



CELEBRATING  
**40 YEARS** 1980 - 2020



Sunday 21 March 2021, 4 - 5.15pm:  
Professor Heath Lees on  
'Wagnerism after Alex Ross'  
by Zoom



**Wagner  
-ism**  
**... After**  
**Alex  
Ross**

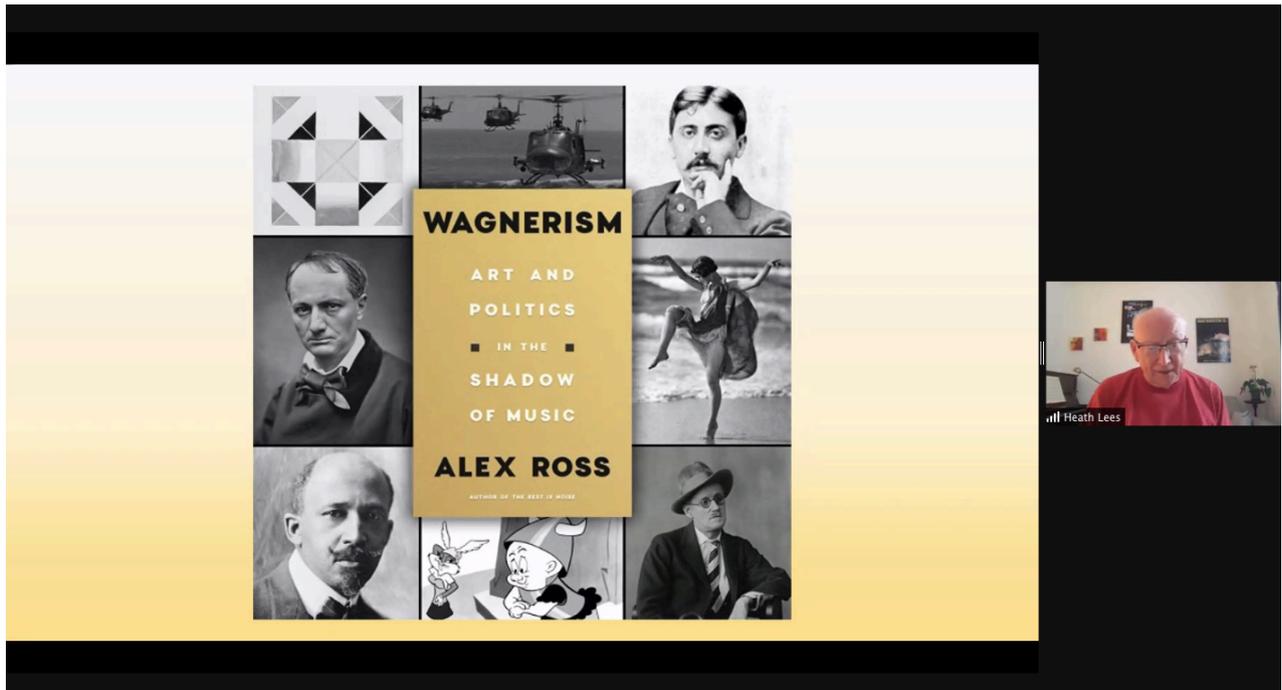


*A Zoom talk  
by Heath Lees*

*For the  
Wagner  
Society in New  
South Wales*

*21 March  
2021*

## Report by Minnie Biggs



Fifty-seven Wagnerites from as far afield as London joined together on Zoom to listen to the ineffable **Heath Lees** speak to us from New Zealand about *Wagnerism after Alex Ross*. Heath said he thought that word was a bit ominous! (the 'after'?)

A “new epoch”, Wagner looked at straight in the face, the full phenomenon. What about Wagnerism before Ross? Not ever before, actually, was there study on Wagnerism as such. Was it surprising how ubiquitous Wagner was in the last century? He is the lens for the culture of that time. Lees gave us a few bullet points, around which he spoke; the first was

***\*Wagnerism is now revealed as a world-wide subject that has extended enormous influence on the art, culture and society of the time.***

He showed a collage of images from a New York book/ music show, which Lees then took us through, pretty much encompassing or touching on the contents of the book.

**Baudelaire** invented Wagner, or appropriated him into his own idea of modernism which led to the second bullet point:

***\*Wagner is now accepted as signalling the birth of modernism.***

Among much else, Baudelaire wrote to Wagner “I felt that this music was mine.”

**Proust** used leitmotifs in his work, as did **James Joyce** in a quite different stream of consciousness way. **Isadora Duncan** danced Wagner essence.

More than one thousand films used his music, (mostly the Ride.)

Lees then took us to the chapter titles, the first where Ross's language about music- the most beautiful- soars. He went on to how each country saw him through their own different eyes. Most curious or unexpected might be the chapters on Jewish and Black Wagner, and Feminist and Gay Wagner, (indicating that Wagner actually transcended the problem of race.)

***\*Wagnerism in America has now been awarded true prominence.***

He suggested a book called *Wagner Nights: An American History* by **Joseph Horowitz**. And goes on to describe a whole chapter devoted to the American author **Willa Cather**. This chapter in the middle of the book is a sort of pause in the relentless history and density of the rest. Ross became quite the Cather devotee!

The second half of the book is more politically oriented, except for the chapters on **Joyce, Eliot** and **Woolf**.

Finally,

***Wagnerism has been thoroughly updated for the 21st Century.***

Heath Lees is the most engaging, informed, charming, clear speaker who has a close relationship with Ross and therefore speaks in a particularly connected manner about the subject, which is also his great passion. We are blessed to have him talk to us!

(Just a little while afterwards a friend wrote: 'just reading Willa Cather's "*The Song of the Lark*". It has a theme of opera and the Ring Cycle (which only emerges in the last 100 pages or so) which makes me wonder if you would enjoy the novel. I find the novel a bit odd overall although I think Willa Cather is an outstanding writer. ' Grist for our mills!)

**Minnie Biggs, April 2021**

## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

An exciting aspect of Heath's presentation was the inclusion of video clips from a Zoom conversation between him and Alex Ross, which was an excellent warm up for Alex's Zoom session with us on 6 June.

The meeting was introduced by President Esteban Insausti, who welcomed visitors from New York, London, New Zealand and around Australian and was summed up with thanks from Past President Roger Cruickshank (in New Zealand).

PS I urge everyone to read the book – it's available in Paperback and I found it to be a really fascinating read.

**Mike Day**

*From the Wagner Quarterly 161, June 2021*



## Professor Heath Lees

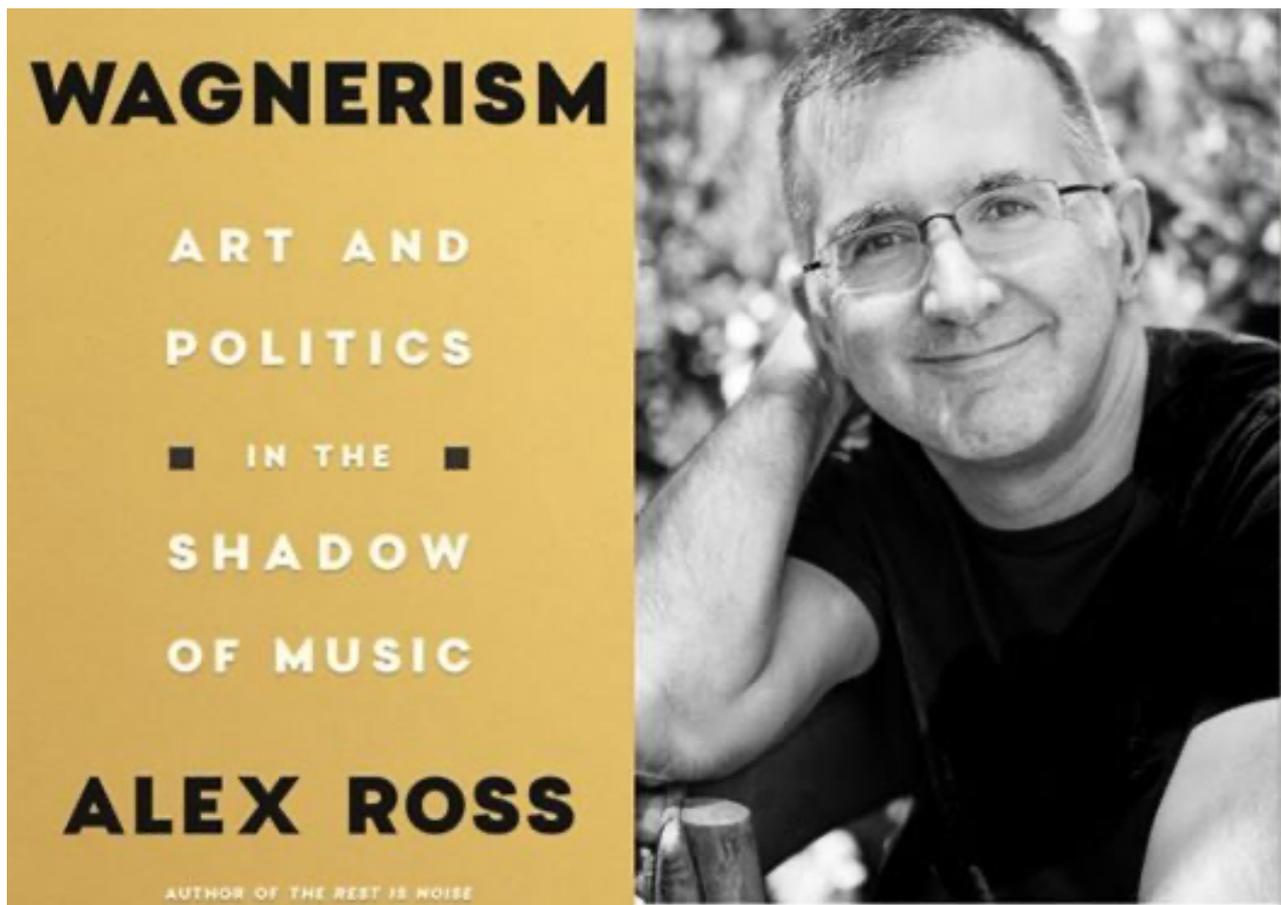
### About Professor Heath Lees

Heath Lees is Emeritus Professor of Music at Auckland University, and divides his year equally between New Zealand and France. Heath has presented many arts programmes on television, including the music series *Opus*, and the weekly arts show *Kaleidoscope*. In 1994, Heath founded the Wagner Society of New Zealand.

Heath has lectured on musical subjects in general, and Wagner in particular, in the UK, France, Portugal, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. As a writer, he has published many books and articles on different musical influences in literary works, including *Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language*, which deals with Wagner's influence on the French poet Mallarmé.

Heath has also given many talks to the Wagner Society on topics such as *The Women in Wagner's Life and Art; Lifting the Lid on Wagner's Piano; Wagner, the Dutchman and the Sea* and *Wagner and Mallarmé: Music as Poetry*.

## About 'Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music' by Alex Ross



In *Wagnerism, Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, Alex Ross, renowned New Yorker music critic and author of the international bestseller and Pulitzer Prize finalist *The Rest Is Noise*, reveals how Richard Wagner became the proving ground for modern art and politics—an aesthetic war zone where the Western world wrestled with its capacity for beauty and violence. For better or worse, Wagner is the most widely influential figure in the history of music. Around 1900, the phenomenon known as Wagnerism saturated European and American culture.

In his new book Ross ranges thrillingly across artistic disciplines, from the architecture of Louis Sullivan to the novels of Philip K. Dick, from the Zionist writings of Theodor Herzl to the civil-rights essays of W.E.B. Du Bois, from *O Pioneers!* to *Apocalypse Now*. In many ways, *Wagnerism* tells a tragic tale. An artist who might have rivalled Shakespeare in universal reach is undone by an ideology of hate.