

Sunday 18 October 2020: Dr David Larkin, via Zoom

**Beyond the opera house: CS Lewis & Wagner Reception
in Edwardian Britain, by Dr David Larkin
4 - 5.30pm, Sunday 18 October 2020
via Zoom**



About Dr Larkin:

David Larkin is a senior lecturer in musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney, specialising in nineteenth-century music. He joined the University in 2010, after two years as a postdoctoral research fellow attached to the School of Music, University College Dublin sponsored by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

His music education began at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, where he studied piano, violin and organ. He graduated from University College Dublin in 1999 with a first-class honours BMus degree, and in 2002 was awarded the MLitt degree with distinction for a thesis exploring the musical and personal connections between Liszt and Wagner. In 2007, he gained his PhD from the University of Cambridge

for a dissertation entitled 'Reshaping the Liszt-Wagner Legacy: Intertextual Dynamics in Strauss's Tone Poems.'

Dr Larkin's previous presentations to the **Wagner Society in NSW** include:

- a Seminar on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (21 October 2018) - This seminar was illustrated with musical extracts put together by Warwick Fyfe, singing Beckmesser and featuring him along with other Opera Australia singers Shane Lowrencev, Donna Balson and Dean Bassett accompanied by Thomas Johnson
- a Seminar on *Parsifal* (30 July 2017) - in which Eleanor Greenwood (who sang Kundry), Warwick Fyfe (who sang Klingsor) & Bradley Gilchrist (pianist) performed an extract from Act 2 of *Parsifal*.
- Exploring *Tristan und Isolde*: a workshop – An Unresolved Enigma (14 June 2015).

About Dr Larkin's talk:

Dr Larkin has provided the following introduction to his talk:

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) memorably described how the chance sight of one of Arthur Rackham's Ring Cycle drawings in his teenage years was a life-changing event, when a feeling of 'pure "Northernness" engulfed [him]'. After reading prose summaries and verse translations of the Ring, he wrote a lengthy poem based on the plot of Rheingold. Although he was on his own admission a 'layman [with] no music education', Lewis even penned a short essay on the composer in his adolescence. He also chased up the recordings of Wagnerian 'highlights' which were in circulation at the time. However, it was not until 1918, long after the essay was written, that he finally experienced *Die Walküre* in full in the theatre.

Lewis was far from being the first British literary figure to conceive a passion for Wagner: in the preceding decades writers as different as E. M. Forster, Ford Madox Ford and Virginia Woolf had all succumbed to the spell of the music dramas, at least for a time. However, Lewis's path to Wagner differs from theirs in one significant way: it was not sparked off by an immersive theatrical experience. Getting acquainted with Wagner via pictorial and literary channels was in fact quite easy, given how saturated the media were with all things Wagnerian in the early 1900s. Yet it was the existence of recorded excerpts which provided a crucial new avenue of approach, without which his enthusiasm would certainly have faltered. In my talk, I will retrace Lewis's journey, with special attention given to what was available on sound recordings before World War I. Lewis thus serves as an early instance of how the gramophone created new audiences for Wagner.

Report from the December 2020 Quarterly

On Sunday 18 October 39 members and friends joined Dr David Larkin on Zoom to hear his presentation: **Beyond the opera house: CS Lewis & Wagner Reception in Edwardian Britain.**

This was a fascinating talk and an illustration of how an academic can, through curiosity, rigorous research and passion, discover new sources and facts to bring to life a somewhat obscure topic.

Starting with a little-known unpublished essay about Wagner written by a teenage C S Lewis around 1910, David was interested in finding out how such a young person could have become interested in Wagner, especially since Lewis didn't attend an actual performance until 1918.



David described Lewis' probable sources of knowledge about Wagner, apart from performance, in the early 20th century. Plenty of material was available: printed scores, libretti and articles; paintings and illustrations; and gramophone recordings. Wagner performances were frequent in London at the start of the century and his work was a source of inspiration to novelists, poets and painters. We know that in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* Lewis says he was inspired by an Arthur Rackham illustration of Siegfried. David suggested that Lewis saw Wagner's world through Rackham's eyes. Other notable Wagner inspired artists included Willy Pogany and Aubrey Beardsley.

Lewis would have read G B Shaw's 'The Perfect Wagnerite' published in 1898, the year of Lewis' birth, and would no doubt have been aware of the interest in Wagner expressed by such luminaries as Ford Maddox Ford, E M Forster (who attended a Tristan when aged 11), Aleister Crowley and Virginia Woolf.

David's primary interest was musical and his exhaustive research revealed that in Britain and Europe in the period 1900 -1920 over 3,000 different recordings of excerpts from Wagner were released. David explained that most of these were 'translations' – freely using a variety of languages, orchestration, instruments and size of orchestra. (Much more freedom than is currently 'acceptable'). David played several excerpts from these early recordings, including Nellie Melba singing Elsa's Dream in 1912, with surprisingly beautiful and clear vocals but generally 'tinny' orchestra and piano accompaniments.

At the conclusion of his paper David answered chat questions from the participants and all agreed that it had been an extremely interesting and entertaining afternoon. President Esteban Insausti expressed our appreciation and the hope that we can hear him in person once gathering restrictions are lifted. David's talk is available through our website: <https://youtu.be/ysbV5yU6AWA> .



The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting grid with 20 participants. The participants are arranged in a 4x5 grid. The names of the participants are: David Larkin, Jacqui Sykes, Colleen's iPad, minniebiggs, June Donsworth, Lynette Longfoot, Margaret Whealy, Mitz's iPad, Florian Hammerbacher, Daryl Colquhoun, Kay Vernon, Leona Geeves, michael day, Pauline Hulgerson, estebaninsauti, Audrey Blunden, Alasdair Beck, Stephanie Lee, Pam McGaw, Glen Barnwell, johnm, Glynis Johns, Diana, kevin, and Michael's iPhone. A chat window is open in the bottom center, displaying a message from Daryl Colquhoun: "From Daryl Colquhoun to Everyone Thank you, David. Brilliant!". The Zoom control bar at the bottom includes buttons for Unmute, Stop Video, Participants (34), Chat, Share Screen, Record, Reactions, and Leave.