

Brickbats & Bouquets For Bayreuth 2017 (& 2016), 8 October 2017

**2.00pm: Brickbats and Bouquets for Bayreuth 2017 (and 2016),
by members who received tickets from the Wagner Society
and attended the Bayreuth Festival**

The society had a very lively meeting on October 8 when members who had obtained tickets to Bayreuth through the society reported on the responses they had to the productions they attended. The mood was set by the serving of Bavarian beer, bratwurst, sauerkraut and pretzels, all essential ingredients for the experience of the annual ritual that is the Bayreuth Festival.

I gave a brief illustrated description of the current productions of *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal* and *Die Meistersinger* and then members Ian Hutchinson, Terence Watson, Jenny Ferns and Warner Whiteford spoke about their reactions. The consensus was that musically the three productions were superb—great principals, wonderful chorus and magnificent orchestra. The sets and costumes and especially the lighting were of the highest professional standards. There was less agreement about the directors' interpretation of Wagner's intentions.

Tristan had many illogical and unattractive aspects and no feeling for the natural elements—sea, forest and coastal headland—that are such an important part of Wagner's work. Everything was very industrial and hard edge. The interpretation of King Marke was problematic—he was portrayed as a sadistic thug, which goes against the music and the actions of the character as written. Rene Pape sang it beautifully, however Christa Mayer's singing of Brangäne was the highlight for most of us.

Parsifal was better received although there were some puzzling elements. Highly detailed productions like this really need to be seen more than once in order to understand all the layers of meaning. Wagner's arguably anti-organized religion message was strongly imagined. Georg Zeppenfeld's Gurnemanz was superbly sung and acted—an often tedious role was made totally engrossing. South Australian bass Derek Welton was excellent as Klingsor.

Die Meistersinger was highly anticipated by the Australian contingent at the festival because of the debut of Australian director Barrie Kosky. Importantly, he is the first Jew to direct at the Festival. I thought his

interpretation, although risky and challenging, was a triumph, but not everyone agreed. The production started off portraying all of the opera's characters as aspects of Wagner and his family and friends and developed into a trial putting Wagner on the witness stand for his anti-Semitism. It was a very detailed and intelligent production, sometimes very funny and with each act ending with a stunning coup de theatre. All the principals created fully realized and sympathetic characters and the chorus was simply stunningly good.

Elizabeth Murphy then amused and inspired us with her enthusiastic retelling of her first Bayreuth and first Ring experiences. Elizabeth captured the unique atmosphere: the green hill and flowers; the introductory fanfares; the sausages and beer; the dresses; the gossip; the beautiful interior of the theatre and its wonderful acoustic; the uncomfortable seats; the informative morning talks and the after-show discussions lasting into the early hours.

The afternoon finished up with members talking about the controversial Castorf Ring Cycle which was having its final performances. Esteban Insausti is one of the few people who has seen this production and had something good to say about the quirky interpretation. Ian and Warner weren't so keen, but all agreed it was musically excellent. During the afternoon many of those present in the audience had added insightful comments and I think I can say that the afternoon was amusing and informative for both those who have been to Bayreuth and those who hope to go. We had talked for longer than *Götterdämmerung* Act 1 and we needed more Bavarian beer.

By Michael Day