



WAGNER
SOCIETY
NSW

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY

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MARCH 2019



PRESIDENT'S REPORT

2019 has begun very positively for the Wagner Society in NSW. We have a very promising program of speakers and performers planned for this year.

Our first guest was the British conductor Anthony Negus, who came to us fresh from conducting the Flying Dutchman in Melbourne. He gave us an outline of his career, commencing with his early experience as an assistant to Reginald Goodall in path-breaking performances of The Ring in English for the ENO. He then made some particularly interesting observations about how to maintain appropriate rhythms and 'pulse' when conducting Wagner. He used the piano a number of times to illustrate most effectively what he was saying.

Our second guest was Israeli conductor Asher Fisch, who engaged in a wonderfully animated conversation with the audience on a wide range of Wagnerian topics. Members recall with pleasure his wonderful Adelaide Ring and recent WASO Tristan und Isolde, with Stewart Skelton as Tristan.

The Society is delighted that the attendances were very good for the first two events - 65 and 75 and looks forward to getting similar audiences during the rest of the year. There are promises for the Wagner Society of a number of other interesting speakers during 2019 and also some treats in Wagnerian music.

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RECENT MEETINGS Thanks to Mailis Wakeman for the photos

Meeting on Sunday 10 February at the Goethe Institut - Maestro Anthony Negus



Meeting on Sunday 10 March at the Goethe Institut - Maestro Asher Fisch



FOR YOUR DIARY

2019

9 Mar – 11 May	The Ring at the Met	New York
7 – 17 June	The Ring in Kiel with Bradly Daley as Siegfried	Kiel
13 – 23 June	Wagner Days in Budapest. - 2 Ring Cycles. Information from www.finearttours.com	Budapest
23, 25, 26 Oct	Donald Runnicles conducts SSO in R Strauss and Faure	Sydney Opera House
2 November	Nina Stemme and John Lundgren in gala all Wagner concert with TSO	Hobart
April 2020	Sir Andrew Davis conducts 3 Ring Cycles for Lyric Opera of Chicago	Chicago

COMING EVENTS 2019 - SUNDAY STARTING TIMES MAY VARY

PLEASE CHECK THE SCHEDULE ONLINE FOR DETAILS

DATE	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
31 March	2.00pm: AGM followed by Concert with Katrina Sheppard	Goethe Institut
19 May	2.00pm: Concert by young singers followed by celebration of Wagner's birthday	Goethe Institut
21 July	12.30pm Act 3 of Barrie Kosky's Bayreuth Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg 2.00 Stuart Skelton talks about Singing on the World Stage TBC	Goethe Institut

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.

Admission to each event will be \$25 a Member, and \$30 each non-Member, \$10 (Full-time students) Seminar/Concert \$40 (m), \$45 (n-m), \$20 (fts).

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

DONATIONS RECEIVED SINCE NOV 2018

Barbara Dorsch, Camron Dyer and Richard Mason

Our thanks for the generous donations to help the Society's objectives.

NEW MEMBERS SINCE NOV 2018

Clive Faro (1216), Alan Ren (1217), Matthew McGirr (1218), David Lillystone (1219), Graeme Wiffen (1220), Patricia Smith (1221), Kevin Herbert Powell (1222) and Julian Coghlan & Andrea Beattie (1223)

Patron:

Honorary Life Members:

Ms Simone Young AM

Mr Richard King

Prof Michael Ewans

Mr Horst Hoffman

Mr John Wegner AO

Mr Roger Cruickshank

Dr Terence Watson

Dr Dennis Mather

Hon Justice Jane

Mathews AO

PRESIDENT'S REPORT continued

Since the last President's Report, the Committee responded to applications from members for Bayreuth tickets for 2019. The following members were successful in getting tickets for Tannhauser, Parsifal, Meistersinger and Tristan und Isolde between 25 and 28 August:

Georgina Carnegie
 Greg and Christine Ellis
 Marie Leech
 David May, *who received most of his tickets from the box office*
 Hugh Hallard
 Ross Whitelaw
 Nadine Wagner

A number of members were interested in attending a performance of Lohengrin on 18 August. Unfortunately it proved very difficult to find out more about this performance. Some information may become accessible to them after they arrive in Germany.

Early though it is in 2019, two Wagner operas have already been performed in Melbourne. First, Melbourne Opera put on an outstanding production of the Flying Dutchman in the Regent Theatre, conducted (as I mentioned above) by Anthony Negus. Then an impressive production of Parsifal by Victorian Opera took place at the handsome Palais Theatre in St Kilda, under the direction of Richard Mills. What a legacy of large and suitable theatres remains in Melbourne and how we all regret the demolition of theatres here!

One concert that we can look forward to will be in the Federation Concert Hall, Hobart, on 2 November. Nina Stemme is returning to Hobart for an 'All-Wagner Gala' with fellow-Swede John Lundgren. He has been much praised for his Wagner interpretations at the Bayreuth Festival, Royal Swedish Opera and Royal Opera, Covent Garden. As at the earlier Wagner concert featuring Nina Stemme, the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra will be conducted by Marko Letonja.

President Colleen Chesterman

HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP

At the meeting held on 25 February the Committee noted the outstanding contribution which Past President Jane Mathews has played in the musical life of the Society. In recognition of her contribution, it was proposed that she should be granted Honorary Life Membership.

PROPOSED Mike Day
 SECONDED Florian Hammerbacher.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear members, I hope you enjoy this March edition, which has a focus on singers. Special thanks to Peter Bassett for his fascinating article on Wagner and singing and thanks to Terence for his insights into Victoria Opera's Parsifal. Many thanks to the career updates sent in from some of the young singers whom the Society has recently assisted and special thanks to Leona for facilitating this. Thank you to members who have helped me source other material. I invite all readers to send me articles for future issues, especially your thoughts on the various Wagner productions around the world which many of you are planning on attending.

Mike Day

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REPORTS ON MUSICAL EVENTS AND MEETINGS

10 FEBRUARY ANTHONY NEGUS

As our President noted in her report, Anthony Negus gave a very stimulating talk to our members and guests, full of amusing anecdotes and musical illustrations. Fresh from the Melbourne Dutchman, he included a detailed analysis of the subtle melodic shifts in Senta's ballad. His insight into Wagner's use of 'pulse' and silence in his preludes and the great influence that Beethoven's 9th Symphony had on Wagner's use of rhythm was especially interesting. His tales

of his early experiences as a schoolboy sitting in the Bayreuth orchestra pit were fascinating as were his descriptions of working closely with Reginald Goodall and Charles Mackerras in London and Wales.

Anthony finished by talking about his experience working at Longborough Opera, in the Cotswolds, and encouraging members to attend his new Ring Cycle there.

10 MARCH ASHER FISCH

Maestro Asher Fisch, in Sydney to conduct a 'Scottish' program for the SSO, entertained 70 members and friends with his reflections on the genius of Richard Wagner. He amused us with very dynamic demonstrations of current conducting styles along with a subtle sprinkling of musical gossip. He started with some memories of working with Elke Neidhardt on the Adelaide Ring. It was his first Ring and he was enthusiastic about Adelaide's ambition in staging of all 4 operas over a week, rather than spreading new productions over 3 or 4 years, which is the usual way. He was also very pleased with the excellent quality recording of the work – a career highlight.

The main part of his talk was about the great influence that Liszt had on Wagner. He played us brief examples of transcriptions of Wagner by Liszt. Asher talked of how he hopes in the future to carry out in-depth research into what caused Wagner to change his musical language several times over the course of his life, from an unpromising start to his early mature works, to the Ring, to Tristan, then Meistersinger and finally Parsifal – at least 6 distinct approaches to sound, harmony and composition, almost as if different composers had written them. What triggered these developments? In summary – an exceptionally rewarding afternoon of music, ideas and friends.

FUTURE WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

31 March AGM followed by Concert with Soprano Katrina Sheppard

Refer to article from Katrina in later in this issue

19 May Concert by young singers followed by celebration of Wagner's birthday

Refer to our website for details of the singers. Come along for cake and bubbles.

PRE BAYREUTH 2019 FUNCTION

It has been a practice in the past to organise an informal get together at a committee member's home sometime before Bayreuth for those members attending so you can meet each other and recognise a friendly face in Bayreuth. Some recent attendees would also be present to answer questions, etc.

We have written to all those who obtained tickets through the Society.

However, we believe there are other members who have tickets via other means to the last Bayreuth week.

It would be helpful to know who might be interested in such a get together and if you'd prefer June/July/August - weekend or week night?

Please let jenny.edwards@uts.edu.au know if you'd like to attend.

QUARTERLY HIGHLIGHTS:

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REVIEWS OF RECENT WAGNER

MELBOURNE OPERA DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER

3rd, 5th and 7th February 2018 at the Regent Theatre

Members who attended the performances enthused about the excellent singing and atmospheric staging.

Here are some excerpts from reviews by the music critics:

Maestro Anthony Negus, a noted international Wagner expert, leads the expanded Melbourne Opera Orchestra in a very fine performance. The music is clearly very well-rehearsed, and the stormy atmosphere is conjured with great flair. Melbourne's favourite soprano Lee Abrahmsen outdoes herself yet again in the leading role of Senta. Looking every bit the angelic daughter, Abrahmsen sings with delicious abandon, soaring into lush, full bodied high notes with unbridled confidence. It is a delightful performance, and one that is all the stronger by Abrahmsen's nuanced acting, in which Senta's inner journey is made clear and engaging. <https://simonparrismaninchair.com/2019/02/04/melbourne-opera-the-flying-dutchman-review/>

Melbourne is indeed blessed to have MO as part of the city's artistic landscape. Bringing a work such as *The Flying Dutchman* to the stage with purely private funds is no mean feat. Furthermore, here is a production blessed with excellent singing from a solid cast, supported by a production that allows people into the story – in other words, an experience that comes close to the “total art work” Wagner envisaged.

<https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/reviews/the-flying-dutchman-melbourne-opera/>

Wagner, of course, is famous for vocal writing that pushes performers to the very edge – an athletic level of ability has to be developed, and then pressed into the service of artistry. It is easy to see why many singers need to spend half their lives in preparation for these roles. Darren Jeffrey as Der Hollander has all that is needed for this – the power, the range, the clarity and stage presence. He delivered this vocally and dramatically demanding role while giving the impression of relative ease – a performance in that sweet spot where a shine comes from a performer being working with writing that challenges the technique just so. <https://www.classicmelbourne.com.au/melbourne-opera-the-flying-dutchman/>

It's hard to believe no one has convinced Rosario La Spina to sing Wagner before now. As Erik, his tenor pours out like a marvellous melting pot of Verdi, Bellini and Wagner. It's extremely enjoyable to listen to. Sung in its original German with three stellar principals, and with a Wagner aficionado like Maestro Negus at the helm, and effective production values, *Dutchman* is a significant artistic step forward for Melbourne Opera. <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/opera/melbourne-opera-soars-with-flying-dutchman-20190204-p50vio.html>



PRODUCTIONS IN MELBOURNE

VICTORIAN OPERA'S *PARSIFAL* - 20, 22, 24 February 2019

Review by Dr Terence Watson

Creative Team: Director - Roger Hodgman; Set Designer - Richard Roberts; Costume Designer - Christina Smith; Lighting Designer - Matt Scott; Assistant Director - Brock Roberts; Choreographer - Elizabeth Hill

Cast: Parsifal - Burkhard Fritz; Kundry - Katarina Dalayman; Gurnemanz - Peter Rose; Amfortas - James Roser; Klingsor - Derek Welton; Titurel - Teddy Tahu Rhodes

Musical Team: Orchestra: Australian Youth Orchestra; Conductor - Richard Mills; Associate Conductor - Daniel Carter

It was a moment of great pleasure, surprise and some apprehension when I learned last year that Victorian Opera was to mount a production of *Parsifal*. I was looking forward to seeing this production for a number of reasons. There has been no fully staged production of *Parsifal* in Australia since Elke Neidhardt's beautiful and provocative presentation in 2001. I find it the most enigmatic and challenging of Wagner's work, a condition I suspect many other Wagnerians also experience. So, another production would give me the chance to try to crack the mystery! Any company that bring off a successful production of *Parsifal* without an extensive tradition of Wagner performance is well on the way to world notice. I believe that Victorian Opera has happily reached this status.

Victorian Opera presented a 3D production of *Der fliegende Holländer* in 2015, also directed by Roger Hodgman. It is amazing to think, given the paucity of Wagner productions in the previous decades, that Victoria has had a feast of Wagner productions over the last decade or so with Melbourne Opera offering impressive productions of *Tristan und Isolde* in 2018, *Lohengrin* in 2017, *Tannhäuser* in 2016, and *Rienzi* in 2013 and 2104. Wagnerians across the continent can only hope this feast continues for many years and I wish these companies—and Opera Australia, which has been improving its record of Wagner productions with *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and two presentations of The Ring Cycle in the last few years—continued success for future productions.

I guess Victorian Opera decided to strike while the iron was still warm after *Der fliegende Holländer* but mounting a production of this masterwork clearly called for considerable preparatory work. In case I did not have the chance to see a staged production of *Parsifal* in Australia again before I died, I decided to see this production twice.



Set Design Act 1 Scene 1 by Richard Roberts

Committing to produce *Parsifal* also commits any opera company to finding suitable singer-actors with the capabilities for meeting the challenges Wagner sets for his principals and the chorus, including wide vocal leaps, long acts with long monologues, complex emotional and psychological states, and little stage action. In addition, the work calls for ingenious ways of creating an interesting and meaningful set, costumes and lighting effects, if one is to take Wagner's stage directions at face value. Wagner was heavily invested in a naturalistic aesthetic for his artworks that required him to conceive his works as occurring in or on very specific sorts of settings—forests, castles, the ocean, 16th century Nuremberg, for instance—that seem to fit the subject matter. The choices that the director and his or her creative team make about these elements have a major influence on how the audience understands the artwork.

The orchestra called on to play this difficult score also needs to have not only high level technical skills, but also very mature musicianship, as well as an appreciation of Wagner's intentions in creating the artwork. Usually this experience would come with long engagement with Wagner's scores. For a one-off experience, as this was for the Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO), considerable responsibility falls to the conductor not only to bring the orchestra to the highest standard it can achieve, but also to induct the players into his or her understanding of the artwork as a whole. The conductor's understanding also needs, ideally, to harmonise with the interpretation of the artwork by the director and the team.

Where to start in awarding plaudits for the deeply moving achievement of Victorian Opera's *Parsifal*, is, for me, not too



Burkhard Fritz as Parsifal, with Flower Maidens

difficult. The members of the AYO played their hearts out with precision, panache and passion. While there were occasional cracked notes or awkward entries, overall they produced a very persuasive Wagner-*Parsifal* sound, remembering that this artwork was created especially for the unique sound of the Bayreuther Festspielhaus. Clearly, as young musicians learning their craft, they relished this opportunity to test themselves. In successfully completing their challenge, much credit goes to Richard Mills as an admirable guide. Most noticeable, for me, were Mills's tempi that were somewhat faster than is often encountered in other productions. There is still, in some houses, that reverential approach to this work that obligates the conductor to take sometimes very slow tempi. Mills's faster tempi possibly helped the players negotiate those brutally exposed high, often loud passages where any error in timing or intonation is very obvious. Mills also shaped the arc of each act with sensitivity and control, so that the typical dramatic and musical structures of each act of Wagner's late, great works was very clear. He also managed the balance between orchestra and singers much better than was achieved, in my opinion, in Melbourne Opera's *Tristan und Isolde* in 2018.



Derek Welton and Katarina Dalayman

With such a solid foundation of sound, the singer-actors could focus on their interactions with each other. All the principals were impressive. Burkhard Fritz, Katarina Dalayman and Peter Rose have vast experience in Wagnerian opera, which showed in the ease with which they embodied the complex characters as they effortlessly sang their parts. It was also a pleasure to hear Teddy Tahu Rhodes in the not very rewarding role of Titurel, especially when he is carted on stage in a coffin in act 3. His rich bass-baritone voice delivered perfectly the sepulchral tones Wagner gives the character:

More of a surprise to me was the vocal and stage mastery of Amfortas and Klingsor by James Roser and Derek Welton. It was particularly pleasing to see how far James

Roser has come since the Wagner Society in NSW gave him financial assistance some years ago. His performance history and repertoire are impressive and the reviews as glowing as the one I offer. Not only did he have the vocal power and subtlety for this role, but he also brought passion to his acting, both of which astonished me. I have never seen an Amfortas so anguished and physically distressed since Elke Neidhardt's 2001 production of this work in Adelaide, with Jonathan Summers in the role. I look forward to hearing and seeing Roser again soon. I was also fortunate to hear Derek Welton sing Klingsor at Bayreuth in 2017 where his voice and command of the stage made me sit up and take notice. Welton's vocal power and acting ability were, though, considerably overshadowed by his costume, a gold lame suit that sparkled, as if he were at Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and his red fright wig and beard around a face with white makeup, gave him the appearance of Chuck the horror movie puppet. What is it with opera costumiers and fright wigs? Poor Stefan Vinke had to suffer one as Siegfried in Neil Armfield/Opera Australia's *The Ring Cycle*. Welton's voice and acting, though, helped redirect one's attention back to things that matter. Klingsor has little stage time to persuade us that he is deeply damaged, but also desperately human in needing recognition from his fellow human beings. Like Parsifal, as a social animal, Klingsor also needs to find a community to which he can feel he belongs. It is entirely understandable that, having been rejected by Amfortas as suitable to join the Knights, Klingsor should create his own cult. Wagner is right to point out that such prejudicial rejections of human beings can lead to nasty consequences, even without "magic" powers playing a part in the person's reaction against the community.

While I expected, and received, wonderful performances from the overseas principals, I felt that the presence of these two young Australians, already with impressive careers overseas, demonstrated both the high quality of training in Australia, and

Victorian Opera's fine judgement in inviting them to join with the highly experienced German and English trio.

Gurnemanz has the most difficult role in *Parsifal*, and arguably in all of Wagner's works. Because he functions as a form of the ancient Greek dramatic chorus, that is, as Wagner's tribute to ancient Greek drama, for which he had life-long admiration, Gurnemanz has the task of delivering the exposition, but he also must needs participate in the dilemma created by Amfortas and the apparent failure of Parsifal to show himself to be the prophesied "pure fool." Peter Rose's experience and total vocal mastery showed through on the Sunday performance, before which it was announced that he was suffering a viral infection. I could not really tell any difference from his fine performance the previous Friday, apart from him possibly holding back a little on the high, loud passionate passages he is sometimes called on to deliver.



James Roser

Burkhard Fritz similarly showed his complete mastery of the role of Parsifal, as well as his openness to the director's provocative interpretation. Fritz seemed to put every ounce of vocal power and energy into the many moments of passion that build to the famous "*Die Wunde*" in the centre of act 2, after which his character settles into a serene state that eventually calms his Knights and reassures Kundry that she is included in the community.

For her very odd part, as Wagner conceived the character, Katarina Dalayman's Kundry was not only immediately credible as an ageless beauty who has apparently reincarnated many times, but also as a vulnerable human being subject to manipulation and male violence. Dalayman also displayed effortless vocal control that left her free to bring much more engagement with and agency to the role than is often allowed in other productions. Even her occasional higher and more energetic notes that came over as slightly harsh contributed to our understanding of the emotional and psychological stress Kundry is under at those moments.

The male chorus, apparently jointly prepared by Richard Mills, Phoebe Briggs, and Phillipa Safey, also seemed to relish the chance to act, rather than stand and sing well, offered by both Wagner's story and Hodgman's direction. No wonder Amfortas was so intimidated by the anger of the Knights in act 3, when he refuses to unveil the Grail and perform his duty. The Knights also conveyed chillingly the fragmentation of the community as the Titurel camp and the Amfortas camp attempted to shout each other down, and then joined together to berate Amfortas. The ethereal voices of the Victorian Opera Youth Chorus Ensemble (VOYCE), prepared by Angus Grant, regularly informed us of the need to wait for the "pure fool."

Christina Smith's choice of costumes for the cast were consonant with the pared back aesthetic of this production. All the Knights (and the offstage chorus and the orchestra members) wore black shirt and black trousers; Gurnemanz a nondescript, comfy shirt, jacket, trousers and scarf he had probably worn for decades; Parsifal a green shirt and brown trousers that he had probably worn since he first left Hertzeleide behind to grieve; Kundry a shabby red dress that she had probably worn in each of her incarnations, and now had worn to ride to the four corners of the world in to collect balsams for Amfortas, then a fetching harem style outfit for her attempted seduction, then the shabby red dress, but now with a Hausfrau smock in which to serve; Amfortas a simple white outfit that looked like his pyjamas, but which became increasingly encrusted with dried blood from the wound in his left side. One can imagine the effect that Klingsor's costume and make-up made on the audience in comparison with these drab, homely costumes that, perhaps, represented their wearers' ascetic mode of life and the precarious condition of the Knights.

The choice of a set design should tell the audience much about the overall interpretation of the work, especially if one eschews the quaint pseudo-mediaevalist-naturalist settings Wagner demands in his stage directions. In this case, Richard



Conductor Richard Mills with AYO

Roberts' set certainly met Hodgman's overall intentions for the production:

".....We sought to achieve this [slowly discovering and coming to love this remarkable piece] by a very simple and dynamic space that puts the focus squarely on the performers, the music and the slowly revealed story. We felt that Wagner's elaborate descriptions of the location of the various scenes are impractical to achieve in a contemporary production and would take the focus away from the incredibly intense (almost slow motion) nature of the story telling and the divine music..." {Victorian Opera program notes}.

To give this vision stage presence, Roberts created a large white box extending far into the depths of the Palais Theatre's big stage; the floor seemed to be covered in dead leaves, and a few overturned chairs hinted at the disorder in the community. The box is illuminated at times with changes of lighting as part of Matt Scott's subtle manipulation of our moods in response to the stage action. The most dramatic element of the set was the presence, halfway down the box, of a serrated gash through all sides of the box, further signifying that the world of the Knights was torn asunder by Amfortas's fall into carnality. As such, it was a simple, but powerful, constant reminder of the fractured and fractious world in which we find ourselves. (There is also a large horizontal gap on the two side walls of the box, but this seems merely to be a practical means of allowing the VOYCE to project effectively through the stage to the audience. These gaps also allowed the offstage brass chorus to similarly inject their important voices directly into the auditorium. This device, though, detracted a little from the stage image, unless it was intended to suggest a window into another realm.)

The gash prompted me to relate the image to the moment in *Götterdämmerung* when each of the Norns cries out "Es riss! Es riss"—the rope of fate has torn. For me, this happens at the same moment as Siegfried's Nothung breaks Wotan's spear, representing the same moment at which the present divine order of the universe of The Ring Cycle ends. By extension, we could also compare it to the story in the Gospels of the veil of the Temple, representing the barrier between the human world and the Holy of Holies, ripping at the moment of Jesus's/Christ's death (Matthew 27:51). Even without these additional associations, the stage image is strong enough to work subliminally for the whole performance. Interestingly, there is no move to "heal" the gash at the same time Parsifal heals Amfortas: perhaps the logistics were too complicated?

I am particularly grateful to Hodgman for his interpretation of this strangely wonderful work. To focus on the interactions between the principals, he stripped the narrative of almost all of its religious and related (or unrelated) imagery—no forest glade, no lake (although there is a swan!), no Grail Temple, no iconography, no mediaeval knights' armour, no large-scale processions, no blazing lights, no doves, no Nazi banners! Here, all is simplicity; nothing to distract from the human story of pain and suffering, offence and forgiveness, self-overcoming, companionship, alienation and compassion. The Grail "lives" in a simple wooden box (perhaps the model

for the larger box in which the action happens) that rests on a small stand for easy transportation when the Knights are in the battlefield (I guess). The crystal Grail is lit from inside its box as a gesture to the immense power it supposedly possesses.

With all the trappings of set, costumes, and props pretty well eliminated, Hodgman was free to concentrate of the relationships between the characters. It was a revelation and a delight to see Wagner's characters given the chance to touch, even caress, comfort, show affection, to others; in so many productions touching seems to be *verboten*. Interestingly, though, in all of Wagner's stage directions for his artworks there are very few references to emotionally significant touching, embracing, etc of any sort (*be/rühren*, *bewegen*, *umarmen*, for instance). Similarly, Hodgman's characters were freer to express strong anger, delight, uncertainty, fear, tentativeness through facial and bodily gestures than I have seen in other productions. Rose's Gurnemanz exemplified Hodgman's approach in not being a detached bystander, but a person deeply engaged with the members of his community and distressed by the way in which it is straying from its God-given responsibilities. When he dismisses Parsifal at the end of act 1, he looks back at his disappearing back with palpable fear, trepidation and doubt. When Parsifal embraces Kundry after he has been anointed king by Gurnemanz, Gurnemanz looks on in wonder and amazement and relief that he has finally made amends for his earlier rash action by rightly acknowledging that Parsifal is the Grail's choice.

Perhaps the most moving aspects of Hodgman's interpretation of Parsifal's relationship with Kundry occur in act 3. Firstly, Hodgman has Parsifal invite Kundry to lift the Grail from its shrine and hand it to him. I've never seen anything like this humane gesture of inclusion and expression of the compassion that this work is supposed to celebrate. Hodgman then gives Parsifal a series of dumbshow gestures to build on this moment. Kundry's death is one of the controversial moments in *Parsifal*: is Wagner simply dispensing with a character once she has served her purpose, or did his imagination fail him in finding a way for her to be integrated into the new order that Parsifal seems to be establishing at the end of the work? Hodgman, I think, makes it clear that his Parsifal understands Kundry's heartfelt pleas to be released from her life—her involuntary series of incarnations. The fact that Parsifal has baptised her, supposedly into a new life, free of the sin of her past life/lives, as Christ's doctrines and practice seem to guarantee, and that she has participated in the Grail ceremony without bursting into flames, suggest that she has indeed been released of her ties to this world and is free to leave it on her terms.

For me, Hodgman's interpretation sets a very high benchmark for future productions, of which I hope to see many, particularly in Australia. I hope that they prove to be as humane and human-centred as this one. Congratulations to all those wonderful creative people who cooperated in a community dedicated to bringing such an impressive production to us.

PARSIFAL, VICTORIAN OPERA (VO) - Melbourne, Wednesday 20 February 2019

Review by Christopher McCabe

Parsifal is like no other opera in the repertoire. Even in the Wagnerian repertoire, it stands out as a supreme musical and dramatic achievement. It demands huge talent and resources from those who participate in it: here, we had the young musicians of an orchestra (the Australian Youth Orchestra), the principals, the choruses, the conductor and an attentive audience. The music is gorgeous, the story complex but, over a long evening, we audience members have time to absorb much of it. This opera draws its public out of the humdrum of daily life into other realms (the Grail community and Klingsor's castle). This opera confronts its interpreters and audience: how do any of us confront suffering, desire and lust, love and death? As we witness the transformation of Parsifal, from callow youth to compassionate man, we are forced inevitably to ask ourselves: could we do it too? What value compassion (to suffer with someone) in our own lives?

The New VO Production:

The reviewer sat in Row E, Seat 33 (the front row) on the opening night. The venue was the Palais Theatre in St Kilda, an attractive suburb on Port Phillip Bay. The experience was especially dramatic for anyone sitting in this front row seat, being blasted away by Richard Wagner's music and action over a very long evening.

The production was superb on all counts: vocally, dramatically, musically.

The six principals sang well, with conviction and verve:

Burkhard Fritz in the lead role sang well: Parsifal is such an exacting vocal role that you need a consummate performer; Fritz was such a one. His conversation pieces with the wild witch, Kundry, were wonderful (and sometimes scary). There was urgency in Fritz's voice and its delivery. Fritz developed and showed the change in the character of our 'hero': from naive young man, to self-knowledge, to knowledge of his fellows (Kundry and Amfortas in particular). Through this knowledge, he realises the compassion that is essential to our understanding of this piece.

Katarina Dalayman as Kundry has one of the toughest roles in the Wagner repertoire: how does a singing actress convey credibly this wild, wounded woman without descending into high camp caricature or excess? Kundry is an excessive character (think Salome in the Richard Strauss opera) and you get the feel.

The VO had excellent interpreters in other key roles: Peter Rose (Gurnemanz) and Derek Welton (Klingsor):

Peter Rose is a superb singing actor; his was a tough role which he acquitted very well indeed. He communicated the back story in Act I expressively. Rose gives an interesting twist to the narrative at the end of Act I: the synopsis (page 10 of the VO program) says that Gurnemanz has become convinced that Parsifal is simply a fool, not the innocent fool



Curtain call

enlightened by compassion. But his portrayal of the role said something quite else: he looked back to the audience in puzzlement and questioning as though he really wasn't sure who this brash young man really was.

Derek Welton was a superb (and menacing) Klingsor: a very strong voice that boomed about the theatre. His physical presence was menacing. In an elaborate outfit (together with face mask), Klingsor conversed with Kundry to huge effect; his lust to murder the young (and naive) Parsifal is consuming. His hunger for revenge knows no limits (well actually there are limits - the arrival of Parsifal).

The Music:

The Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO) played superbly; it was a pleasure to hear. The sheer excitement of these musicians in playing Wagner was palpable. For the first time I can recall, I was hit by the urgency in Wagner's score; not just the beauty of the preludes to each Act but their urgency and sense of expectation. This music, essential to the convoluted libretto, sweeps the audience along. The prelude to Act II was chilling; we look forward to the first sighting of the dreaded Klingsor. Klingsor was rejected as a member of the brotherhood of The Grail; his is a 'wounded' character.

The Conductor:

Richard Mills did a masterful job: the timing of the music was exceptional. The sounds he evoked from his large and young orchestra were superb and dramatic.

The Director:

Roger Hodgman went for a simple Parsifal: not many frills, spare for the most part, thus putting all the focus on the music and its superb interpreters. This 2019 production was a stark (and welcomed) contrast. The sparsity forced us to concentrate on the singers and their particular interpretation of their roles.

Conclusion:

A most satisfying and confronting night in the music theatre: the experience was exciting and will remain with those of us fortunate to have witnessed it. Parsifal grabs you and clings; when in the theatre, you cannot ignore it, it demands attention. We can't ask for anything better than that.

NINA STEMME: THE TASMANIAN CONNECTION

Following up her legendary *Tristan und Isolde* with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra in 2016, Nina Stemme returns to Hobart for a one-off concert with the TSO on Saturday 2 November.

Australian Wagnerites may wonder how it is that Nina Stemme, arguably the finest Wagner soprano of our times, performs exclusively in this country with the TSO, an orchestra which, due to its smallish size, is not normally associated with Wagner's music.

It all started with a dinner à trois that took place in Hobart in March 2014. Present were Marko Letonja, who at that time was TSO Chief Conductor, Rita Schütz, Marko's Zurich-based agent, and Leo Schofield, who was then living in Tasmania. In the course of the meal, Rita happened to mention that in addition to being Marko's agent, she was also Nina Stemme's. Leo immediately saw a brilliant opportunity: a gala concert performance in Hobart of *Tristan und Isolde* with Marko Letonja conducting the TSO and Nina Stemme and Stuart Skelton in the title roles.

Voilà! Two years later Leo's grand idea came to pass – albeit with an abridged version of *Tristan*, not the complete opera – and the Stemme-Skelton-Letonja concert, which by common consent was a remarkable night, went on to win 'Best Orchestral Concert' at the 2017 Helpmann Awards.

Marko Letonja, who is now Conductor Laureate of the TSO, conducted three cycles of the *Ring* for the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm in 2017. The Brünnhilde on that occasion was none other than Nina Stemme, and Wotan/the Wanderer was performed by Swedish bass-baritone John Lundgren. *Nina Stemme Returns* on 2 November will reunite all three artists.



Photo by Neda Navae

Featuring key episodes from *Die Walküre*, *Götterdämmerung* and *The Flying Dutchman*, the TSO concert will showcase an enlarged orchestra, with the additional musicians being drawn from the Australian National Academy of Music.

Book tickets at tso.com.au or phone 1800 001 190.



CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations are due to The Wagner Society of New Zealand who celebrate their 25th Anniversary this year. The society is marking the occasion with the publication of Sir Donald McIntyre's memoirs, edited by President Emeritus Heath Lees

Donald McIntyre in the ground-breaking production of *Die Meistersinger*, Wellington, 1990

REPORTS BY ARTISTS SUPPORTED BY THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW

KATRINA SHEPPEARD

I have lived in London and Germany since leaving Australia in 2007. My voice has always been sizable and I was encouraged to pursue a solo career whilst a member of the full-time chorus of Opera Australia. From there I went to the Young Artist Programme at Opera Queensland in 2007 and after this I decided to move overseas – first to Germany and then London in January of 2008.

My first audition in the UK was for English National Opera and I was hired to understudy the role of Santuzza – a favourite role to this day – and felt I had made the right decision moving overseas. ENO were very supportive and I covered many large roles for them – Turandot, Fidelio, Martha in Weinberg’s Passenger, Tosca, Katerina in Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, and most notably Norma which I went on for in 2016. I have also sung for many smaller companies in the UK performing roles such as Tosca, Aida and Turandot as well as performing the role of Barber’s Vanessa in Germany where I lived for 10 months 2014/2015.

All this led to being invited to audition for Wagnerian roles and I contacted the Wagner Society in NSW for help with coaching and singing lessons to help me with this specialised repertoire. I am so grateful to them for this assistance in both 2017 and 2018. Last year I was able to work with my teacher and coach in Berlin for several weeks over the Summer, and again for a week this year. I have been very lucky with my vocal training whilst in Europe - I met Liane Keegan whilst in the Young Artist Programme at Opera Queensland and studied with her in London and Berlin for several years. When she returned to Australia I began working with Elizabeth Connell whom I had met when I was a chorister at OA – it was a wonderful experience to work with her as a mature singer in London and sing through all the dramatic soprano repertoire with this incredible artist. It was such a huge loss when she passed away.

I began searching for a new teacher and was recommended to Janice Alder in Berlin - Janice introduced me to the Franziska Martienssen Lohmann technique. Martienssen-Lohmann (1887-1971) was a famous German vocal pedagogue who wrote 8 books on the subject known as ‘the bible’ by opera singers in Germany. She was a pioneer of vocal pedagogy, tracing back to the ideas of belcanto technique as taught by Emmanuel Garcia and combining them with the study of psychology, philosophy and physiology. My voice responds very well to this training – keeping the voice ‘slim’ and always



keeping in mind the height and flexibility of bel canto – especially in the Wagner and Strauss repertoire where it can be very tempting to over sing and push the voice. Last year I studied even more intensely this technique with the dramatic soprano Allison Oakes and vocal coach Adelle Eslinger – they work closely together and complement each other training singers in Berlin. Allison has her own very successful career as a dramatic soprano, making her debut this year at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and Adelle is a repetiteur at the Deutsche Oper Berlin.

It has been a great privilege to be trained by these two very exacting teachers and I credit my vocal development over the past 18 months to them both. Last year I was fortunate enough to sing excerpts of Tristan and Isolde with Australian Helden Tenor Stuart Skelton, and have been exploring Wagner and Strauss roles – Isolde, Brünnhilde, Salome, Crysotemis – with Adelle when I am able to travel to Berlin to work with her.

Since 2015, when I returned to London from Germany, I have had a close association with the Tait Memorial Trust. Isla Baring, the Chairman of the Tait, has been very supportive of me and I have been able to give back as a member of the music board and committee, as well as helping with the programming and organising of the many concerts the Tait puts on in London. It is very rewarding work and I am very grateful to Isla Baring and the Tait for all they do to support developing Australian performing artists making their way in the UK.

I am very excited to see what 2019 might bring and would like to thank the Wagner Society in NSW again for their support of me over the past two years. www.sheppard.me

SAMANTHA CRAWFORD

Hello friends,

It's hard to believe another year has passed, and already the Christmas lights are sparkling on the streets of London. As 2018 draws to a close I'm grateful for several special performances taking place since my Summer Newsletter, covered in more depth in my recent interviews with Interlude HK and Australian Women London. Work has taken me to Madrid, Munich, Hong Kong, the Isle of Wight, and back to London. However, the highlight has been my husband and I welcoming our daughter in September. She is a joy and already enjoyed a jet set start to her life with her soprano Mother! 2019 starts with return trips to Germany and Vienna, and an Italian flavour to repertoire as I perform works by Rossini, Mascagni and Leoncavallo.

Interlude HK

I was interviewed for Interlude HK about my experience as a finalist at the Hong Kong International Operatic Singing Competition. This was the inaugural year the HKIOSC was held, and I performed a programme of arias from Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and *Pique Dame*, and Dvorak's *Rusalka* which were broadcast for HK radio. The final gala was live-streamed on Facebook from City Hall, where I performed with conductor Lio Kwokman and the HK Virtuoso Orchestra. The Jury consisted of Dame Kiri Te Kanawa (Chair), Peter Katona, Sumi Jo, Dennis O'Neill, and Lo Kingman. I very much enjoyed my time in the city and participating in the competition, which has led to several invitations to audition.

Australian Women London

Since founding the Creative Professionals Network Australia with Emma Cullen at Australia House in 2016, I have been aware of the great work being done by Julia Griffin at Australian Women London, and I was flattered that she approached me to tell my story in her *Success Club* series. It was a real pleasure to be interviewed for Julia's AWL podcast in August, and we covered a wide range of topics from working in opera, training at the Guildhall School, mentoring, CPN, gender equality, SWAP'ra, competitions, opera roles and why we love London.

Australian Women London

Samantha Crawford is a London-based and hugely successful Soprano singer. She has a vocal gift, admirable ambition and a desire to support Australian creatives in London. We met up ahead of the birth of her first child to talk all things success and opera here in London.



Concert with Sir Bryn Terfel. Copyright Bill Knight.

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Julia Griffin

Most Recent Post



Samantha Crawford: Soprano opera singer in London
Sep 11, 2018

SWAP'ra Gala at Opera Holland Park

A star-studded gathering of female opera talent provided the most harmonious of rallying cries. **** Fiona Maddocks, The Guardian.

I was delighted to support the new charity, SWAP'ra (Supporting Women and Parents in Opera) by performing at their Opera Holland Park gala. It felt very apt to sing out in unison at this celebration of the sisterhood whilst eight months pregnant! It was a fantastic evening and the SWAP'ra team have begun some great new initiatives to support parents working in opera. I look forward to working with them further in the coming months.

The week in classical: Swap'ra gala; Le Cid review - challenging the mainstream



Looking Ahead

Eight weeks after giving birth I returned to work with a performance of Howells' *Hymnus Paradisi* at Chelmsford Cathedral for the Armistice 100 Remembrance concert, and now look forward to singing Rossini's *Stabat Mater* in the Spring. As the New Year rolls in I will be focusing on repertoire with a distinctly Italian flavour as I prepare to sing roles in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Next London performance is on 24th February at The Shoreditch Treehouse with Sydney baritone Morgan Pearse, also helped by the Wagner Society in NSW, Chad Vindin (piano), and Australian Lisa Bucknell (violin).

Hope to catch you at a performance soon.

Cheers to 2019, friends.

With love,

Samantha

<http://www.samanthacrawford.com/>

JOSHUA SALTER

Overview

I was lucky enough to be selected to attend the Berlin Opera Academy in July and August 2018.

Thanks to the generous support of the Wagner Society in NSW it made this opportunity a reality.

The Berlin Opera Academy is situated in historic Koepenick in the old East Berlin. It is surrounded by the Spree and is out of the hustle and bustle of Mitte. It has a beautiful Old Town with cobbled streets and historic buildings.

The first day at the Academy was a welcome and meet and greet, where we met all of the cast and creatives as well as the teaching faculty. However, it was announced that the Sitzprobe was the following morning so I elected to rest up.

The first rehearsal of Haensel und Gretel was overseen by all of the music and vocal staff, including David Wakeham and Pamela Armstrong- with whom I would later work on my repertoire. Maestro Lutz De Veer was conducting this rehearsal, and his knowledge of the score was evident immediately. I was singled out for my clear German diction, thanks to my intensive coaching with Tanja Binggeli in the months prior. The hard work always pays off!

Over the next week, I was able to attend Orfeo ed Euridice at the Staatsoper Berlin, and also see Il Viaggio a Reims at the Deutsche Oper starring Australian soprano Siobhan Stagg, who sang superbly. Visiting two 'A' Houses in a week is an amazing opportunity, and the quality of the productions was outstanding, as was the singing.

Haensel und Gretel was double cast, and the other Vater wasn't arriving until the following week, so I had to sing the role twice a day for the first week! It was a valuable lesson in learning when to 'mark' a rehearsal, and also learning about how to pace yourself through such a long 5 week program. Each evening we were emailed the Probenplan (this is standard procedure in German houses) which outlined the rehearsals and coaching times for the following day.

A typical day at the Academy would be as follows:

- Movement Class 9am-10am
- Production Rehearsal 10am-1pm
(or Character classes with Director)
- Lunch 1pm-2pm
- Production Rehearsal 2pm-5pm
(or Music calls with Maestro)
- Vocal Lesson/Coaching 5pm-6pm
- Dinner
- German Class 7pm-8:30pm

This timetable was very intensive, and it allowed me to develop various facets of my singing, and how to deal with a busy vocal schedule.



Lutz De Veer

Maestro De Veer is a native Berliner, and actually grew up in Koepenick. He was at the Academy just before taking up a position at Staatstheater Nuremberg. De Veer worked as Kapellmeister at the State Opera Hannover. He has also worked with the Stuttgart Radio Orchestra and Staatsoper Hanover.

Music rehearsals were very valuable and we had several sessions every week. Sometimes these were with all principals, but usually the Mutter and Vater would work our whole scene by ourselves. De Veer focussed on text and delivering phrases with contrast and colour. We would often just speak our scene in an expressive fashion with no

music, then re-do the scene with the piano. He was very strict on German diction, especially final consonants.

Marcin Lackomicki

He regularly participates in productions of the Teatro alla Scala di Milano and the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro and worked for the Teatro Comunale di Bologna as well as for the Teatro Regio di Torino. In 2008, with a scholarship from the Wexford Festival Opera, he staged Gian Carlo Menotti's rarely played radio opera La zitella e il ladro in Wexford. Since the 2016/17 season, he has been a regular guest at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, where he supervised new productions such as Puccini's "Manon Lescaut" and Strauss's "Die Frau ohne Schatten" and as director of "La Traviata".

Lackomicki's process was very interesting and unlike anything I had experienced before.

In our first rehearsal he asked if everyone was off book and knew what every word of the German meant. He then proceeded to hear the Opera from the beginning and made us move furniture in the room while singing it through. After he had heard half of the opera he called for a lunch break!

Only later did I realise that he was actually looking at our stage movements, whether we were moving naturally, reacting to the text, and were involved in our character.

From there we were placed into individual sessions or small groups for 'character development'.

In one memorable session, I spoke the text while the other Vater mimed through the scene. Then we would swap. In the next run through, one of us would sing the part with piano, while the other acted on stage and vice versa. We ended up with two completely different characters and scenes! Even in these early sessions, the basics of our character and the blocking of our scenes were formed and we could take this into the rehearsal space for the Production Rehearsals.

David Wakeham

David Wakeham has established a worldwide reputation, with critically acclaimed performances at La Scala di

Milano, Teatro Massimo Palermo, Theater an der Wien, the Komische Oper Berlin, Oper Leipzig, the Bayerische Staatsoper München, the Staatsoper Stuttgart, Oper Bonn and Opera Australia, performing major roles in the Czech, German and Italian repertoire.

As a teacher, David was always extremely supportive and generous with his time. He urged me to focus on resonance and support, trusting the projection of the voice and resisting the urge to oversing. David had an open door policy on his lessons, so sometimes other students would observe our sessions. He always championed the music and maintaining phrasing and melodic line - even in larger repertoire. David would often sit in on production rehearsals and give valuable feedback. Having sung the role of Der Vater many times, it was great to get specific role feedback and how to navigate tricky sections. His advice to me was to know the repertoire that is right for you, sing to your strengths (especially in audition situations), and trust your instrument.

One fond memory is when he told me of his role debut of Der Vater at Bayerische Staatsoper. His costume included a thick waistcoat - and in it was stitched the name of every singer who had played the role. The last person to have worn it - one of my favourite baritones - Hermann Prey!

Production Week

Our amazing venue for the Opera was Kultur Buro Elisabeth, a bombed out WW2 church. The 16m roof has been refurbished with a glass ceiling and the space is now used for concerts, recitals, and exhibitions.

Production week was a gruelling one, with bump into the venue in Mitte on a Sunday, rehearsal that evening, dress rehearsal Monday, general rehearsal Tuesday, and opening night on Wednesday. Managing your voice and overall health during long days in a Berlin heatwave can be a tricky thing to do but keeping well hydrated and well rested was important. It was also very important to know when to mark a rehearsal and when to sing. I decided to mark the first dress rehearsal but sang the general to get a feel of the acoustic in the venue. I felt that my performance of Der Vater went very well due to detailed preparations and the advice and guidance of the expert staff on the Faculty, and also the coaches from Sydney who helped me prepare the role before I left for Berlin - Glenn Winslade, Sharolyn Kimmorley and Tanja Binggeli.

Thank you to the Wagner Society in NSW for your amazing contribution to attend this intensive 5 week program- the Berlin Opera Academy - a once in a lifetime opportunity. <http://www.joshuasalter.com/>

ELEANOR GREENWOOD

In 2018 the Society gave a grant to Eleanor Greenwood. Here is a report on her activities since receiving the award

Dear Leona and the Wagner Society of NSW,

I am writing regarding my experience after receiving support from the Wagner Society in NSW. My trip was extremely worthwhile and allowed me to develop with my Italian coach in Italy. I was also able to attend an agency audition in Germany and I received positive feedback in my new Vocal Fach as a Jugendlich-Dramatischer Sopran. They are willing to represent me when appropriate auditions come up and have already arranged one audition with an Opera House for me. I was extremely grateful for this opportunity and can only hope that it will mean I can undertake further auditions.



I was able to study with my Italian Coach, meeting up with Martina Franca, Italy where she was working, and undertake coaching on various roles including Leonora from Fidelio, Elisabeth from Tannhauser, Sieglinde and Leonore from Il Trovatore, with a focus on approaching repertoire (including the German repertoire) from the Bel Canto perspective, the weeks spent there and coaching with her were extremely beneficial and have set me on a strong path.

As there was an Academy going on at the same time as I was there (I arrived well after it started), I was able not only

to undertake extensive coaching sessions with my coach, I could also observe many sessions that other singers were undertaking with her and in so doing, I could absorb more fully, the approach she was teaching. This really reinforced my understanding and confirmed my belief that the Italian bel-canto method is the best, most efficient, healthiest and most beautiful method for singing, even in the largest and most dramatic of pieces.

Currently I am In Australia working two day jobs in order to save up for the next opportunity. I'm staying in Brisbane with family now in order to save. Recently I was offered some concerts with Opera Queensland, at the Powerhouse in Brisbane,

and at the airport. In 2018 I sang with Opera Queensland for Opera by the Lake, at a concert as part of the 'Music on Sundays' Concert Series with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and I was a soloist with the Queensland Choir for their Christmas Concert. Of course, I would love to sing in Sydney again and I was able to attend a stage audition at Opera Australia recently. I live in hope they will note my enthusiasm and commitment to my craft and that one day, I might sing for the National Opera Company in a role such as, for example, one written by Wagner! Thank you again for the support and encouragement that goes along with that and everything this trip has done to allow me to develop. <https://www.eleanorgreenwood.com/>

CHRISTOPHER CURCURUTO

Subject: 2019: A year of discipline and exciting news!

Dear supporters,

Can you believe that January is already done and dusted? I'm sure it was Christmas only yesterday...

On Monday I finished my first block of performances including participation in a Faculty recital at the invitation of Dr. Jeffrey Snider (acclaimed Verdi baritone), and a concert of scenes from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, produced by University of North Texas Opera and directed by a host of student directors in the school. I performed the roles of both Bartolo and Figaro in various scenes including Bartolo's aria *La Vendetta*, a radical take on Figaro's *Non piu andrai* in which Figaro physically and very seriously assaults the young Cherubino, and the entire Act II Finale (as Figaro). It was a very rewarding experience and was a great start to the Spring Semester!

Today I will be performing in a Singer Showcase for new applicants to the UNT College of Music and rehearsals are well-and-truly underway for our upcoming performances of Gianni Schicchi and *Così fan Tutte*.

My technical work with Dr. Austin has really started to take shape. This semester Dr. Austin has graciously accepted my proposal to do 3 x half-hour lessons per week. I felt that shorter but more frequent lessons would be of greater value to my technical development, and that appears to be the case. I am now able to produce a freer, more consistent sound, a lot more quickly and across my range which seems to be starting to settle.

Onto the exciting news. This week I received notification that I have been accepted into the Pittsburgh Festival Opera Meistersingers program for young dramatic voices on full scholarship. This is a summer program run by internationally-renowned Wagnerian soprano Jane Eaglen consisting of specific instruction to assist dramatic voices to



reach their full potential including beauty of tone, lyricism, and efficiency. As part of the program I will also receive coaching from experts in Wagnerian repertoire and perform in a recital of Wagner works. In addition to this opportunity, I have also been contracted by Pittsburgh Festival Opera to cover the role of Hunding in their production of Jonathan Dove's reduction of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, to cover the role of *Gianni Schicchi*, and to perform both an ensemble role (TBA) in *Schicchi* and a role in a brand-new Puccini cabaret.

In addition, the Wagner Society in Victoria are currently offering tickets to the 2019 Bayreuth Festival and accommodation to a

young Australian singer with Wagnerian potential, for which I have expressed interest. UNT are also offering a grant to graduate music students to undertake educational experiences abroad for which such an opportunity would be competitive. Should everything come to fruition, I would also seek out German language courses to take whilst in Germany. So, potentially a VERY exciting, and VERY Wagnerian Summer coming up this year!

All members of faculty here at UNT are supportive of me pursuing this repertoire and have offered me all the support necessary to make sure that I approach it carefully and responsibly. I remain grateful to the Wagner Society in NSW who sponsored my studies here at UNT with the specific aim of developing my instrument to pursue this repertoire and I am very happy that my development has been such to allow me to do so.

I trust you are all well and hope that the terrible heat subsides soon! Fortunately in this part of the US we haven't been hit with the Arctic blast/polar vortex those up north are experiencing.

Warm (unironic) regards,

Christopher C Curcuruto

<http://www.christophercurcuruto.com/>

EMAIL FROM FIONA JAMES, 27 FEBRUARY 2019

Dear Leona,

Please find attached a receipt for the Wagner Society's donation of \$500 for the Song Prize.

On behalf of the Foundation please thank the members for this most generous donation.

We are truly excited about this year's competition with all the added benefits we've been able to introduce as prizes.

Here's hoping we can keep it going into the future and encourage more art song.

The Final is on 21 September at the Independent Theatre at 5.30pm.

I'll let you know about the heats once all the applications are in.

With warmest regards,

FIONA JANES | Artistic Director | General Manager
Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyng Foundation

REMEMBERING DEBORAH RIEDEL

2019 marks the tenth anniversary of the death of the wonderful Australian soprano Deborah Riedel. My involvement with Deborah was in connection with the Adelaide *Ring* of 2004, in which she sang Sieglinde to Stuart Skelton's Siegmund. She was outstanding, as can be heard in the complete Melba recordings. However, in 1999 she had been diagnosed with cancer which finally claimed her life on 8 January 2009. She was 50 years of age.



Deborah had made her European debut as Freia in *Das Rheingold* in 1991 at Covent Garden, and had sung a wide-ranging repertoire at the Paris Opera, Vienna State Opera, Bavarian State Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyng thought highly of her, and Bonyng was her mentor. He helped her transition from mezzo-soprano to 'lyric soprano with a coloratura facility' and described her as having 'one of the most beautiful voices we have heard in Australia in a very long time ... warm, human and touching. It is also a voice of a very decent size capable of filling any opera house.' Eighteen years later he described her voice as 'velvety' and 'voluptuous' and said that hers was 'undoubtedly one of the greatest voices ever produced by Australia'.

During the *Ring* rehearsals in 2003, Deborah told me with some pride that one of her forebears had been associated

with the first Bayreuth Festival. She wasn't certain of the details, although she thought there was some connection with the orchestra. I did a little research and found that in the 1870s Richard Wagner had had frequent dealings with Professor Carl Riedel (1827-1888), chorus master, composer and president of the *Allgemeiner Deutsche Musikverein*. His Leipzig choral society, the 'Riedel-Verein' founded in 1854, took part in the choral finale of Beethoven's 9th Symphony which Wagner conducted in the Margrave's Opera House after laying the foundation stone for the Festival Theatre on 22 May 1872. Carl Riedel became a member of the management committee of the General Society of Patrons for the support and preservation of the festival in Bayreuth,

and he was also president of the Leipzig Wagner Society. In 1873 his 'Appeal to the Germans' for support for the Bayreuth enterprise was used in preference to a text written by Friedrich Nietzsche, thereby contributing to Nietzsche's growing disenchantment with Wagner. He lunched informally with Wagner on 15 May 1876 during rehearsals for the first *Ring* and, in later years, Wagner and Cosima saw him socially on a number of occasions. Wagner promised to take Cosima to Leipzig on her birthday in 1881, to perform the *Parsifal* choruses for her with the Riedel choir. It was a nice connection between the Adelaide production and Wagner himself.

RECENT GRANTS TO YOUNG SINGERS

TABATHA MCFADYEN - DIRECTOR

Has been granted funding for her internship as Second Assistant Director at Mainfranken Theater Wurzburg production of *Gotterdammerung*. <https://www.tabathamcfadyen.com/>

MAIA ANDREWS - SOPRANO

Has been granted funding for intensive lessons from tenor Jack Livigni in London and New York. She is seeking help to sing a wider repertoire and prepare her for a Strauss concert later in 2019. She has been encouraged to learn *Woglinde* by Bremen Opera. <https://www.maiaandrews.com/>

SARAH PRESTWIDGE - SOPRANO

Has been accepted into the Bel Canto Summer Audition Training Program in Munich July-August 2019. It was noted that her current repertoire has focused on coloratura roles of Mozart for example, however she has expressed a strong interest in developing further into Wagnerian roles. Sarah is an NSW Aboriginal woman and the committee wished to indicate to her our interest in following her career and encourage her to keep in touch with us. The society approved funding towards German language and general coaching. <https://www.facebook.com/SarahPrestwidgeSoprano/>

JESSICA HARPER

Has been granted funding towards German language lessons (intensive) at Goethe Institut, Dresden and ten coaching sessions with Thomas Cadenbach at Semper Oper, Dresden. <https://jessicaharpersoprano.com/>

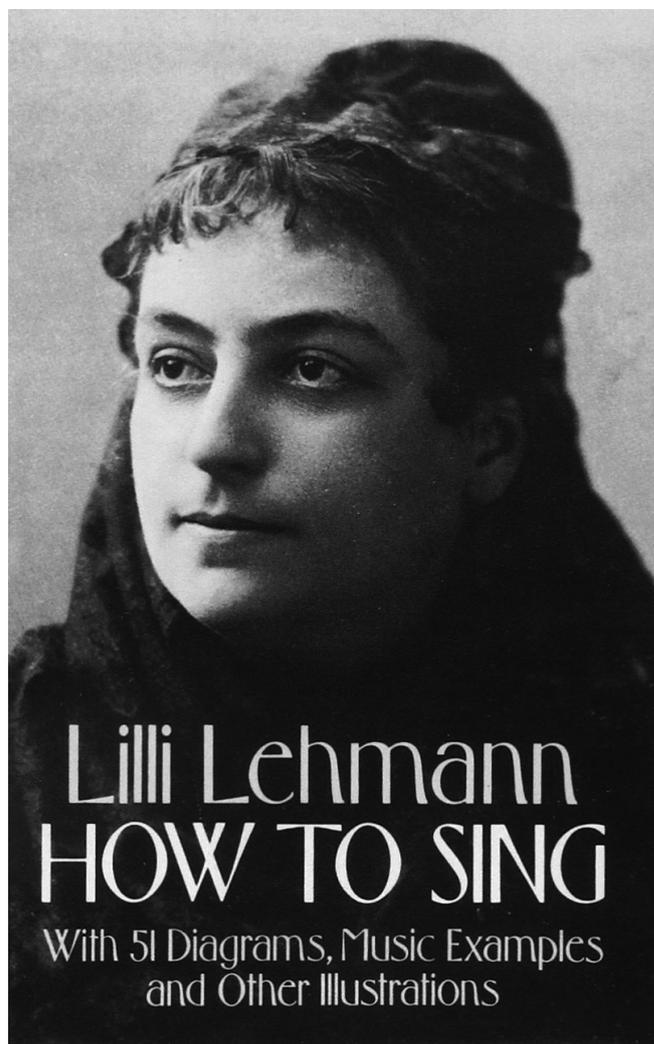
RICHARD WAGNER ON THE PRACTICE AND TEACHING OF SINGING

Monday 7 September 2015 by Peter Bassett

Weber and Beethoven were still alive when Wagner was a teenager, and their long shadows, together with those of Mozart and Marschner fell on all of his early projects. His first completed opera *Die Feen*, composed in 1833 when he was just twenty years old, was never performed in his lifetime but, even if it had been, it wouldn't have sounded as good as it does in the best recorded versions we know today. The type of singing familiar to Wagner was far from ideal, and many German singers of his era were poorly trained and had unsophisticated techniques. His sternest critic, Eduard Hanslick had something to say on the difference between German and Italian singers at that time: 'With the Italians' he said, 'great certainty and evenness throughout the role; with the Germans an unequal alternation of brilliant and mediocre moments, which seems partly accidental.' Wagner had to entrust his major roles to inadequately trained singers in many cases, which must have been challenging to say the least. He worked hard to improve matters, pouring much time and energy into the preparation of performances. 'I do not care in the slightest' he once said, 'whether my works are performed. What I do care about is that they are performed as I intended them to be. Anyone who cannot, or will not, do so, had better leave them alone.'

David Breckbill has written that 'The differences between the singing which Wagner knew and that which we hear today are considerable. In his day, the best singing was far from straight-toned ... but the continuous vibrato which has long been an element in present-day operatic singing [designed to project and colour the voice] was entirely foreign to him.' Wagner died in 1883, long before the invention of sound recording, but three of his chosen singers made recordings when the technology was in its infancy. One was Hermann Winkelmann who created the role of Parsifal in 1882. His voice was recorded in 1905, as was the voice of Marianne Brandt who was Waltraute in the 1876 *Götterdämmerung* and Kundry in the 1882 *Parsifal*. The third, and vocally most assured, even in later life, was Lilli Lehmann who also became a famous teacher. Her book of 1902, published in English as 'How to Sing', is still available in print and online, and her account elsewhere of the 1876 *Ring* rehearsals gives us a glimpse of Wagner's skill and energy as a stage director. He selected her for the roles of the Rhine Daughter Woglinde, the Valkyrie Helmwig and the Woodbird in the first complete *Ring*. During her long career she sang 170 roles including Isolde and Brünnhilde, and was equally at home with Mozart and Bellini. One of her surviving recordings was made in 1907 when she was 59. Obviously her voice is more mature than it had been in Wagner's time, but her performance of 'Du bist der Lenz' from Act I of *Die Walküre* is a fascinating record, especially since it is 108 years old.

The transition to a warmer, more emotive sound since Lilli Lehmann's time may have been influenced by Italian

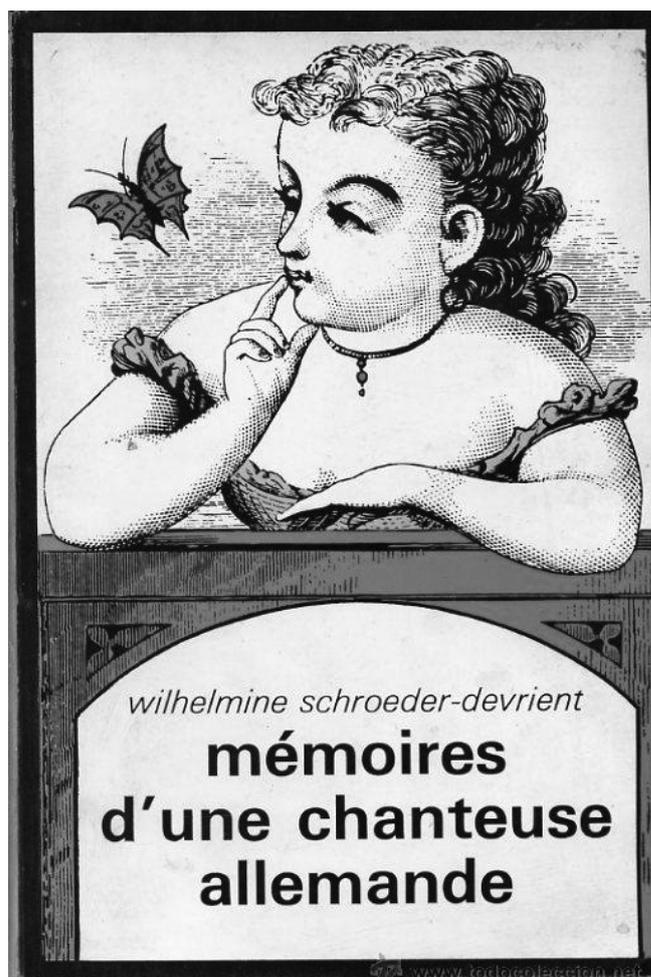


operatic practice, especially after radio and phonographic recordings brought the ringing tones of Italian singers into homes throughout the world. Sir Roger Norrington, champion of the so-called historically informed approach to performance, asserts that the fashion for vibrato arrived with Hollywood, aerodynamic car design, radio, ocean liners and the early days of flight. I wonder though, if was also perhaps a continuation of the allure of all things Italian in opera, exemplified by an historic preference for Italian libretti and even Italian stage names. Ludwig Leichner for instance, who sang the role of Hans Sachs to Wagner's satisfaction, was better known to his audiences as Raphael Carlo. Opera companies from London to Rio de Janeiro, including the court opera in Dresden where Wagner spent part of his youth, were designated Italian opera companies and, in the second half of the 19th century, Wagner's works were customarily sung in Italian in non-German speaking countries. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner records a discussion on the subject that he had with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert during his visit to London in 1855. When *Lohengrin* was first performed in Australia in 1877 it was sung in Italian, prompting Wagner to urge

the singing of his works in English – in English-speaking countries. Would he have approved of a continuous vibrato in the modern style? Adherents of the historically informed approach say no, because the written evidence is that he treated vibrato as a special effect, restricting its use in his scores to specific functions. They also insist that continuous vibrato constrains dramatic flexibility and impedes a vivacious delivery of the text – both issues of considerable importance to Wagner. It would have been unfamiliar to him but my sense is that, as with everything else to do with performance, he would say that dramatic need, not inflexible rules, should dictate musical expression.

'Dramatic need' – now there is something that Wagner came to appreciate in one particular woman whom he first saw in his youth. In *Mein Leben* he recounts the story of the formative theatrical impression made by the dramatic soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. His recollection was that she had been performing the role of Leonora in *Fidelio* in 1829 and a few years later he saw her again in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*. It was not her voice as such that impressed the young Wagner but her ability to take on the whole dramatic persona of her character through a combination of music, clear delivery of text and acting. His ecstatic reaction has no parallel in his writings: 'When I look back across my entire life' he said, 'I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced upon me'. Later he was to have some misgivings about the actual lyrical capacity of her voice, but he dismissed these in favour of the larger significance of her theatrical personality. In his 1872 essay 'On Actors and Singers' he admitted: 'No! She had no 'voice' at all; and yet she knew how to work her breath so beautifully and to project with such a truly feminine soul that one ceased to think any more about singing or voices at all! ... 'My entire understanding of the actor's mimetic art I owe to this great woman, a lesson that allows me to view truthfulness as the essential foundation of that art.' He noted the extraordinary effect created by her innovation of speaking rather than singing the final word in her threat to Pizarro: 'Just one sound and you are dead!' The terrific effect of that gesture, said Wagner, was the sudden and shocking return from the ideal world of music to 'the naked surface of dreadful reality'.

Clearly, the encounter with Schröder-Devrient set the benchmark for his ideal singing actor, or is that acting singer? She had performed Leonora in front of Beethoven himself in 1822 when she was just 18. It is reported that Beethoven was not at all happy about his exalted heroine being entrusted to 'such a child'. But her father Friedrich Schröder was an accomplished operatic baritone, and her mother Sophie was one of the most celebrated German actresses of her day, famous especially for her depiction of Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*. She coached her daughter, and so the young Wilhelmine was trained in that combination of singing and acting that appealed so much to Wagner and, as it turned out, to Beethoven. The latter had attempted to conduct the dress rehearsal but since he was almost completely deaf at that time, it descended into chaos. Persuaded to watch the performance from the front row of the audience, he was transfixed by Wilhelmine's



characterisation and, afterwards acknowledged that he had found his Leonora. In 1823 she was conducted by Carl Maria von Weber, and subsequently she created the roles of Adriano in *Rienzi*, Senta in *The Flying Dutchman* and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* for Wagner. To have been conducted by Beethoven, Weber and Wagner – who can imagine such a thing?

Not everyone shared Wagner's rhapsodic reaction to Schröder-Devrient's performances. Those who were not impressed were invariably opposed to sacrificing the traditional emphasis on beautiful singing, and they were usually out of sympathy with Wagner's priorities generally. The English music critic Henry Chorley criticised Schröder-Devrient for her tendency to 'attitudinize', as he put it, and for being one among hundreds 'who have suffered from the ignorance and folly of German connoisseurship ... which made it penal to sing with grace, taste, and vocal self-command because such were the characteristics of the Italian method'. He also went on to describe the music of *The Flying Dutchman* as extravagant and crude, and *Tannhäuser* as a work of pretension that left him blanked, pained, wearied and insulted. Clearly people like that were never going to see eye-to-eye with Richard Wagner, and there were plenty of them. There still are.

It is interesting to compare Wagner's views on the connection between acting and singing with Verdi's remarks on a proposal to engage the soprano Eugenia Tadolini for

the role of Lady Macbeth in Naples in 1848. Verdi was quite clear that for this role he wanted dramatic authenticity rather than beauty of delivery. 'Madame Tadolini has a wonderful voice, clear, flexible and strong, while Lady Macbeth's should be hard, stifled and dark. Madame Tadolini has the voice of an angel, and Lady Macbeth's should be that of a devil.... The most important numbers in the opera are the duet between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the Sleepwalking scene.... And these two numbers definitely must not be sung. They must be acted and declaimed, with hollow, masked voices.'

Amongst those who have questioned Verdi's motives was Birgit Nilsson, a radiant Lady Macbeth, who claimed that Verdi was having an affair with another singer at the time and so wanted to present Tadolini in a poor light. 'What lovely-voiced singer with any self-respect' said La Nilsson, 'would take on a role in which her voice should sound as hard and hoarse as a devil's?' With all due respect, I suggest that what motivated Verdi was not the desire for wilful distortion of the voice, which would be just as arbitrary as the most mellifluous rendering regardless of context, but truth of characterisation; and in pursuing this goal he was close to Wagner's aesthetic values.

Because of the Schröder-Devrient experience, we can understand why Wagner went to such lengths to achieve convincing acting and to avoid a situation where singing became detached from the other aspects of stage craft. He really was after a total work of art. This isn't to say that he didn't value beautiful singing – singing that cultivated a beautiful tone – he did, greatly; along with a firm vocal line and precision in musical detail. It's just that such singing was not an end in itself for him. He wanted flexibility and conviction of utterance that simulated heightened speech. 'In my operas' said Wagner, 'there is no difference between phrases that are 'declaimed' and 'sung,' but my declamation is at the same time song, and my song declamation.' In his vocal style, the melodic accent always falls on the proper accent of each word, and this certainly helps with clear enunciation. He emphasizes important syllables by dwelling on them, and when Tannhäuser was first staged in Dresden, he actually had the words of the text copied into the parts of all the orchestral players, so that they could follow the phrasing of the singer. It would be a mistake to assume that Wagner cared more for the orchestra than he did for the voice, which is one accusation often levelled at him. On the contrary, he once remarked that 'the human voice is the oldest, the most genuine, and the most beautiful organ of music – the organ to which alone our music owes its existence.' In describing the relationship between singer and orchestra in Tristan, which is the most musically driven of all his works, he begged the reader to observe how, in the third act, the gigantic orchestra seems to disappear, or, more correctly speaking, becomes a constituent part of what Tristan is singing.

The orchestra as 'a constituent part of the song' sums up Wagner's intentions very well. Consider an especially beautiful example of how this merging of orchestra and



The Muse Henri Fantin-Latour

voice works to create the impression of a single sensory experience. The second act of Tristan is an apostrophe to the night and to that 'unity of being' which lies beyond the world of illusion, yearning and suffering – the harsh world of 'day'. Almost everything in Tristan und Isolde is viewed from the perspective of the two lovers, including the warning call of Isolde's maid Brangäne – more lullaby than alarm as it floats through the night. We hear it, so to speak, through the ears of a man and a woman for whom no world exists beyond themselves. The total effect is ravishing.

There were at least five occasions on which Wagner set out to improve standards of performance through formal education and training. The first occurred when he was a young man in Dresden in the 1840s, occupying the position of second Kapellmeister at the Saxon court. He proposed some entirely reasonable reforms to the conditions and payment of the Royal orchestra but ran up against the insecurities of his superiors and the resentment of others. He then submitted a 'Plan for a National German Theatre for the Kingdom of Saxony' in which he advocated the removal of the theatre from the control of the court, the creation of a democratic association of dramatists and composers which should elect the director and determine artistic policy, and the foundation of a theatre workshop to train young artists, producers and technicians. Again, nothing was done and this report was left to gather dust. The whole experience was an early and depressing brush with bureaucracy, and fed the fires of his revolutionary inclinations.

His next attempt at major reform came in Zürich where he had fled after the failure of the 1849 Dresden uprisings. He wrote a paper entitled 'A Theatre in Zurich', calling on the town fathers to reshape their theatre from top to bottom. He insisted they should hire singers who were also trained actors; train them on a year-round basis; actively recruit German poets and composers to develop works; limit performances to no more than three per week (so that singers would not be burned out by exploitation); and found a Commission of Theatrical Affairs to govern the institution. As always he conceived his plans in the context of a reformed world of opera. In Zurich, he drew parallels between what he wanted the theatre to become and folk-like activities such as village festivals and the singing societies in German towns. This was too novel for the staid burghers and, again, nothing came of it, but the seeds of Die Meistersinger were being sown in his mind even at that early date.

He wasn't discouraged, and the next opportunity to do something came in March 1865, when he was living in Munich under the patronage of the young King Ludwig II. The king commissioned him to prepare a report 'On the Foundation of a German Conservatoire in Munich'. Once again Wagner called for a school in which singers would be better trained in the theory and practice of music than was usual at the time. He urged the development of performance and production practices for an individually German art. But exclusivity was never part of his plan. After all, he had had considerable experience of conducting the operatic and symphonic works of other composers. Between the ages of 20 and 23 he had conducted or prepared no fewer than seventy-seven operas by most of the major operatic composers of the 18th and early 19th centuries – German, French and Italian. Like Hans Sachs he was aware that tradition and inspiration are not mutually exclusive but mutually enriching.

Incidentally, the term that has come to be applied to Wagner's mature operatic style – 'Musikdrama' – was not coined by him, or even officially sanctioned by him. He used a variety of descriptions: 'drama', 'stage festival play' and so on, but deliberately avoided a single generic classification. In his essay of 1872 entitled 'On the Designation Musikdrama' he acknowledged that others were using this term but he was unwilling to adopt it. He did though distinguish his works from debased traditional forms of 'opera'. If you think 'debased' is too strong a word, then remember what the operatic world had been like in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The 'stars' in the whole system were the singers, and they could make or break a production. It was the heyday of the volatile prima donna, and none was more volatile or more prima donna than Caterina Gabrielli. One contemporary writer described her as 'the greatest singer in the world...certainly the most dangerous siren of modern times, having made more conquests than any woman breathing.' She had a power that modern leading ladies can only dream of. If she were in a bad temper, which was often, she'd only hum her arias. It was commonplace for singers at that time to

bribe the press and pay for claque, and by 1830 in Paris an agency had been established to provide any number of claqueurs ordered by theatre managements or individual singers. Wagner fell foul of them in 1861.

By the time of Lohengrin in 1850 and, certainly, by Tristan in 1865, the centre of gravity had begun to shift. Gone were the days when even composers were at the mercy of headstrong singers, who would count the bars of music allocated to various roles and either demand extra ones to outdo their rivals or just insert additional music themselves. Rossini once complained that while he didn't mind some changes, 'to leave not a note of what I composed – even in the recitatives – well, that's unendurable'.

In respect of Wagner's proposals for a school in Munich, he argued the need for a new type of poetic text that took account of the particular attributes and constraints of the German language – so different from the Italian. From such a text, he said, would emerge a dramatic, declamatory vocal line, often un-lyrical and un-vocal to the point where the human voice was treated almost as an instrument of the orchestra. The committee charged with giving effect to Wagner's report met once or twice, scratched its collective head and decided that his proposals were too expensive. So that was that. They might also have had trouble dealing with his daunting prose style, and one wonders whether the lengthy report was actually read to its conclusion.

Tristan und Isolde was performed in Munich in June of 1865, having been completed six years earlier and already declared un-performable in Vienna after seventy-seven rehearsals. Wagner came to regard his first exponent of the role of Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, as a model interpreter of his works, and was hugely impressed by his intelligence, artistry and musicianship – notwithstanding his corpulence. Schnorr, who was just 29, had been borrowed from the Dresden court theatre. His wife Malvina (who was eleven years his senior and from a Brazilian family) had come too to perform the role of Isolde. Towards the end of the first series of performances, Schnorr felt unwell. There was a fourth performance of Tristan on 1 July, and then he participated in a staging of The Flying Dutchman and in a royal concert at which he sang excerpts from Siegfried, Die Walküre, Das Rheingold and Die Meistersinger, none of which had been staged at that point. He and Malvina returned to Dresden where he attended a rehearsal of Don Giovanni. The next day he fell seriously ill, and on 21 July he died. Rumours spread that he had died from the exertions of the role. Talk of a 'Tristan curse' resonated with the gullible because of the length and strangeness of the work and Tristan's harrowing delirium and death on stage. It was a case of life imitating art. It seems most likely though that the overweight tenor had died from rheumatic complications which caused a stroke. Schnorr's death at 29 was a calamity that Wagner lamented for the rest of his life. He was, in the composer's view 'the' singer, and we can add his name to that of Schröder-Devrient as having had a profound effect on Wagner's concept of how his roles should be performed. In this case

it was the tenor's musicianship and intelligence rather than his physical gestures that delivered a convincing portrayal of the role. Clearly there was more than one way to give a totally convincing performance. It is fair to say that Wagner learnt as much from his singers as they learnt from him.

When in 1872 Wagner laid the foundation stone of his festival theatre – not in Munich as the king had wished but in the provincial town of Bayreuth – he also began work on a long essay entitled 'On Actors and Singers'. In this he elaborated his ideas on the fundamental importance of gesture, mime and improvisation, and he lamented the disappearance from the modern theatre of a true improvisatory art which, in his view, only survived in elements of popular culture. The salvation of dramatic art, he concluded, lay in the selfless collaboration of the dramatist and the singer or actor.

The improvisatory quality of Wagner's staging comes out very clearly in the detailed records made of rehearsals for the first Ring in 1876. It was noted that all the things Wagner did at the rehearsals created the impression of having been improvised. He kept changing his mind from day to day, altering not only blocking, stage movement and gestures, but also the musical tempi. Needless to

say, this drove the singers mad but he was giving effect to his own maxim about improvisation. He sought to liberate the singer and never to impose his own personal characterisations. He believed that every artist of stature brought something inimitable to a role, and he only stepped in when he came upon a lack of understanding or superficiality. His only demand was that the singers abandon their personal identities to the role.

In respect of the technicalities of singing, Wagner coached his performers in declamation, intonation, phrasing and dynamics, and urged the greatest clarity in presenting a character's emotions. His famous last instruction to his cast before the first Ring performance was: 'Clarity! The big notes will take care of themselves; the small notes and the text are the main things.' Audibility of words was a recurring problem, and Wagner's view was that the orchestra should support the singer as the sea supports a boat – rocking but never upsetting or swamping. It was a point he made over and over again, and one that today's conductors and composers would do well to heed. Despite the huge size of the Ring orchestra, in the main it supports and punctuates rather than overwhelms the vocal line. In Parsifal Wagner achieved near perfection in combining maximum orchestral expressiveness with vocal clarity.



Ludwig and Malvina Schnorr von Carolsfeld as Tristan und Isolde

In 1877, a year after the first Bayreuth festival, Wagner began looking again at the prospect of establishing a school for the training of singers and actors and the development of other theatrical skills. He contributed an article to the local newspaper, Bayreuth Leaves that had been set up to support the festival. This article, entitled 'Proposed Bayreuth School' was a thoroughly practical statement of arrangements, outlining courses of study for the years 1878 to 1883. He intended to supervise personally the activities of the school, which would be open to male and female graduates of existing music schools, or singers and musicians who had reached an equivalent level. Students would have to commit to remaining in Bayreuth each year from 1 January to 30 September, and the academic year would be divided into three terms. During the first year, 1878, the dramatic works of German composers other than Wagner would be studied under the guidance of a special singing-master. Given the pre-determined level of vocal expertise, the focus of the course would be on interpretative and performing skills. Piano studies would also be undertaken by experienced pianists, which would lead to the conducting of orchestral performances. It was hoped that sufficient instrumental musicians would be available during the final three months to form an orchestra or, failing this, that musicians on holidays from the court orchestra would be able to fill any gaps. During the second quarter, attention would be paid to string-quartet playing. How interesting that Wagner felt that the four 'voices' of a string quartet had something to teach human singers about expressive relationships! Throughout the year there would be lectures focusing on cultural, historical and aesthetic matters towards an appreciation of German performing styles.

In Act 3 of *The Mastersingers* Hans Sachs gives Walther a lesson in how to construct an ideal song and, in the process, Wagner gives us a lesson in how songs should be written and sung. The text is perfectly clear; the musical expression mirrors the spirit of the words, the orchestra is part of the song and, as Wagner put it, his declamation is at the same time song and his song declamation.

In the second year, 1879, a similar course would be followed, but now the focus in the last term would be on Wagner's own dramatic works, particularly his earlier operas. The third year, 1880, would culminate in complete stage performances of the earlier works – if possible *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. *Tristan und Isolde* and *The Mastersingers* would follow in the fifth year, 1881; *The Ring of the Nibelung* in 1882, and the first performance of *Parsifal* in 1883. He recognized that not all those who enrolled for the first year would still be involved in the sixth, but he hoped that a sufficient number would continue from year to year to form a nucleus of experienced

students who might be able to assist with teaching and serve as models for later intakes.

A feature of this scheme that strikes me as particularly interesting is that Wagner intended to train students in the performance of his works and employ them in the festival theatre, including for a second performance of the *Ring* in 1882 (six years after the first) and the premiere of *Parsifal* planned for 1883. He was determined, it seems, to prepare up-and-coming singers, répétiteurs and conductors in a music school environment rather than rely on the ad hoc engagement of outsiders in the traditional way. It was an audacious plan that crystallised once it was clear to him that another festival could not be mounted in 1877. Now he would create a cadre of especially prepared singers and instrumental musicians. After all, his motivation for the Bayreuth experiment from the outset had been to present ideal performances in ideal surroundings, using singers

who truly understood his intentions. This was what would distinguish Bayreuth from other opera houses. While many of his singers for the first festival had been the best available, the reality was that they had come from busy careers in the wider world of opera, were wedded to old habits which were not easily thrown off. He was particularly annoyed by the attention-seeking Franz Betz, his Wotan, who had been peeved that he could not take curtain calls whenever he wished and had, as Wagner noted, hammed up his part in some places, especially at the beginning of the *Valkyrie*. Wagner was inclined not to invite him back and, for his part, Betz declared that he would not come anyway.

To his great regret, Wagner was unable to proceed with his school and create the model productions he desired. The first Bayreuth Festival had left an enormous deficit, which was hardly surprising given that the composer had not only staged the huge four-part *Ring* for the first time but had also built an entire theatre in which to perform it. There was no way he could mount a new festival in 1877, and so he set about giving concerts in the hope of raising funds. When these concerts generated only modest returns, other ideas were floated, including the sale of the entire enterprise to either the Imperial or Bavarian governments, or relocating the Festival to Munich. These ideas came to nothing and he eventually released the *Ring* for general performances throughout Europe. This would at least generate royalties, but any hope of creating ideal performances seemed gone forever. The financial crisis was finally settled in 1878 with the intervention of the King who arranged for the Munich Court Theatre to pay royalties until the debt was wiped out.

It was during those testing times after the first Festival that Wagner contemplated one of his more extraordinary solutions. He would sell his house and the theatre in

Bayreuth and move to America. At various points during his life America loomed as an attractive prospect or was suggested to him by admirers in the United States. He wrote to a supporter in July 1877 that if nothing came of his plans for a financial solution then he would wash his hands of his Festival and go to America and would never return to Germany. Nothing came of it and Wagner was soon fully absorbed in his composition of Parsifal which, in July 1882, received its premiere in Bayreuth with great success. His health deteriorated and in February 1883 he died in Venice without having set foot on the North American continent or having brought to fruition his plans for a music school.

In Act 3 of The Mastersingers of Nuremberg, which is itself a giant demonstration of the art of singing, Hans Sachs gives Walther von Stolzing a lesson in how to construct an

ideal song and, in the process, Wagner gives us a lesson in how songs should be written and sung. The text is perfectly clear; the musical expression mirrors the spirit of the words, the orchestra is part of the song and, as Wagner put it, his declamation is at the same time song and his song declamation. There is also a masterly lesson in how to set conversations to music.

Wagner's efforts were titanic and his achievements remarkable, and hand in hand with those achievements went a passion for educating singers and everyone else concerned with the production of opera. Clearly, for him, one crowded lifetime was far too short.

From a paper presented by Peter Bassett to the 8th International Congress of Voice Teachers on 13 July 2013. Last updated on: 14th September, 2018

VALE HEINZ EBERT

Many members were saddened to hear of the recent death of long time member Heinz Ebert. His daughter Maree sent me this lovely tribute in reply to a letter of condolence from me.

Dear Michael,

Thanks for your kind words. Yes, Dad was good at everything! I hope this may be suitable for your Newsletter. Heinz's love of Wagner was limitless. His ecstasy was, 'Wagner's, The Ring Cycle', which we thought he had great stamina to sit through. He often told us of Wagner's life and life in Germany at that time. He was so delighted when he recently found a CD of the complete 'Ring Cycle' in a small shop. He was over the moon!

During the war he was sent to live on the farm in the south of Germany. He lived with his Grandmother who taught him his appreciation of classical music. When he was sent south, he encountered the stories of King Ludwig II and his fantastic castle, he was enchanted. Wagner managed to enrich his cultural musical heritage. His love of Wagner spread to his sister, Marianne, in Stuttgart, who today still belongs to The Wagner Society over there. Dad loved going to Wagner's birthday parties and would tell us each year how old Wagner had turned that May.

Regards, Maree Sulter.

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Montserrat Caballé as Eva in Lohengrin 1965



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THE RAVEN'S REPORTING, COMPILED BY CAMRON DYER

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Featuring key episodes from *Die Walküre*, *Götterdämmerung* and *Der fliegende Holländer*.

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