

**Sunday 10 April 2022**

**Talk by Peter Bassett on ‘Hurry away then,  
towards the East’**

*A Wagner Society in NSW in-person event  
at the Goethe Institut, Woollahra*

**Program**

**12.30pm [AEDT]: DVD – ‘Die Feen’**

**2.00pm [AEDT]: Talk by Peter Bassett**

**Report**

**DVD – ‘Die Feen’**

Members enjoyed this charming production from the Wiener Staatsoper of Wagner’s first completed opera. It was fascinating to hear that even as a teenager highly influenced by current composers, he nevertheless was starting to show a preference for certain orchestral sound combinations and dramatic effects that would become known as ‘Wagnerian’.

**Talk by Peter Bassett**



**Peter Bassett** has been a regular contributor to the Quarterly over the years and an occasional guest lecturer. The members and friends who attended were very pleased to welcome Peter back again and were treated to a fascinating insight into Wagner's understanding and use of Buddhist and Hindu ideas. Many members are familiar with Peter's books or have attended his informative and entertaining pre-performance talks before the Melbourne *Rings*. This talk was meant to be a lead-up to the Brisbane *Ring*, postponed until November 2023.

### **Some highlights from Peter's talk:**

Wagner's awakening, so to speak, to the literature of the east, can be traced to the early 1850s. In 1852 he wrote from Zürich to his former assistant August Röckel, languishing in Waldheim prison, about the poetry of the fourteenth century Persian mystic, Hafiz, whose works were then being edited by Hermann Brockhaus, Wagner's brother-in-law. 'We with our pompous European intellectual culture' wrote Wagner, 'must stand abashed in the presence of this product of the orient, with its self-assured and sublime tranquillity of mind.' In 1814, Goethe had been drawn to the poetry of Hafiz and used it in his collection of twelve lyrical poems *West-Eastern Divan*, symbolizing exchanges and mixtures between the orient and the occident. In 1856, the 33-year-old artist read his first book about Buddhism. Madly in love with Mathilde Wesendonck, he conceived two deeply connected opera projects: *Tristan und Isolde* which he went on to compose and stage, and *Die Sieger* (The Victors), an opera scenario based on an Indian Buddha legend translated from Sanskrit. These two projects mirrored Wagner's burning desire for the consummation of his love and the necessity of renunciation. *Die Sieger* occupied Wagner's mind for decades until his death in 1883. When Tristan and Isolde sing: 'Then I myself am the world', they are drawing on one of Schopenhauer's favourite passages in the Upanishads: 'I am all these creatures, and besides me there is no other being'. Peter compared the texts from the Upanishads to Isolde's last words in the *Liebestod*. They are remarkably similar. It has been said that for Wagner, who lived in exile for much of his creative life and was seriously disenchanted with politics, Buddhism was a way of answering his three most fundamental questions: what does it mean to be German? What does it mean to be Christian? What is art? In his view, Buddhism wasn't remote from German thought but intrinsic to it. This connection can be demonstrated by one piece of music composed for *Die Sieger* that ended up in the *Ring*. According to Cosima Wagner's diary entry for 20 July 1878, it had been written for the Buddha himself. It is misleadingly labelled these days as 'the motive of the world's inheritance', but it was described by Wagner's assistant Heinrich Porges as the 'redemption theme'. The phrase in question is first heard in the Wanderer's final scene with Erda. He desperately wants answers to one question in particular: how to stop a turning wheel. In Buddhist teachings, the turning wheel of karma is the inexorable working out of the consequences of one's actions, the destiny of

suffering that is shaped by one's deeds. Erda is baffled and unable to help him. He pauses to collect his thoughts and then he says that he is no longer concerned about the end of the gods and, in fact, consciously wills it. What he once resolved in despair, he will now do gladly. At that point, we hear in the orchestra the majestic theme once intended for the Buddha. During the first rehearsals, Wagner said that this passage 'must sound like the proclamation of a new religion'. Indeed it does. Peter finished with a discussion of the original text of Brünnhilde's final words, which was not used in the staged version of *Götterdämmerung*. The text makes it clear that her insight was born of her overwhelming, grieving love for Siegfried. In *Parsifal*, which has many Buddhist influences, Parsifal tells Amfortas: 'Blessed be your suffering that gave compassion and wisdom to the timid fool'. So Brünnhilde and Parsifal are both, in their own ways, redeemer and redeemed, and exemplify Wagner's idiosyncratic application of the Indian religions to his greatest works for the stage.

Peter's original ideas for this talk were published in the July 2020 issue of the *Wagner Journal* and can be found on:

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