

Joachim Herz's Production Of 'Der Fliegende Holländer' By Dr Graham Bruce, 5 February 2017

2.00pm: Presentation by Dr Graham Bruce

Our first presentation of 2017 was on February 5 at the Goethe Institut. It was presented by Dr Graham Bruce, then President of the Queensland Wagner Society. He attained his PhD at the Tisch School, New York University, he was author of *Bernard Herrmann: Film Music and Narrative* and was previously Head of Media Studies at QUT. He showed 55 members and visitors the film by Joachim Herz: *Der Fliegende Holländer: ein film nach Wagner*. Despite its fame as the first more or less complete Wagner opera on film, it is only recently that this ground-breaking black and white film was transferred to DVD. Graham acquired the film from a German film library, provided an introduction and also led a discussion at the end of the screening. Graham has sent us the following summary of his presentation and the main questions asked. In 1964, Joachim Herz made what is possibly the first film (as opposed to a filmed recording of a stage production) of a Wagner opera, 'Der fliegende Holländer', at the East German DEFA [Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft] studios. For years it seemed impossible to see the film, but finally it was released recently in Germany on DVD, and a copy was imported from the DEFA film library.

Herz, an associate of the Berlin director and founder of the Komische Oper, Walter Felsenstein, had made productions of this opera in Berlin, Leipzig, and Moscow, and the success of these encouraged him to make a film of the work. He was keen to make a "proper" film, one which could exploit the full range of the resources of the cinema. Pre-recording of the soundtrack by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the singers (in 4-channel magnetic sound) allowed him to choose appropriate actors to mime the voices (and the miming is extremely accurate). Furthermore it allowed him complete freedom in the placement of the actors, in the editing of the visuals, and particularly in creating realistic "asides" and "thoughts" by the actors, the sound track conveying these without lip movement.

Herz's approach to the work was to make the main action the dream vision of Senta, a young woman confined in a restrictive bourgeois merchant family, a romantic, longing for love and freedom. His approach

was echoed by subsequent directors, notably Harry Kupfer in his Bayreuth and Berlin productions. The escape from reality was made clear by the changing screen size, the small size of the “reality” scenes expanding into wide-screen for her dream vision.

The discussion following the screening focussed particularly on the following:

- the duet when the Dutchman and Senta first meet which takes the couple outside the confines of the house through a ruined church and into the countryside while the soundtrack gives us their sung thoughts then their “dialogue”;
- the “horror film” depiction of the Norwegian sailors and Ruth Berghaus’s innovative choreography of the Dutch sailors’ dances and choruses;
- the ending of the film as Senta, awakened from her dream, leaves the house to seek freedom outside and perhaps to put her escapist dream into practice.

By Graham Bruce and Colleen Chesterman