grotowski's notion of the theatrical priesthood:

The actor, depending only on the natural gifts of voice and body, could bring the sacred rituals of theatre and the themes of social transformation to the audience. The audience became pivotal to theatrical performance, and theatre became more than entertainment: it became a pathway to understanding.

The relevance of Wagner's explanation to the character and myth of Siegfried, as Wagner constructs them, is evident.

Wagner emphasises the communal ritual nature of the drama: Grotowski and Armfield build on this notion by calling for the involvement of spectators in the action. Grotowski was known for bringing members of the audience onto the stage as part of the theatrical world. Members who have seen the recent Bayreuth productions of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Parsifal* will recall similar effects. In *Meistersinger*, Katherina Wagner had the townsfolk sitting in bleacher seats and dressed as members of the audience, as a direct reflection of the larger community. In

*Parsifal*, Stefan Herheim inserted a large hanging mirror in the final scene to reflect the actual audience to itself.

Armfield extends this idea further by having "ordinary" people participate in the theatrical realisation of the narrative: they form the Rhine River (in *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*), they become the gold in *Rheingold* (suggesting that human beings have a similar value to that attributed to the gold), very movingly, they pay tribute to the dead Siegfried by laying flowers in a circle around him (that both reminds us of the ring of power, the cycle of life and death, and the folk ritual of laying flowers at the sites of motor car accidents) – again to mention only a few of Armfield's imaginative deployments of his crowd. Whether or not one is convinced of the theatrical validity or ideological intention of the use of the crowds depends perhaps on one's own ideological commitments or preferences in theatrical practice.

In developing Grotowski's ideas, Armfield emphasises, as he told Blake, the "plac[ing of] the performer in a space where there is concentration on the human body and the clarity of the story." Grotowski described this approach: "By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography [ie not arising out of the actors' discovery of the drama], without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc [[www.jbactors.com/actingreading/actingteacherbiographies/jerzygrotowski.html](http://www.jbactors.com/actingreading/actingteacherbiographies/jerzygrotowski.html)].

Out of the placement and interaction of the performers, according to this approach, certain theatrical effects will naturally arise— particularly significant symbols, character's actions, scenic images. I have in mind, for example, the giants ripping through the backdrop with their cherry-pickers. This moment has several significances. Firstly, the backdrop is exactly what Wagner called for in his stage directions, a very naturalistic picture of the mountain top with Valhalla in the distance. Armfield makes a strong ideological point by showing how easy it is for the giants to destroy Wotan's illusion of a future shield from attacks, and of his growing divine power. Armfield builds on the delusion of Wotan's dreams and ambitions by having the Norns engaged in an equally futile task of repairing Wotan's world. The sham of this attempt, given all that has happened and that will soon happen, is reinforced by having the backdrop upside down as well as torn. The action of the Norns carrying off the entire backdrop reinforces its illusory status. It is also a statement about the nature of contemporary attitudes to such *faux* naturalism.

Another instance is the bare stage for the second encounter between Wotan and the giants where the gold "box" is built around Freia; at the moment she is declared freed by the giants, she bursts out of the "box," scattering gold in all directions. It is unexpected and powerfully dramatic as a representation of love freed from the power of gold/money.

A further "muscular" theatrical moment is Fafner's bursting stark naked and covered in blood from his cave. For most Wagnerians, there is an expectation of a dragon of some sort (usually quite disappointing). In keeping with the notion of not competing with "rich theatre" or film, Armfield

undercuts this expectation on one level, and deftly refocusses our attention on the plight of the dying giant on another level.

When we consider the relatively small number of props and sets in Armfield's production, we enter another important area of "poor theatre," that of the need for them to arise directly out of the actors' actions:

The number of props is extremely limited; each one has multiple functions. Worlds are created with very ordinary objects, as in children's play and improvised games. We are dealing with a theatre caught in its embryonic stage, in the middle of the creative process when the awakened instinct chooses spontaneously the tools of its magic transformation. A living man, the actor, is the creative force behind it all [Grotowski, Jerzy (2012-11-12). *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Theatre Arts (Routledge Paperback)) (p. 76). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition].

This approach is, perhaps, best described in terms of the "magic transformation" that Grotowski identifies as central to the theatrical experience. Indeed, transformation is a key term, it seems to me, in Armfield's analysis of the Ring Cycle. Almost every character experiences a change of some kind. Armfield sets up the transformation pattern with Alberich's magic changes into the serpent and the toad: the use of circus or cabaret magic sleight of hand to emphasise the dubious intelligence of Alberich's willingness to demonstrate his new power with such party tricks, rather than immediately dominate Wotan. The transformation of the Rhinedaughters into circus or cabaret dancers continues the metaphor.

Among the many other transformations Armfield builds into his production, one of the most dramatic is Fafner's making himself up into a psychopathic nightmare figure on the huge screen at the beginning of act 2 of *Siegfried* as a symbolic dragon, and then appearing transformed back to

his giant form as he staggers mortally wounded and naked from his cave. Hunding's hut seems to have been changed into an Australian high country shelter. We could even read a critique of the modern obsession with transforming one's body into a perfect form into the Gibichung's gym rituals. The wild mountain woman is finally transformed into the modern trophy bride, hobbled in wedding gown and high heels and trapped in a parody of an Australian ritual – the horror of a wedding in the tent that turns into an internecine battle à la Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola*.

These production transformations match the character transformations that Wagner describes in great detail. Siegmund, for example, develops from a feral forest predator to noble hero willing to sacrifice himself for the safety and well-being of his lover. Wotan transforms from world dominator to world renouncer. Alberich "grows" into a nightmare of hatred and resentment. Siegfried changes from just post-pubescent youth into a tender, loving man to match the gentle, adoring Brünnhilde who has been transformed into a human being by her father. There are many other instances.

Finally, we must be grateful that Armfield is highly sensitive to the special character of opera, since it has contributed to a highly successful interpretation of one of the world's towering cultural masterpieces; as he told Thompson: "It's very different directing opera to directing plays. In opera, the director's job, I believe, is all about making the music feel inevitable and right. You know, what happens in an opera theatre is that an audience listens with their eyes."

[www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/txt/s2945193.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/txt/s2945193.htm)

<http://sydney.edu.au/alumni/sam/november2010/profile-neil-armfield.shtml>

[www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/neil-armfield-promises-a-ring-of-revolution-with-opera-australias-production/story-fn9n8gph-1226741165764](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/neil-armfield-promises-a-ring-of-revolution-with-opera-australias-production/story-fn9n8gph-1226741165764)

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## THE MELBOURNE RING CYCLE 2013 - Interview with Conductor Pietari Inkinen

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"Wagner's music has this dark side that's like nothing else, and such heavenly moments too, for contrast. Performing it is a pleasure, it has such rewards. There's such a scale of expression and emotion and colour in the orchestra. How did he do it? It's Wagner at his best, where he evolved to in his career. It's so uniquely rewarding, and such a pleasure," Inkinen stops as he tries to explain, pausing to correct himself.

"No. Pleasure is the wrong word. It's more like – after you've heard it, at least for a while, you can't listen to anything else. You are so soaked in this world. It's not in your head, it's in your whole body. You're covered with it."

"I try to understand as much of the language as possible, down to the last word, learning what the deeper meanings

are and what's going on. The more you read, the more your understanding grows with it, and when I conducted *Die Walküre* in concert and then in Palermo it got deeper and deeper. It will only improve during the rehearsal period."

The Ring is driven by the orchestra with long passages building up to a climax, delicate transitions and a flow where everything is connected to everything else, Inkinen says. "You have to learn how to handle the orchestra, to save something and hold back, so that you still have a little bit more to give when it really matters. You have to calculate the powers required to build up to a climax." The full interview can be read at the Melbourne Ring's special website:

[http://melbourneringcycle.com.au/ring\\_cycle/behind\\_the\\_scenes/news/pietari\\_inkinen\\_interview](http://melbourneringcycle.com.au/ring_cycle/behind_the_scenes/news/pietari_inkinen_interview)

## TERJE STENSVOLD:

### Interview with Wotan in the Melbourne Ring Cycle

Like most Norwegians, Stensvold grew up with the Norse myths on which the Ring is based. 'Those stories meant a lot to us in the fifties when they were seen as symbolic of our liberation from Sweden. We have many streets named after Walhalla and I know a great restaurant called Walkure.'

Stensvold has become one of the most in demand Wotans of his time. His career has enjoyed a remarkable second wind, since he retired in his fifties and began singing lessons again. 'I did not really trust vocal coaches, they were foolish, so I just started to sing twice as much as before when I realised that my voice was growing.'

Stensvold is admired for the warmth of his tone and his vocal power. He also brings a wisdom to the part that comes with age and experience. 'I have now sung the role more

than one hundred and ten times. If I had done it for thirty years, I might be tired, but I still have the interest and the energy.'

He counts himself lucky that he's not been asked to take part in any controversially extreme productions. 'I have never had to go against the music' but he prefers productions in which he does not have to wear a heavy hat or coat.

'The great thing is that I have my spear to help me get up when I need it - I'm quite fit from walking in the woods, but my knees have been ruined by tennis.' The full interview can be read in the Melbourne Ring's special website: [http://melbourneringcycle.com.au/ring\\_cycle/behind\\_the\\_scenes/news/video\\_wotan:\\_terje\\_stensvold](http://melbourneringcycle.com.au/ring_cycle/behind_the_scenes/news/video_wotan:_terje_stensvold).

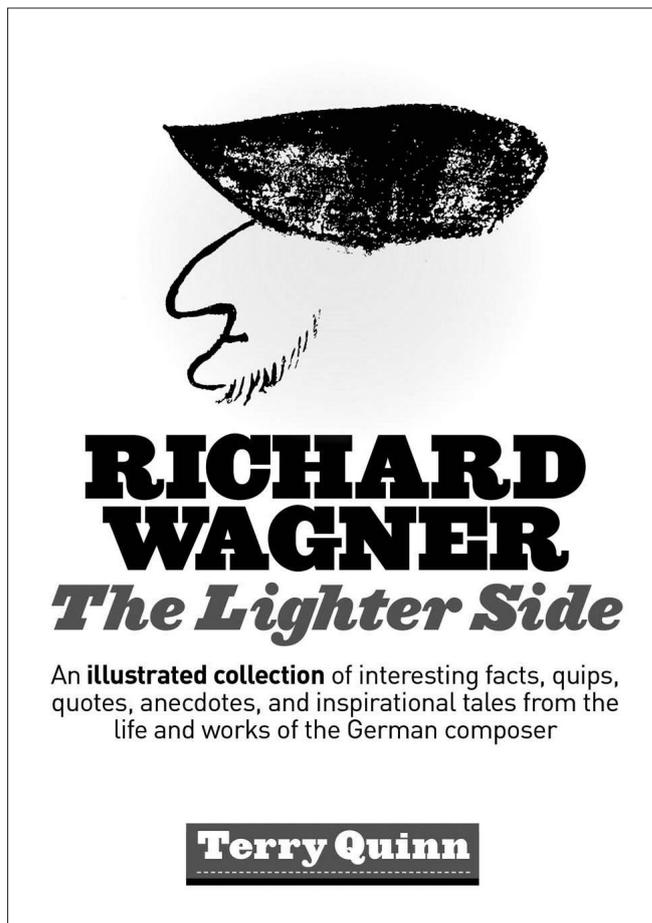
## BOOK NOTICE

### RICHARD WAGNER: THE LIGHTER SIDE by Terry Quinn

Predictably, many books about Wagner were published during the year of his bicentenary. Your Editor saw shelves of them in Leipzig and Bayreuth earlier this year, but, naturally, all of them were in German, so we English speaking Wagnerians can expect an avalanche of translations in the coming months. In the meantime, you could entertain yourself with this book, which may be a welcome change for many from the uber-seriousness of most books about Wagner. The compiler/author reinforces the notion that Wagner appeals to all sorts and one can't predict who might be attracted to him, for whatever reason: "Before retiring, he held senior management positions with major American and Japanese corporations." The book's subtitle says it all: "An Illustrated Collection of Interesting Facts, Quips, Quotes, Anecdotes, and Inspirational Tales from the Life and Works of the German Composer." The website blurb describes the book:

"There are many books about every aspect of Wagners [sic] life and works, but none has focused on the trivia, the interesting facts, anecdotes, and quotations about the man and his operas. For more than twenty years, Terry Quinn has collected information on each of Wagners [sic] 13 completed operas and the difficulties encountered in staging them; famous Wagnerian directors, conductors, and singers; key persons in the composers life, especially the women, not to mention the dysfunctional Wagner family; Wagners [sic] visits to London; the festival and theater he created in Bavaria; and a great deal more. Also included are interviews with current Wagnerian scholars."

[www.AmadeusPress.com](http://www.AmadeusPress.com) and [www.onstageandbackstage.wordpress.com](http://www.onstageandbackstage.wordpress.com)



The book is available at many online book sellers from about \$US28 at the Amadeus Press site to about \$US22 at discount sites.

## MELBOURNE RING CYCLE CRITICAL RECEPTION

Sampled by Terence Watson

Alan John: Limelight Magazine 29 November 2013

The curtain call with over 200 souls on stage...was deeply moving in itself, partly due to the afterglow of the closing bars, but also because of the sense of vast collective effort in this most massive of all live artistic endeavors. Finally Opera Australia have a *Ring*, and this production by the country's finest theatre director with his brilliant creative team, and superb young maestro Pietari Inkinen with his equally remarkable band, is one of which opera patrons and all Australians can be very proud.

Daniel Golding: ABC Arts 29 November 2013

...while the plot might seem ridiculous to clear eyes today, the music remains awesome in every sense of the word.... It makes gym equipment seem otherworldly. It makes a prat's funeral feel like an elegy for all of us, and the trials of nobodies sound like the true twilight of the gods. Opera Australia's standing ovation might've been fuelled by sore legs, but it was aimed to conductor Pietari Inkinen and his orchestra, who were superhuman. This is, above all, what I'll take from *Götterdämmerung*—such a conjuring trick of musical spectacle cannot be written off as mere phantasmagoria. Wagner was the master illusionist, his music full of the best smoke and mirrors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Anonymous: Herald Sun 29 November 2013

The Melbourne Ring Orchestra, under the baton of Pietari Inkinen, is simply marvellous and drew out a multitude of colours across the four nights. No opera is complete, of course, without an audience and, by the time we reached Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*, there was almost a party atmosphere in the stalls. You get to know your neighbours in the course of a Ring.... And when this giant locomotive finally grinds to a halt, you breathe a sigh of relief ... and think about starting the journey all over again.

Michael Shmith: The Age 27 November 2013 – *Götterdämmerung*

Yes, a mixed night, but mostly on the side of the gods. Although I have some concerns about the overall production, there has been much to admire and celebrate in Opera Australia's first full staging of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Andrew Clements: The Guardian 26 November – *Götterdämmerung*

As a whole, however, the performance had a consistency missing earlier in the cycle; that can only deepen in the two cycles to come, and some aspects of the production might even come into focus too.

## THE RAVEN'S REPORTING, COMPILED BY CAMRON DYER

There is a regularly updated list on the Society's Website [www.wagner-nsw.org.au](http://www.wagner-nsw.org.au) that takes the list to 2017.

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