

A Letter from the President



The Adelaide venue for the tremendously successful, first completed fully Australian Ring Cycle

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A Letter from the President cont.



FOR YOUR DIARY

<i>Tristan und Isolde.</i>	Queensland Music Festival 2005 with Australian Youth Orchestra, including Brisbane's Lisa Gasteen in Queensland's premiere concert performance - see Newsletter 97 for details	Saturday 30 July 2005
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COMING EVENTS

	2005	
February 20	Post-Adelaide Ring Cycle discussion	
March 20	TBA	
April 17	Palm Sunday - Alan Whelan "Symbols in Parsifal"	
May 22	AGM - recital by Conservatorium German language scholarship winners, Wagner's birthday party (this is the actual birthday). This meeting will coincide with the 25 th anniversary of the Society and the 100 th Newsletter - June 2005 issue.	
July 17	Alan Whelan "Perception and Reception of Wagner in the Nazi period"	
September 18	TBA	
October 16	Composer Nigel Butterly to talk on Liszt and Wagner	
November 20	TBA	
December 11	End of year function - <i>Please bring a plate</i>	
	Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)	

We will try to find subtitled performances for video presentations, but not all recordings include them, so please feel free to bring a libretto to help with following performances.

COMMITTEE 2004-2005

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The 2006 Ring at Bayreuth

For those of you who have not heard yet, we now have a new Director for the 2006 Bayreuth Ring Cycle, after the withdrawal of Lars von Trier. The new Director is **Tankred Dorst** (with an assistant **Ursula Ehler**. The set designer is **Frank Philipp Schlößmann** and the costumes will be done by **Bernd Skodzig**. The Dramaturg will be **Dr Norbert Abels** The conductor will be **Christian Thielemann**. There was also a rumour around Adelaide that Lisa Gasteen had been invited to be the Brünnhilde for this production. If so, I'm sure there will be a run from Australia on the Bayreuther Festspiele box office!

Another Page from the History of Wagner in Australia – Phillip Bennett remembers

As part of the Newsletter's *ad hoc* project to record aspects of the history of Wagner performances in NSW and people's personal experiences within that larger history, I am pleased to bring you a reminiscence from Mr Phillip Bennett, retired of Taree.

Growing up in a small country town during the mid to late 1940's wasn't exactly an ideal place to develop a love for the music-dramas of Richard Wagner. Books on the subject would have been almost non-existent, as were recordings. There certainly weren't any society lectures and I doubt if many people in the town would have heard of Richard Wagner let alone be familiar with his music.

However, fate played its hand in my case with my father having among his collection of acoustically recorded and electrically recorded 78 RPMs the complete Act 1 of Wagner's *Die Walküre* recorded on eight 12 inch recordings in

1935 by Lauritz Melchior, Lotte Lehmann and Emanuel List with the V.P.O. under Bruno Walter and a single 12 inch recording of the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger* under Beecham. My father had no real interest in Wagner's music and actually had been given the recordings. His operatic interests were entirely Italian. Also, among his books was a 1922 first English edition of Gustave Kobbé's *Complete Opera Book*, which was to become indispensable. Then later, thanks to my elder brother in 1948 developing a passion for collecting rare old recordings of operatic arias resulted in my becoming familiar with many Wagnerian 'arias' and singers.

In our family in those days, playing and listening to music was as natural and everyday as was eating and I don't recall any deliberate attempt to make us listen - we just did. By the time I had started high school in 1947 I knew quite a number of Italian arias and singers from my father's record collection and by the early high school years I had developed a deep interest in the music of Act 1 *Die Walküre* and had played the recordings so many times that I virtually knew the music, in essence, of the full act. There weren't any librettos so the literal translation was out of the question.

As my father's musical interests were mostly in concertos with an interspersing of Italian arias, I turned to Kobbé. Kobbé's descriptive life of Wagner was excellent and the outline of Act 1 of *Die Walküre* was so wonderfully detailed in the actions of the characters, the motives and the orchestral descriptions that I could not have wanted for more. My self-inflicted interest in Wagner had begun.

One of the first Wagnerian recordings my brother purchased in Sydney was quite an historical one. It was the *Parsifal* Prelude to Act 3 - the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra conducted by Siegfried Wagner, Richard Wagner's son and recorded in the Wagner Theatre in Bayreuth and issued with the approval of Siegfried Wagner. The total playing time for both sides was 5 minutes and 35 seconds. I would not have known who Siegfried Wagner was at that time but I had read about Bayreuth in the Kobbé .

Snippets of Wagner were becoming known to me through recordings and I was hearing the voices of some of the legendary Wagnerian singers. Then a set of fourteen 12 inch 78 RPM Black Label HMV recordings of an abridged compilation of the three acts to *Die Walküre* was purchased. The principal singers were Walter Widdop, Gota Ljungberg, Frida Leider, Florence Austral and Friederich Schorr. There were three orchestras and conductors and the labels were numbered in sequence as the opera progressed. We now had a complete (of sorts) *Die Walküre* and the detail of the work in Kobbé was, for me, out of this world.

Kobbé had many photos of Wagnerian singers of the distant past and there were three I particularly became interested in: Lilli Lehmann was a singer I especially longed to hear. She met the Wagners in 1872 and was Woglinde (a Rhinemaiden) in the first performance of *The Ring* at Bayreuth in 1876 and later became a great Brünnhilde. Jean de Reszke was declared 'the greatest Tristan heard at the New York Metropolitan Opera and his brother Eduard de Reszke was a renowned Hagen, Hans Sachs and King Marke. In time I would get to hear all three.

In November 1950, Eugene Goossens staged *Die Meistersinger* at the Conservatorium of Sydney. I had turned sixteen in October and would now be seeing a Wagnerian opera. Renee Goossens, in her memoir *Belonging*, may have adored the looks of the tenor Alan Ferris who played Walter, but I remember I was enthralled by the voice of the bass baritone James Wilson who played Hans Sachs. Then, in June 1953 Eugene Goossens staged *Die Walküre*. I was now to see my second Wagner opera. James Wilson was Wotan and Alan Ferris was Siegmund. Goossens had found the ideal Sachs and Wotan in James Wilson.

I listened to a lot of short wave radio broadcasts in those days and heard quite a few concerts from countries around the world. The greatest thrill for me was in late 1954 when I tuned into Bavarian Radio and heard a performance of *Lohengrin* from Bayreuth. Many years later I realised it would have been the second year of Wolfgang Wagner's 1953 production that I heard with Nilsson, Windgassen, Varney and Uhde.

Over time, my collection of recordings, books and videos of Wagner has become quite extensive and I value them greatly. However, my pride and joy is a 10 inch 78 RPM recording lasting 2 minutes 23 seconds of the voice of Jean de Reszke, "the greatest Tristan heard at the Metropolitan". The transfer to disc from a scratchy and almost inaudible cylindrical recording, made on 19th March 1901 from the wings of the Metropolitan of a fragment of the forge scene from a performance of *Siegfried*, was made over forty years after the performance. My copy was purchased through an auction in the USA about 15 years ago.

Getting to know the works of Richard Wagner, nearly 60 years ago, could not have been achieved for me without the old recordings. Although my first introduction was from the 1935 recordings, to hear the extracts from recordings made in the late 1920's, then even 1904 and up to the 1940's, had set me on the path to a full love and comprehensive

understanding of the greatest of the operatic composers. "Compared to this, we are mere mandolin pluckers". (Giacomo Puccini after studying the score to Tristan und Isolde.) Phillip Bennett

And just to put Phillip's comments into a broader historical context, the period 1923 to 1934 saw a number of other Wagner performances at the Con. In his memoirs, *The Distant View* [The Currawong Publishing Company Sydney 1943], W Arundel Orchard "...for many years Director of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music [August 1923-July 1934—successor to Con founding Director, Henri Verbrugghen—August 1915-January 1922, who beat, among others, Engelbert Humperdink!]" lists numbers of performances of music from Wagner operas: *Die Feen* Overture on 19-8-1931, as well as concert performances of: *Die Walküre*, Act I on 13-3-1929, Act 3 on 11-3-1931, *Parsifal* (excerpts from Acts 1, 2, 3) on 11-3-1931, *Die Meistersinger*, Act 3 on 1-4-1931, Smithy song from *Siegfried* on 28-11-1928, the RhineMaidens' song from *Der* [sic] *Rheingold* on 18-6-1932, *Götterdämmerung*-Closing Scene on 25-7-1934 [p.253].

According to the Con's website, there were "interesting" times during and after Orchard's reign: "However, at times during the later part of the stewardship of Verbrugghen's successor, Dr Arundel Orchard (Director 1923-1934), there were tensions with another emerging professional body, the ABC Symphony Orchestra (later to become the Sydney Symphony Orchestra), driven by the young, ambitious and energetic Director General of Music for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Bernard Heinze.

"It was during the administration of the next director, Dr Edgar Bainton (Director 1934-1948), that the Conservatorium forged another professional association with the world of opera, with the foundation of the Conservatorium Opera School in 1935.

"But it was under Sir Eugene Goossens (Director 1948-1955) that opera at the Conservatorium made a major contribution to what Roger Covell has described as "the most seminal years in the history of locally produced opera...", producing works such as Verdi's *Falstaff* and *Othello*, Wagner's *Mastersingers* and *The Valkyries*, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Goossen's own *Judith* (with Joan Sutherland in the title role)."

Der Ring des Nibelungen Adelaide 6-12 December 2004 (3rd cycle) - Dr Jim Leigh

Australia can be very proud of its first homegrown Ring production. The only previous productions in Australia were the Quinlan touring company Ring in 1913 and the 1998 Adelaide Paris Châtelet import. This new production was well up to world class and equal to anything I've seen except at the major German opera houses like Berlin, Bayreuth and Munich and possibly Covent Garden in the 1980s.

Adelaide created a genuine festival mode with several Wagner exhibitions through the three cycles, introductory talks before each performance and a very interesting "meet the artists" recital, with the singers performing Wagner, Wagner related work and popular musicals in a smaller room of the Adelaide Festival Centre to the conductor Ascher Fisch's piano accompaniment. At the third of these we were also treated to a fun Fauré/Messager quadrille for piano four hands on themes from *The Ring*. Great to see the performers in mufti having some fun and Ascher Fisch came across as a really lively musician. I heard of this concert through the lady in charge of one of the subsidiary events, the Christine Rothauser Wagner memorabilia exhibition at the University of Adelaide Library. Her great grandfather played in the Leipzig 1877 Ring, the first outside Bayreuth.

My only general criticisms of the new production are that perhaps more could have been spent on key singers in major roles and less on technical production and that I never got the feeling that this Ring penetrated below the surface of the plot, even with numerous clever insights and illustrations designed to make the actual story as clear as possible. It was almost as if Elke Neidhardt, Director of the production, wanted to stay away from epic myth expressing German philosophy and produce a Ring more for the general public than for Wagnerians.

A further general criticism was the rather tacky US style marketing of tickets, clothing, souvenirs, spin off deals and the like. I also heard some criticism of the catering and the inflated prices around and I also had not realised before how poorly the seating in the Festival Theatre lined up in some sections. While there is good legroom, heads in front seem to obstruct a lot and over 15 hours in the same seat this gets irritating. However the sound in P row right was excellent.

General aspects of the production.

The idea of the blue-lighted outer proscenium to frame the entire work, except for one or two points where it was turned off briefly, tried to achieve the Bayreuth optical illusory effect of a much deeper stage and larger than life size characters. However it had an unfortunate side effect in diminishing the contrast in the surtitles, important even for those generally familiar with the text, and especially so in view of how good they were in carrying on the story for relative neophytes.

The use of fire and water, the representation of nearly all scenic transitions without closing the curtain, the clever use of character entry from the auditorium, the use of characters to open gauze curtains and as accessories and the use of off-stage musical effects was all outstanding. The central post 1950 Bayreuth style hydraulic double disc, crucial to the action, functioned smoothly and silently throughout. The set designer Michael Scott-Mitchell was in many ways the star of the whole enterprise. Oh why did we have to endure Strosser/ Châtelet in 1998? Costuming was variable and often quite amusing, a combination of Rosalie at Bayreuth in the late 90s and the current “grunge” Stuttgart plus original touches (costume design: Stephen Curtis).

The augmented Adelaide Symphony Orchestra was almost full Wagner Ring strength and played consistently well with barely a false entry and only occasional wobbly brass playing. Woodwind playing was impeccable. I had only a slight quibble with Ascher Fisch’s Barenboim-like interpretation. He seemed to deliberately lighten the texture and dynamic in *Rheingold* and *Walküre* and beef it up in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. He also drastically varied tempi eg rushed end of *Walküre* and *Siegfried*’s funeral march and ultra slow *Waltraute* scene. He no doubt was trying to be kind to some of the weaker singers and the clarity and audibility of sung text was excellent but several big scenes went for nothing (eg Donner’s hammer blow to dispel the mists, and even Wotan summoning Loge for the magic fire scene). Some important leitmotifs were skipped over or poorly phrased.

In 15 hours there were only a few minor stage management fluffs. A technician was slow to get off in one scene change in *Walküre*, some beer bottles were dropped off stage after *Siegfried*’s narration in *Götterdämmerung* and there were some near entanglements with the moving hydraulic discs at several points.

Das Rheingold

The very opening of the Ring began in absolute pitch darkness. The musicians played from memory and only had a tiny laser light point for the beat. This would have been yet more effective (a) if the musicians had not tuned up beforehand and (b) if the audience had not been warned beforehand by an announcement (no doubt for health and safety reasons). However, the gradual emergence of the famous E flat chord of the nature or genesis motif still tickled the spine.

We then saw the much rumoured water curtain effect and very good it was too. The Rhinemaidens were dressed in tight diving suits with false breasts and their individual names on their sleeves. Zan McKendree-Wright, a big strapping girl was Flosshilde the responsible one and stood out. However all sang well (Natalie Jones: Woglinde, Donna-Marie Dunlop: Wellgunde). The teasing of Alberich was done very effectively around a sloping bank front stage (here representing underwater rocks), like the Friedrich Helsinki production with topless Rhinemaidens. John Wegner was an outstanding Alberich, not just in *Rheingold*, but also throughout the cycle. Indeed he outsang Wotan by a large margin and it was a pity he did not get his chance to sing Wotan for whom he was the understudy. He was not at all dwarflike or ugly, indeed quite the contrary. However he was lecherous. When asked to show what he had, he did a dirty old man raincoat flash. The gold was a near blinding light from a battery of lightsources behind the water curtain. After the renunciation of love, Alberich appeared black rather than red.

The transition to Scene 2 was managed without the curtain dropping although the cessation of water flow was rather audible. The gods, portrayed as effete lotus eaters in white, lounging on modern white plastic low lying chairs, were distinctly identifiable. The whole set slid silently on from each side.

Wotan (John Bröcheler) had red hair, a furred lined coat, and a wolf head image on his tee shirt, plus a white eyepatch on his left eye. Fricka (Elizabeth Campbell,) had big Bronwyn Bishop hair, Freia (Kate Ladner) what looked like a 1950s cocktail dress or even a fancy nightie, as in the Bayreuth Flimm production, and both goddesses had false breasts. The golden apples were in a plastic shopping bag as in Neidhardt’s Sydney *Tannhäuser*. Donner (Timothy DuFore) wore a boxing glove on one hand (as in Helsinki) and carried a child’s cricket bat in the other: a boastful sportsperson. Froh (Andrew Brunson) was a long haired dreamy 19th century poet. The giants, who were normal size, wore bright yellow-green safety overalls, reflective tape, safety and helmets and arrived on a little truck. Fafner (David Hibbard with Fasolt: Andrew Collis) had a metal claw on one hand as a presentiment of his later shape as a dragon. Loge (Christopher Doig) had a silvery suit on and emitted real flashes of fire from his hand. Unfortunately, I felt all the singers of the above roles except Freia were underpowered.

The transitions to and from Nibelheim were also done without closing the curtain. Nibelheim was a sloping 20th century attic where child labourers toiled. It had electric lights though that were turned on and off at times. Wotan and Loge entered via the roof and a ladder. Mime was sung and acted very well by Richard Greager. He was dressed in overalls and a jacket with a jeweller’s lens over one eye. The transformations to dragon and toad were done in an amusing, incompetent magician way, with the dragon a Chinese dragon made by children above the attic and the toad a toy on a cable. Musically they were a bit subdued.

The curse was shouted rather than sung by Wegner. The giants re-entered from the auditorium. Erda appeared as the Willendorf Venus, with one large stylised floppy dark breast hanging out. (Wieland Wagner had used this image for the treasure covering Freia in his 1965 production.) She just waddled on stage with no mysticism whatever or suggestion of blue light. This earth mother was very well sung by Liane Keegan. The piling up of treasure to obscure Freia was

done with Freia horizontal, possibly because it had to fit on a trolley to be taken off by Fafner when he had killed Fasolt by strangling with his claw. Donner's call was very weak and Froh's two little songs scarcely heard at all.

There was no rainbow, but Valhalla was effective as a white cubist building with approach steps allowing an effective procession, though feebly accompanied. The drum beats accompanying the off stage Rhinemaidens' lament preceding this seemed much too loud. In summary, effective staging but generally underpowered except for John Wegner. Time 2 hours 35 min.

Die Walküre

Act 1 began with a thunderclap and then the stormy prelude. Sieglinde was seen on the front stage apron as a kept, unhappily married doormat and Wotan was shown explicitly placing the sword in a central pool tree stump or rock before the Act began.

His idea of the pool was clever as it symbolised the well of wisdom at which Wotan had given up his eye. The sword – in-stone and lady-in-lake recalls the Excalibur of the Wolfram / Arthurian legends. The hut was created by spears rising around the lake (carved from the world-ash tree and providing a link with Hunding's ash tree centred hut). The first drink offered by Sieglinde to Siegmund was a handful of water from the pool. Siegmund and Sieglinde both had red hair to denote their Volsung genealogy from Wotan and the singers actually looked like twins. Hunding had the now mandatory bunch of henchmen.

The spring night saw the whole hut vanish as its spear walls descended and an abstract flowery backdrop appeared [drawn across by Wotan –Ed]. Siegmund waded into the pool to extract the sword. Wotan was seen manipulating events as huge wall shadow play. The orchestra was very restrained in Karajan fashion, but some beautiful woodwind solo work and lower string playing could be heard. I was a bit disappointed in the restrained but clean singing of all principals (Siegmund: Stuart Skelton, Sieglinde: Deborah Riedel, Hunding: Richard Green). The whole act however sustained tension and dramatic flow without real passion.

Act 2 introduced Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde. She unfortunately muffed her opening Hojotoho's, but recovered after that. As is now standard, the scene was set inside Valhalla, rather than Wagner's "a wild rocky place in the mountains" and this introduced the first set to be applauded as it came sliding on. The dead heroes were clear plastic figures with helmets, a similar effect to that used by Keith Warner in his current Bayreuth *Lohengrin* for the live Saxon army in Act 1. Gasteen's acting and physical jerks were excellent. She mocked Fricka's "big hair" and rolled around on the stage. The later scenes took place around geometric beams containing fluorescent tube lighting which framed the actions brilliantly and precisely. Sieglinde's short nightmare was played out by Hunding's henchmen. The whole set began to remind one of a huge airship hangar with big items wheeled in from the back. The stage movements were beautifully smooth and silent, a feature of the whole production. The whole act, including Wotan's long central monologue, was tensely sustained and the orchestra started to sound a lot richer in texture. Wotan also was much better sung.

This is a crucial Act as it defines Wotan's dilemma: the need to regain the ring to stop Alberich doing so and destroying the gods, without breaking the contracts on which his authority is based. The concept of the free hero, who will do it uncontrolled by Wotan, and the differential role of the curse on those who use the ring for power as opposed to love are introduced.

Act 3 began with a tour de force of staging. Before the ride began a lone Valkyrie was seen knocking on the closed wall at the back of the stage. It eventually opened revealing another applauded set sliding forward. It was the *Wunderbar*, a nightclub bar with nine stools, nine bubbling cocktail champagne glasses and nine television monitors over the bar. The Valkyries made their various entrances from the auditorium looking for a drink after a hard day's dead hero gathering. No dead heroes or horses were seen. The girls drank a blue fluid out of beer glasses (blue blood of dead heroes?). The actual music was rather light, but all Valkyries sang and acted well especially Kate Ladner as Helmwige, Liane Keegan as Waltraute and Zan McKendree-Wright as Schwertleite. The scene of Wotan's arrival was monitored on the black and white TV sets, the inverse of the current Stuttgart production where Wotan is watching the Valkyries from a security video monitor camera. Just before he came in, though, the TV sets cut to the news in colour.

Wotan's farewell and the magic fire scene were beautifully realised. Two concentric hydraulic disks rose gradually à la Sydney Olympics and stage flame arose from outlets around the disks. There were only slight movement problems with some jerkiness and Lisa Gasteen nearly got her hair caught in the works. The actual summoning of Loge was a bit perfunctory. I thought the orchestra and Wotan became a bit ragged and the tempo was too fast. Sieglinde jumped the gun in *O hehrstes wunder* and the important "redemption through love" motif blurred in its effect.

Overall the effect of the Act and the whole music drama was very impressive and dramatically well sustained. One started to believe in the characters and get into the Ring as a story. However, power, love, Feuerbach and Schopenhauer did not yet impinge on the spectator's consciousness. (thr Valkyries: Gerhilde: Elizabeth Stannard, Ortlinde: Lisa

Harper-Brown, Siegrune: Gaye McFarlane, Grimgerde: Jennifer Barnes, Rossweisse: Donna-Maree Dunlop). Time 3 hours 50 min.

Siegfried

Act 1 showed a rather messy Mime smithy with some more modern equipment mixed with a lot of junk. Wotan/Wanderer was lurking behind the scenes even before the question and answer scene, as is now becoming standard (Helsinki, Bayreuth). There was a lot of funny Mime/Siegfried by-play. The bear was Siegfried with bear mask on. Mime used WD40, made Siegfried model planes and sculptures of egg cartons, threw SPAM tins around, rode a tricycle, did things with an egg whisker and generally hammed it up with good comic dancing and timing - and singing. The forest was spear/trees as in Walküre Act 1.

The Gary Rideout story is now folklore. Brought in at six days' notice and with no stage rehearsals to replace an ailing Timothy Mussard, he has mastered the role. According to such fanatics as our president who has seen all 3 cycles, he improved with time, rather than fading as is usually the case in this impossible role of Siegfried. He has a strong baritone voice but can produce ringing high notes as well. He had the hammer-tapping down pat by the 3rd cycle. Wotan sang much better and really looked aged. Mime's vision was portrayed by fire and steam. At one point Siegfried returned with a dragon shaped kite and balloons, indicating that he already knew of Mime's plotting. The question and answer scene went well and the orchestra began to enunciate motifs with much more authority. The importance of these narrative scenes in the Ring cannot be overestimated and all were done well throughout the cycle.

The Act 2 linden tree was balloons floating gently, replacing the Bayreuth rustling metal leaves. The Wotan/Alberich scene, often boring, was quite funny, as was the later Alberich/Mime scene. (*Siegfried* is an opera entirely composed of two person dialogues and one duet). The off key cor anglais [for Siegfried's attempts to imitate the birds -Ed] was well done.

The dragon was just a huge claw poked out with independently moving fingers. Apparently Fafner in yellow overalls could be seen behind the scenes from some seats, but I'm not sure whether this was intentional or not. Siegfried had Volsung red hair and was dressed in a faded Mambo brand tee shirt in Stuttgart style. Gary Rideout acted the insensitive brash young man without fear very convincingly. The dragon's dying one finger salute of his slayer got a few laughs.

The Woodbird was a small child (sung in the high vibrato Chinese style by Shu-Cheen Yu, the singer of the Woodbird in the recent Sydney concert performance). She had bright red hair and the wolf symbol on her tee shirt, denoting her control by Wotan, still manipulating events when he should be observing only. This is now almost a cliché as well (Bayreuth Flimm). She wore green shorts and different coloured sandshoes on each foot and carried a big lip shaped balloon, obviously the lead up to Siegfried finding adult sexual love with the sleeping woman he is soon to awaken.

The dinner interval, coincided metaphorically with the famous 12 year gap between 1857 and 1869 when Wagner broke off *Siegfried* at the end of Act 2 to do a few other things like writing *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*, taking over Bavaria and Cosima and siring three children. When Act 3 commenced, we heard a new sound from the orchestra and a perceptible change came over the entire production. Everything seemed bigger and better.

Erda still did not come on with much fanfare, but the "bare" breast was gone. The glaring bright light used for the appearance of the gold was used to symbolise another great turning point. Wotan realises Siegfried was indeed his free hero and when united in sexual love as one with Brünnhilde would redeem the world, the turning point strongly marked by the first appearance of the "world inheritance" or "Siegfriedliebe" motif. The curtain did drop for the ascent through the fire. The disc came down for Siegfried to awaken and woo Brünnhilde but rose again at the end. A telling bit of business as Siegfried and Brünnhilde became one, and she, the raging man-eating dragon was Gasteen seizing the sword herself from Siegfried and brandishing it. He still knew no fear. Lisa Gasteen was fabulous here, but Gary Rideout was drowned out in the final scene. Time 4 hours 5 min.

Götterdämmerung

Prologue/Act 1

The Norns scene did not have the outer blue proscenium. This was to allow the image of the rope of destiny to appear out of the darkness. The Norns had masks painted on their faces. All sang strongly (1st Liane Keegan, 2nd Gaye McFarlane, 3rd Kate Ladner). The disc on which Siegfried and Brünnhilde had spent their night(s) of love had sprouted red abstract flowers, suggesting possibly poppies or roses. The postcoital duet went as well as the pre-coital. The curtain fell for the Rhine journey, which was way too fast. Hagen drew open the curtain on the tragic events to come at the Gibichung palace. Hagen was powerfully sung by Duccio dal Monte. I felt however that he was rather one dimensional in his acting. He wore an abstract Star Wars tunic, as did his inner coterie of supporters. Much better acting and good singing too was provided by Jonathan Summers as Gunther who wore a military uniform resembling a UK paratrooper. Guttrune (Joanna Cole) was portrayed as a plain Jane cripple with a calliper, limp and spectacles. Other Gibichung hangers-on wore modern business suits, military uniform or just anything in the case of the Vassal chorus. The full depth of the Adelaide stage was used for the Gibichung palace, with an effect something like the Deutsche Oper Berlin time tunnel or the Bayreuth Kupfer production. The ribbed arches sloped away sideways in the distance and I was not

sure what this was meant to mean. Hagen was groping Gutrune, suggesting a history of child abuse and a variant of the Gunther/Gutrune groping in Friedrich's Helsinki and Berlin productions.

The new Siegfried was Timothy Mussard who was cleaner than but not nearly as powerful as Rideout. He faded to inaudibility at times. When Siegfried was offered a cigarette he portrayed his lack of worldliness by starting to eat it. The power of the potion was exaggerated in that even the dowdy crippled Gutrune easily and instantly became an object of extreme passion. Gunther was very convincingly acted as the coward seeking approval. The Waltraute scene was slowed right down; this was risky as the scene can be difficult to bring off. However, it was carried off well by Elizabeth Campbell (better here than as Fricka) and Gasteen. This whole Prologue/Act 1 took 2 hours 5 min.

Act 2

The blue proscenium was on initially but irritatingly turned off just before the Alberich/Hagen scene at the start of Act 2. This confrontation between two of the best singers in the whole production did not go as well as in the 1st two cycles from all accounts. There was some stage noise.

The altars to Wotan, Donner and Fricka were three metallic looking pulpits on the left of the stage. The Vassal chorus sang powerfully and the spear oath and conspiratorial trio were powerfully conventionally operatic in a Verdian or Meyerbeerian way, featuring the confluence of some of the best individual singers. The orchestra now came into its own. Even plain Jane Gutrune was made to look reasonable in her white wedding dress, but she retained her limp. Siegfried made several poorly timed entries in the Act, and at times was not heard at all. Lisa Gasteen was at her best in this dramatic Act, which fairly fizzed through.

Act 3

The Rhinemaidens were still on their bank (now on the surface of the river rather than under it) but sheltered under an umbrella from the sunlight, which had replaced the light from their stolen gold (Frau *Sonne*). The opening horns were somewhat wobbly but the scene went reasonably well with Flosshilde dominating again.

The hunt rest break was fuelled by cartons of Coopers Pale Ale (the local South Australian brew). Siegfried's narration and death scene was sung from the central disk, slightly elevated. The funeral march was rushed musically but very effective dramatically at the curtain was up for most of it. As the parade of leitmotifs illustrating Siegfried's life passed majestically by, static visions were seen of Siegmund, his father (wehwalt motif), and Sieglinde, his mother (Sieglinde motif), and a moving Wotan anxiously seeing if his grandson was really dead and where was the sword (sword motif). Siegfried's body stayed on the disk for the return to the hall. Hagen now appeared with his loyal followers in Star Wars tunics while Gunther had his faithful paratroopers. Hagen ran Gunther unconvincingly through (always a weak bit of *Götterdämmerung*). Hagen's spooky followers started the revolution by restraining Gunther's men. Gunther initially tried to hide from Hagen behind his sister.

Gunther even had his own little funeral march, as four of his loyal men lifted him synchronously. Siegfried's arm did not rise of its own accord. Hagen and Brünnhilde jointly lifted his arm up and shrank from the ring. The bearing off of Siegfried to his funeral pyre was done by four of Hagen's men taking his weight as the disk dropped away.

Flames rose up along the whole back wall of the stage as Brünnhilde took over proceedings. Here Gasteen began to develop a slight beat, but overall carried the finale off triumphantly, following Siegfried's body back into the flames. Valhalla was seen vaguely behind going up in smoke. The water curtain descended to cleanse the ring of its curse and the majestic Valhalla and redemption through love themes took over, not always well phrased. The test of orchestral clarity here is always whether you can hear the final *Götterdämmerung* motif (in strings and woodwind) over the main Siegfried motif before the last redemption motif and I could not. Listen to the Janowski recording for this. Solti also fails the test.

The final scene showed Erda and a new young world ash-tree centre stage as the new world order possibly begins to recycle. Thus we have the slightly optimistic ending finally chosen by Wagner after considering about nine alternatives. The musical hint for this possible new beginning comes when Brünnhilde, in her final peroration sings the word *Ende* to the nature (Erda) or genesis motif.

The Ring, however, is not just about love replacing power as the basis of a world system, but rather the interaction and incompatibilities of love and power, and how this must be accepted as the reality behind the historical necessity governing the world. How we wish for a serious production which really conveys this. Maybe in the new Sydney Proper Opera house in 2050 or maybe as a monumental film directed by Peter Jackson or Peter Greenaway.

Time of *Götterdämmerung* 4 hours 35 mins. Time of whole cycle 15 hours 5 min (slightly slower than Karajan (14.59), not as slow as Barenboim (15.31))

A (Very) Personal Response to *Der Ring des Nibelungen* Adelaide, 2004 By Robert Graham

In 1961, Beatles producer George Martin said that “the *Ring* was not for the casual operagoer”. In a way, that is what I *am* (though I often have strong opinions about things that I know very little about!), and all of my thoughts come from that perspective, though I am attempting to systematically educate myself about music in all of its forms.

I was delighted when Terence Watson asked me if I would be interested in writing a director’s response – a piece about my thoughts and some of the difficulties of staging this massive work and the relative merits and success (failure too, I suppose) - of what some people have come to refer to as “The Neidhardt *Ring*”. I said yes with some trepidation, not because I didn’t have any thoughts about the production(s) but because I consider myself wet behind the ears when it comes to the work of Wagner.

I have been a member of the Wagner Society for only a year (Member number 904!) and I saw my first Wagner opera only in 2003 – the Simone Young conducted *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at the Capitol Theatre in Sydney, followed by a problematic Cathy Dadd production of *Der fliegende Holländer*. This great interest in Wagner has come relatively late to me, though I was first intrigued by the beautiful sounds of *Das Rheingold* in drama classes taught by Professor Michael Ewans (an Honorary Life Member of this society) at Newcastle University in the early 1980s – I recall Strauss’ *Salomé* and *Electra*, Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Berg’s *Wozzeck* also fascinating me.

It was made very clear to me that I must “do my homework” before going to Adelaide. In response to that very adamant direction, I listened many times to two different productions of *The Ring* on CD (Solti and Bohm) and studied on DVD the Otto Schenck/James Levine production from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. I also soaked up all Deryck Cooke had to say about the symbolism and *leitmotifs*. I understand a little of the German language, but it is through repetition that I come “to know” musical works, though I always get something new out of Wagner’s operas each time I hear them. I would say that I am fairly open-minded when it comes to “assessing” various interpretations of music, drama and opera: I do not subscribe, as a rule, to the “right” or “wrong” approach, but to *whether it works or not*, whether it is interesting and arresting and whether it is **consistent** with the aims and ideals of the creative team. Art for Art’s sake and deliberate provocation – “because I *can*” - do not really interest me.

So, to Adelaide and the third cycle. I read an interview by Penelope Debelle with the director Elke Neidhardt in the Sydney Morning Herald and was interested to see what this middle-aged, German, female director was proposing to do (a younger, male, Australian director, for instance, might do something completely different), her attitude to the work and so on. If, as she proposed, she wanted neither a “conventional” nor a “self-consciously avant garde” production that would “divorce action from meaning”, then I believe that she has largely been successful in her aims. In this interview Neidhardt is quick to attack Christoph Schlingensiefel and his recent *Parsifal* in Bayreuth: “We didn’t want a German-style deconstructed sort of concept where very often you don’t recognize what is on stage. It’s off the wall. It’s terribly successful, I don’t know why. I hate this stuff; it’s just one big old wank.” This is all well and good, however, but to be “the captain of the ship” (as she refers to herself) one has to in a way impose a vision, an over-riding directive or throughline to the whole work, which can be a rather burdensome, egoistic thing, and where she is going to be at the core of any praise or criticism.

What struck me most about this cycle was that there was no really clear throughline, little that was perfectly clear about what was holding it all together: it was variable, perhaps inconsistent, in its approach. The American writer William Berger in his book *Wagner Without Fear* describes in an obviously tongue-in-cheek single sentence (!) what the Ring is about: “... a German Romantic view of Norse and Teutonic myth influenced by Greek tragedy and a Buddhist sense of destiny told with a socio-political deconstruction of contemporary society, a psychological study of motivation and action, and a blueprint for a new approach to music and theater [sic].” Though this is meant to be humorous, it is quite true. Berger rightly points out that “the *Ring* saga, like any truly great work of art, has as many meanings as there are people to interpret.”

I believe that Elke Neidhardt has, in the main, deliberately avoided political (including Marxist) associations (with the exception, perhaps, of some of the Gibichungs who closely resemble coalition forces now fighting in Iraq), traditional German (nationalistic) connotations and big statements about philosophical, social and psychological (Freudian and Jungian) readings. Some might see this as a weakness, a watering-down of artistic integrity. Neidhardt has, on the contrary, sought to please and entertain, not to shock or agitate. Hers is a *Ring* for everyone and though some will carp about a possible dissolution of artistic integrity, an attempt to do too much or too little, I think that she has served Wagner quite well. Talking to people during intervals and after performances, the responses were invariably positive with only minor reservations. One of the most interesting and affirming things for me was seeing many young people at these performances and listening to them animatedly gushing about what they were hearing and seeing, and analysing the characters and situations. As a teacher, I was starting to feel a little more positive about the education of young people!

As a mark of respect, I wore my dinner suit to *Das Rheingold*: I love that sort of tradition! From the total blackout (a fantastic idea!) and the slowly emerging chords of the Rhine I knew I was going to be enthralled. The Rhinedaughters in their blue/grey wetsuits (later to have regally-coloured purple skirts added) sliding about the tilted forestage with a lascivious black leather-clad, equally sexy and popstar-like Alberich set the tone for what would follow: an eclectic approach with a great sense of fun, with aspects of both tradition and modernity. This is in keeping with Neidhardt's insistence on not "tying the production to a particular era or style" though there is a risk of confusing an audience by being too broad or vague and inviting critics to scream "cop out!". Nick Schlieper's lighting was at its best and most evocative here: a shimmering blue-green haze that made us feel like we were underwater.

The set designs by Michael Scott-Mitchell were wonderfully inventive: imposing, sometimes glaringly bright, at others dim and chiaroscuro, at times angular and symmetrical (perhaps mirroring the at times predictable and changeable nature of the gods' thinking and behaviour). Stephen Curtis' costumes were a mixed bag, ranging from the appropriateness of the slippery Rhinedaughters and the grubby Mime, to the silliness of Siegfried's hippie gear and the ridiculous looking Woodbird as clown. The most impressive aspects of the *Ring*, for me, were the beautiful playing of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra under Asher Fisch and the exquisite lighting by Nick Schlieper.

Is it possible that total clarity is attainable in such a monumental work? Neidhardt wanted a "fresh vision" and tried to "tell the story as simply and purely" as she could, "primarily true to Wagner's words and music." She said to Penelope DeBelle: "The story, I hope now, will be totally clear. It is in a modern setting, but not limited by time, so it's not set in any period. The gods look like gods and you will know they are gods because they are all white, on a white floor. They are absolutely ghastly, not friendly, but I did nothing that is not written."

Well... What do gods actually look like? The seeringly white 1950s looking see-through fibreglass/plastic set for the mountaintop clearing certainly carries connotations of power but also of purity and transparency. These dopey gods, dressed predominantly in white with some silver, read building plans upside down and lounge about on funky retro lounges, the women with hairdos and skirts for nightclubbing, bearing plastic breasts and pearls, some of the men equally blonde and vapid (I wasn't close enough to see if they had blue eyes or not!) – Donner's cricket bat was a humorous nod to the "Australianness" of this production.

The much-vaunted water curtain created a fleeting impressive effect but, like the dragon's claw and Brünnhilde's rock, the limitations and usefulness, in the greater sense, was questionable. I found, on the other hand, the Nibelheim setting to be one of the most powerful in the whole cycle, along with the Gibichung hall that utilized the depth of the stage very well. When Alberich puts on the Tarnhelm and becomes a giant serpent in Nibelheim, the children (playing Nibelung slaves) are used to great effect – certainly not done for laughs, the way many productions apparently go. The ring itself is not outlandish or oversized, but at particular moments we see it glinting in light. I suspect that the blue, radiating panels around the whole proscenium are meant to symbolize the ring and its watery birth. There are numerous circular shapes in Scott-Mitchell's various settings to remind us of this ring and of the old cliché "what goes around, comes around".

The gold piled up around Freia is most effective: crates that look like they should be carrying contraband weapons create beautifully the oxymoronic sense of protection and danger. Erda waddling on is less effective, though I understand that a singing torso presents its own difficulties. She is dressed in suitably earthy colours displaying what appear to be overly-large breasts, conveying the *Erdmutter* idea. Unfortunately, she seems merely to drift around, without stability, permanence and that sense of fixedness that would make one want to trust her opinions. Liane Keegan's earnest singing, however, gave the part a little more substance.

The rainbow bridge was presented as a glowing staircase situated upstage centre, leading to the opening of Valhalla. I can't say that it was a moment of pure magnificence visually, but the power of the music here, and in significant other places, helps out when the production crew have struggled with or ignored Wagner's directions. The feeling of splendour here comes almost entirely through the music, as does the destruction, fall and burning of Valhalla and the rise of the Rhine at the end of the cycle. It is at moments like these where verisimilitude is impossible – so why try? I think the director was wise in this respect. Neidhardt and her team bring to life many of the themes/*leitmotifs* in *Das Rheingold* quite clearly. The lime-green workmen's overalls for Fasolt and Fafner immediately display their role in the drama, without the need for stilts. They are bald, 21st Century giants with oversized shoes, showing that bigger is certainly not always better.

Neidhardt said that the *Ring* "is 16 1/2 hours of music, and 16 1/2 hours of ugliness I don't think is on" and that she wanted Michael Scott-Mitchell "to recreate the theatrical magic of the Sydney Olympics when Cathy Freeman lit his cauldron before it rose from the water below." There are many beautiful and effective moments in this cycle, perhaps none more striking than the "Wunder Bar" in *Die Walküre*. Many would see this as a momentary jape taken a step too far, that perhaps the amusing cleverness of the design is not quite enough to sustain the weight of a whole scene – overkill, if you like. The same could be said of the dragon's claw in *Siegfried*. Was such expense gone to merely to have the dragon flip its middle finger at the hero?

Hunding's shiny, circular, high-tech rather than primitive house cleverly united upstanding metallic spears, water and a hint of Brünnhilde's rock in a cage-like environment which clearly displayed Hunding's possessiveness. The shallow water enables us to concretise aspects of the characterization: that Siegmund's face is Sieglinde's reflection, that his voice is her own echo and that she is the image which he has kept hidden within himself. Water is an extremely powerful and versatile symbolic element. I talked to some people who did not like the Arthurian approach instead of the sword Nothung in the World Ash Tree, but it seemed to work well enough.

It is noticeable that rarely in the entire design concept does any natural substance appear (apart from water and fire), and there is precious little in the way of *natural* colour too, with the exception of Erda. In this scene, Neidhardt cleverly has Sieglinde slip out dressed in Hunding's colours (red) and to shed these, upon her return, in favour of Siegmund's (green). As a relative newcomer to Wagner's work, I was puzzled about why I did not feel any real revulsion towards the incest presented in this drama. Perhaps we don't really think deeply about confronting themes, and would rather be carried away by the music and spectacle? In truth, most of what happens in the *Ring* is totally ridiculous.

Wotan instructs his daughter on a set filled with life-size transparent plastic figures with silvery, winged helmets, all facing stage right. It is not clear as to the meaning of this, though these hollow figures would appear to be vessels ripe for filling with Wotan's knowledge and experience. Brünnhilde is presented clearly as being different from the rest of the Valkyrie sisters. She wears a long, relatively demure emerald-green dress, with coat and hood, which is at odds with her outlandish, aggressive, punk-like sisters. The "Wunder Bar" makes a small concession to traditional productions by placing a horned helmet atop the name, otherwise it is a sparkling white set with nine spinning bar stools, a bar behind which can be seen television screens soon about to display thunder and lightning. The avoidance of real horses (and previously [in the Australian Opera's production – Ed.] Fricka's chariot drawn by rams) comes as no surprise to us. The wildness of the ride and the Valkyries' dissenting behaviour comes through perfectly in the loud, sinister, war-like music and the wailing women. Despite pleading that she cannot understand Wotan's arguments about why Siegmund had to die etc., Brünnhilde is placed on an isolated rock, surrounded by fire. Neidhardt has Wotan do this very tenderly and reluctantly, which certainly fits the heart-rending music. Memories of Cathy Freeman looking nervous in 2000 come flooding back, though this set does not malfunction and we cannot see Lisa Gasteen trembling (who wouldn't tremble, though?) because she is laying down and we are intrigued by the jets of flame coming up through holes in the stage floor and we literally feel the heat of this situation. In a sense, this scene marks the end of the reign of the gods – at this point Wotan has given up and we wait expectantly for what is to follow.

Siegfried begins with a wonderful rendering of Mime's cave deep in the forest, a postmodern metal-smithing junkpile belonging to a hoarder. Once again, the circular, slightly sunken space that was used as Hunding's hut is used, assisting us to see connections between settings and events. Richard Greager is a wonderfully warty and whining Mime (one of my favourites!). Wotan appears as a touristy-looking Wanderer, wearing a camera around his neck and a red sun visor on his head. Indeed, Neidhardt has him reappear every now and then, wandering around the fringes of the stage. He has aged and looks weary, and the costume designer has cleverly given the gods, from this point on, a creeping greyness, from the feet upwards, in their predominantly white costumes, suggesting their aging and diminishing significance. After much reflection, I still cannot understand the value of Siegfried's costume: a vaguely hippie-like, baggy linen outfit which would have been much more suitable in *Hair* or a film like *Big Wednesday*. The re-forging of Nothung, however, from junkpile to near-perfection, is staged simply but most effectively. The smashing of the anvil becomes a lopping of one of the tall metal, spear-like protuberances emerging from the circular pit in the stage.

The setting for Act 2 may be the most colourful (albeit artificially) in the entire cycle: a raft of green balloons suspended above the stage recreated the freedom and airiness of the forest, but again I found it hard to come to terms with a Woodbird dressed like a clown in a frizzy red wig, running around carrying a balloon shaped like a large red mouth. Why was she onstage at all? This may be an opportune time to think about the hairstyles given to the characters in this cycle. We have come to recognize that the male gods and their progeny have, in the main (or is that "mane"?) long, thick and wavy red hair: Why? To represent passion, blood, fire, shame, embarrassment, temper? Or the more Biblical impression derived from a supposedly red-headed Judas and his lack of trustworthiness and his two-timing? The female gods we have seen with bouffant blonde styles, a ditzzy cross between Marilyn Monroe and the B-52s. Strangely, we see the Woodbird with red hair and this is quite confusing. Is Neidhardt telling us that this Woodbird is somehow related to the gods? Or is she trickily trying to suggest that these selfsame gods are totally responsible for their own destinies?

Fafner as dragon emerges from a large golden iris (another ring) upstage centre – but only one claw. As effective as this was, it appeared to be an overly complicated and expensive way to carry out a single, momentary visual gag: the middle finger flipping "Get f---d!" as the dragon is slain. For the money that was spent, I believe that the dragon's head and jaws would have been more justifiable, probably more interesting and certainly with more dramatic mileage. In Act 3 Scene 1 Wotan gives the impression that Erda's all-knowingness is disappearing (though Neidhardt refutes this by bringing her back at the very end of *Götterdämmerung*, holding what appears to be a small ash tree). Strangely, there was little emphasis given to Nothung's shattering Wotan's spear.

The device of bringing down the house curtain to cover some scene changes simply did not work and remained, in such an expensive production, a point of weakness. Audiences love to see scenery moving in and out and a clever use of lighting at these points, accompanied by the wonderful orchestra, would have been an added spectacle. Using the house curtain in this way exacerbated the problem of why the workings of the dragon's claw were shown (nothing else was highlighted in quite this way) – perhaps Neidhardt was mirroring the unpredictability, inconsistency and confusion of the gods?

So to *Götterdämmerung*. I love William Berger's description of the Prologue: "Trying to make literal sense out of the Norms is as hopeless as deciphering Led Zeppelin lyrics". The three Norns with their iridescent rope of world knowledge weave away under Brünnhilde's tilted rock, now with a soft grassy covering, leading into the most impressive setting in the whole cycle: the Hall of the Gibichungs. Again, this orchestral interlude did not need to be covered by the bringing down of the house curtain. This is where we see the vast stage of the Festival Theatre used to its potential – the creation of depth and space in Michael Scott-Mitchell's red-lit, receding angular superstructure (which was on trucks so that it could be moved concertina-fashion) that created an effective space/prison dichotomy and looked like it might be collapsing at its furthest upstage point.

Hagen, looking a lot like his father Alberich, Gunther, in commanding officer's gear of the coalition forces in Iraq, and polio-stricken Guttrune, with a calliper on her leg and a dowdy outfit (Australian chenille?) with cardigan (though I did not see a used tissue up the sleeve), and various hangers-on who resemble white collar corporate raiders or modern airline stewards. One of the most impressive sections of this opera follows Hagen's calling of his vassals. Many of them are dressed like Paul Hogan in his television show (flannelette shirt without sleeves, work shorts, sturdy boots and football socks – another concession to this being an Australian production). When they arrive for this first chorus in the entire cycle, the effects are impressive and Neidhardt shifts them around the stage with style. Brünnhilde's dress is deep red with a creeping yellow ring around the bottom, looking very flame-like.

The return of the Rhinedaughters in Act 3 bearing umbrellas is kind of fun, but just an excuse to have them do something different. They are supposed to live in water! Siegfried's murder is suitably low-key (he obviously had it coming to him) and the hydraulic lift is used once again, this time as a pyre where our hero is laid, wrapped with his sword. There follows a powerful sequence when the Gibichung vassals/warriors solemnly march past in an apparently endless line behind a screen upstage, paying homage. More fire is added to the stage for the immolation sequence, with a line of flames licking and growing behind this screen. Lisa Gasteen worked very hard during her demanding aria, though there are those who know more about singing than I do who thought that she struggled a little bit with the higher registers. Nonetheless, she was effective and engaging with her heroic grieving as the end of her voice coincided with her telling of the end of the gods. I'm not sure about the black coat that she was wearing – someone said it looked suspiciously like Ms. Gasteen was trying to cover up a costume that she didn't approve of!

The collapse of Valhalla could have been much more effective: why wasn't the concertina-like Gibichung set designed so that it really could fall in on itself? The audience could feel the heat of the flames (I certainly could, even from the second to back row of the theatre), but Brünnhilde slipping out between curtains upstage was actually a bit of a squib and the time it took for the water curtain to be put into place again (and the plasticity, dribbling noises that could have been covered up by the orchestra) certainly didn't evoke this destruction as powerfully as it could have.

If the Gibichungs represent humanity and whom Wagner made clear must not be harmed by the final cataclysm, and the gods are *all* immolated, then this section did not make it clear. In an Eliot-like sense, this finale is a whimper, and not a bang. The final image of Erda holding a small tree, presumably an ash, behind the water curtain suggests powers of redemption and regeneration and hope for the future. Is it, though, clear enough that this redemption is specifically for *the world* and for the *ring itself* and not for the gods?

In Elke Neidhardt's Director's Note from the program, she writes that "My answer has been to look closely at the text – Wagner's own words – and to present what the characters themselves are saying in a way that resonates in our own age. The mythology from which his narrative derives belongs to no time and every time. Its strength, which he recognized, is that it comments on the human condition without being tied to specific historical circumstances." In other words, a flexible, eclectic production that is very much a potent theatrical experience. To these ends, the Adelaide *Ring* is successful, though perhaps a qualified one. Most of us were moved and affected, and certainly not bored, as Neidhardt would have wished, and the production team should be proud of its accomplishments. I am glad and privileged to have been a part of this wonderful work and I now hope that I will get to Bayreuth one day – as long as I continue to do my homework. ...January 2, 2005. [Robert Graham is Head of English at Oxley College, Bowral. He is an Honours graduate of the Drama Department at Newcastle University and has an MA in Theatre Arts from the University of Pittsburgh. He has directed productions for school and university students and for community theatre groups. He is the recipient of two Canberra Area Theatre Awards for Best Director and is currently working on a production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* with his Extension 1 English students.]

Reviews of the Adelaide/Neidhardt Ring Cycle from Australia and overseas

While there were reservations about aspects of the production and some singers (mostly the two Siegfried tenors) from most critics, their general view was that this Ring Cycle was a national and international event of major significance for Australian opera and for a new way of looking at representing the music dramas. The following quotations can hardly do justice to the nuances of individual critic's comments and analyses, but I hope they give a flavour of the excitement of the occasion. Many of the Australian based reviews are still available through the OperaCritic website www.theoperacritic.com/company.php?company=ssa&offset2=5&offset=0, although for most of the overseas ones you would have to subscribe (usually free) to that newspaper's website.

Australia mounts its first-ever complete Ring Cycle – Sandra Bowdler

5 Jan 05 / Andante

At the conclusion [of *Götterdämmerung* and the Cycle] the audience rewarded singers, players and production team with a 20-minute standing ovation, with particular enthusiasm for Lisa Gasteen. It is almost unbelievable that tiny somnolent Adelaide could have produced virtually from scratch such a thoroughly conceived and executed artistic triumph, and opera in Australia will never be the same again.

Band of gold

3 Dec 04 / The Bulletin

The Adelaide production of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* began marvellously with *Das Rheingold*, soared to magnificence with *Die Walküre* and held much of that high ground during *Siegfried*. Praise for the management, singers, orchestra and production team respectively could overflow this page, without exhausting the superlatives.

...

Through working together over so many years, the production team have achieved a coherent vision. Michael Scott-Mitchell as set designer delivered heart-in-the-mouth effects while the lighting of Nick Schlieper supplied a metaphysical dimension. Costume designer Stephen Curtis echoed several generations of Wagnerian drag.

BBQs, balloons and paper flowers for Wagner's Ring - Jeremy Eccles

30 Nov 04 / The Opera Critic

"What's unique is that we found we weren't just doing four individual operas but four massive and inter-related operas. It meant that issues unresolved in *Das Rheingold* couldn't be sorted out until we got through *Götterdämmerung* six months later". Michael Scott-Mitchell, the set designer of Australia's first ever local version of Wagner's Ring Cycle, reveals two things in that comment about its more than three year production process. The first is the brash, Aussie innocence with which the whole design team approached a work none of them had even seen before....The second is a complexity in the work that's unrelated to sheer length. And it's a complexity that the 'Perfect Wagnerite' audience, in GB Shaw's phrase, can mull over too as it goes through the 16 hours of music and a week in time that the experience lasts.

But that can't hope to capture the strength of this team's production....Story and motive were preferred to wacky concept. So arguably, in *Götterdämmerung*...we really didn't need the heavy hints we got about contemporary Iraq and the US Neo-Cons. Wagner's rich sub-text is always capable of throwing up contemporary thoughts....But then you could just wallow in the enhanced Adelaide Symphony Orchestra's performance under Maestro Asher Fisch, which went the gamut from blazingly foot-tapping to tear-jerkingly lyrical.

An Australian Ring for all humanity - Rosalind Wadley

27 Nov 04 / The Opera Critic

There is a pervading sense of relief and pride in Australia after the triumphant premiere of the Adelaide production of the Ring. It worked, Australia can do it, we pulled it off!...There's also an excitement that Australia can contribute to the world of opera at such a high level.

Local critics have been raving, and much of it really was that good. ...Elke Neidhardt set out to tell the story clearly, working closely with her design team to produce a cycle with vivid characterisation and beautiful sets. The creative teamwork...has taken the production to a superior level with its dramatic synthesis of story, lighting and sets.

From the opening of *Das Rheingold* it was immediately apparent this would be an original and entertaining realisation of the Ring....The other highlight to *Walküre* was Lisa Gasteen's arrival as a thrilling Brünnhilde...she captured every shade in Brünnhilde's character....With a tone to die for (lush low register and searing high notes) and complete dramatic conviction, Gasteen has established herself as one of the great Wagnerian sopranos of our time, and one of Australia's greatest achievements.

...the uncluttered story-telling, together with a brilliant cast and plenty of room for the orchestral accompaniment to work its subliminal magic, produced a Ring that was profound and deeply engaging. The Adelaide Ring will be

remembered as a fresh, humorous and beautiful production which tells Wagner's story in a way that is relevant not just to Australians, but to all humanity.

This has been an important cultural event - John Slavin

26 Nov 04 / The Age

This Ring will be remembered as an important step forwards for opera in this country for the daring of the undertaking and for its music-making. Loge (Christopher Doig) elegantly provoking his adversaries; Siegmund (Stuart Skelton) and Sieglinde (Deborah Riedel) making love beneath moonlight; the incomparable scene of farewell between Brunnhilde (Lisa Gasteen) and Wotan (John Brocheler); Brunnhilde's immolation at the end of *Gotterdammerung* for which Gasteen got a standing ovation.

These are the moments I shall cherish - plus the rich, moody, utterly affecting musicianship of the South Australian Orchestra under Asher Fisch....In spite of its glitches, its lack of a substantial Siegfried, this has been an important cultural event and the Wagner effect, that surge of emotion that carries the listener along on the flood of his musical genius, will echo in the memory for a long time.

Aussie Ring triumphant - Graham Strahle

25 Nov 04 / The Australian

...this is an astonishing production and eclipses the much-vaunted Chatelet Ring, which SOSA mounted in 1998. Gloriously rich visually and musically, it simply must not be missed.

Fearlessly Australian - John Slavin

The AGE: December 29, 2004

The Berlin-based opera critic Shirley Apthorp recently declared that the Adelaide Ring Cycle was a very Australian affair. Speaking on Radio National, she praised Elke Neidhardt's production for provoking in audiences "an uncritical openness and eager engagement like nothing the Old World could produce". Quite a few members of the Ring's audience found the remark patronising and somehow dismissive.

There is a moment in Neidhardt's *Siegfried* that goes some way to providing an answer. The young heroic brat, Siegfried, the man who knows no fear, goes to the lair of the dragon Fafner who, as dragons do, is sitting on a hoard of gold. Formerly, Fafner had been a giant builder's labourer sporting a spectacular claw-like glove for grabbing metal bars and opponents' throats....Now the unseen dragon is roused to fight the boy, and one of the difficulties of Ring productions is how to represent a live, feisty dragon on stage....Set designer Michael Scott-Mitchell settles for a metonym, a part representing the whole. Only Fafner's gigantic dragon's claw thrusts down onto the stage like a cat grabbing at an irritating mouse in its hole. When Siegfried stabs it to death, the claw goes into its death throes, and just as the audience thinks it's all over, it starts into life long enough to give everyone the finger. The audience recognises the larrikin irreverence and laughs....I don't want to make too much of a gesture that has no dramatic relevance to the scene in which it appears. The purists will take care of that.

Opera is about creating a parallel universe where emotion is not repressed in the name of civility. Even in its tragic aspects, it is a glimpse of utopia.

Adelaide runs Ring round UK - Hugh Canning

The Sunday Times 31Dec 2004

TO make a pig's ear out of one Ring cycle may be a misfortune, but to produce two looks like more than carelessness: it's a dreadful waste of resources and talent....After Phyllida Lloyd's pallid Ring visions for English National Opera, the Royal Opera launched its own version of the tetralogy with another botched staging of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*.

My disappointment stems partly from having seen a more theatrically engaging Ring in Adelaide, where State Opera South Australia has just staged Australia's first home-generated production of the cycle. I went primarily to catch the Brunnhilde of Lisa Gasteen, who will be Covent Garden's Brunnhilde and, if nothing goes wrong, one of the world's....

The production...was one of the most visually resplendent Rings of recent times, with spectacular use of water ...and fire, as well as fresh, witty insights. Neidhardt's *Rheingold*, staged as the Ring's satyr play, is the funniest I've seen. The Ride of the Valkyries, with boozing Rocky Horror amazons carousing raucously at a comic-fascistic Wunder Bar, was an unforgettable coup de theatre, too.

What made Neidhardt's Ring so memorable, however, was the intelligence and distinction of her *Personenregie* (direction of the actors). Neidhardt may have concentrated on old-fashioned narrative values, but her production looked modern and felt contemporary. Gasteen's Brunnhilde looks set to storm the world. At least she, and Terfel, are two things to look forward to in Royal Opera's *Die Walkure* next March.

Witty approach gives retelling a certain Ring - Martin Ball

The Australian November 19, 2004

SOMETHING unexpected has been happening at the Ring cycle in Adelaide -audiences have been laughing. Laughing at the humour in the story and at the wit in its telling. And they have been standing and cheering for this new production directed by Elke Neidhardt for the State Opera of South Australia.

Richard Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen is not usually discussed in terms of humour, but as Neidhardt has been telling everyone this week, it is there in the text. And this production is all about the text: it's about telling the story in a direct and uncluttered way.

Neidhardt's achievement has been to create a Ring that is clear and accessible to those who are new to the operas, as well as refreshing and entertaining for those with a dozen (or in one case 70) cycles notched up. The sets are sparse yet powerful; the lighting vivid and focused.

But the last word to

Crikey - From the brunnhilde of Moe - Thalia Meyerhold

Crikey.com.au

Ravenous for some solid operatic fare and deeply cheesed off at the stale, cheap canapés served up by Opera Australia during its current dismal season in Melbourne, Thalia quit downtown Moe and headed for the City of Churches, temporarily metamorphosed into Bayreuth-on-the-Torrens, for a sixteen-hour, four-course Rabelaisian feast of protein-packed red meat in the form of Wagner's Ring cycle, opera for grown-up's as opposed to the insubstantial nibbles on offer at the Arts Centre.

What with watching and listening and gaping at celebrities, not to mention paying attention to Wagner's complex tale, by the end of Gotterdammerung Thalia was tuckered out. But en route back to Melbourne she couldn't help pondering a few unpleasant facts. Little old Adders brought off this internationally-acclaimed cultural coup against all odds. The State Opera of South Australia operates with a full-time staff of three. A salutary lesson here for the lavishly supported Opera Australia which has constantly shied away from mounting a Ring. No wonder its audiences are slipping away, especially in Melbourne where we are fobbed off with mouldy productions, third rate singers and fourth rate conductors.

As the Rhinemaidens lament when they lose the gold "Weh! Weh! Weh!" so Thalia, condemned to a life of CD's and cable with the only light at the end of the tunnel the faint glimmer of hope that Adelaide's triumphant show might be revived in a few years time and she can again hear some real opera....

And to remind us that there was a significant downside to the production – that it was not telecast by the ABC!

Aunty baulks at opera fees - Matthew Westwood

The Australian: November 15, 2004

THOUSANDS of people will miss out on the classical music event of the year because the ABC says it is too expensive to broadcast....The station's program manager, John Crawford, said it was disappointing that plans for a broadcast had fallen through...."The ABC is the appropriate organisation to broadcast it," he said. "(But) the artist fees are so high. There are more musicians working in an opera than any other (musical) ensemble."

THE RAVEN'S REPORTING, COMPILED BY CAMRON DYER

There is a regularly updated comprehensive list on the Society's Website <http://www.wagner-nsw.org.au> that takes the list to 2013 – the bicentenary of Wagner's birth!

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Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde and Timothy Mussard as Siegfried – *Götterdämmerung* - Adelaide Ring Cycle



Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde – *Siegfried*- Adelaide's Ring Cycle

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