



WAGNER
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nsw

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SEPTEMBER 2013

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY

IN MEMORIAM Joseph Ferfoggia (c. 1923-2012) – long-time honorary auditor for the Society – see Swan Lines.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Welcome to the third Wagner Quarterly for 2013.

I have to confess that I have missed some of our Society's more recent events, as I have taken my Wagner enthusiasm overseas. I am really sorry not to have attended these events, as on all accounts they have been outstandingly successful. Some fifty people, including her Excellency the Governor, attended the Dutchman seminar. This is described later in this Quarterly, as are the Lisa Gasteen meeting, the "Swords and Winterstorms" concert, and the more recent Neil Armfield talk, which I believe was fascinating.

In June this year, I was fortunate enough to attend Ring Cycles in Riga, Milan and Longborough. And in August I went to the third and last cycle of the new Ring production in Bayreuth. Unfortunately, because of the decisions relating to ticket allocations, there were many fewer Sydneysiders in Bayreuth than in previous years. But a small ray of hope on this issue remains. In November the matter will again be discussed at a meeting of the Administrative Board, and it is possible that there might be a different outcome. We can only hope!

Given that most of my recent Wagner experiences have been outside the country, I shall describe them briefly here. I do not include the Milan Ring Cycle, which is discussed elsewhere in this newsletter.



Two Wagner motifs marking the Wagner Weg in Bayreuth. Who is he poking his tongue at?



Multiple multi-coloured Masters by Ottmar Hörl capering over Bayreuth: Is he welcoming visitors or shooing us away? 300€ at www.Bayreuth-shop.de

The Riga Opera House is a jewel of a 19th century opera house at one end of a park which divides the mediaeval section of the city from the modern city. The standard of opera there is extraordinarily high. The *Rheingold* was directed by Stephan Herheim (of recent Bayreuth *Parsifal* fame), and was full of metaphors. For example, Wotan was Wagner, and Valhalla was the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. The giants wore masks which depicted Marx and Engels.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT *Continued page 3*

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Simone Young AM

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FOR YOUR DIARY

2013		
5, 10, 12 October - 7.30pm, 8 October - 6.30pm	<i>Der fliegende Holländer</i> – Concert performance in Wellington, New Zealand, Auckland, New Zealand	ASB Theatre, Aotea Centre
Nov-December 2013	THE RING CYCLE – Melbourne: Cycle 1: November 18 to 25. Cycle 2: November 27 to December 4. Cycle 3: December 6 to 13. Festival program now announced	Melbourne Opera Theatre and associated venues for Festival events
5-8 DECEMBER 2013	RING CYCLE SYMPOSIUM – program now announced	University of Melbourne
2014		
	No Wagner performances scheduled by Sydney Symphony Orchestra or Opera Australia	
Sunday, 10 August 7.00pm	Jonas Kaufmann – concert of arias by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet and "others" with conductor Jochen Rieder	Sydney Opera House

COMING EVENTS 2013 - STARTING TIMES MAY VARY.

PLEASE CHECK THE SCHEDULE FOR DETAILS.

DATE	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	TIME & LOCATION
6 OCTOBER	Susan Bullock – Melbourne's Brünnhilde – and Richard Berkeley- Steele – Melbourne's Loge: <i>Singing Wagner</i>	Goethe Institut 2PM
NOVEMBER & DECEMBER	Because of the Melbourne Ring Cycle, the Society will not be offering any functions. The program for 2014 will be in the December 2013 Quarterly.	

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 \$20 a Member, and \$25 per non-Member, unless otherwise indicated.

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

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	Mike Day	0413 807 533
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	Nick Dorsch	0419 751 694
Public Officer	Alasdair Beck	9358 3922
Consultant	Roger Cruickshank	0414 553 282
Newsletter Editor	Terence Watson	80978 9797
Webmaster	John Studdert	wagner_nsw@optusnet.com.au

Alberich in Scene 3 was Hitler, and the Nibelungen were his soldiers. In general, the metaphors worked well, and it was a very engaging production. The orchestra was conducted throughout the cycle by 32-year old Cornelius Meister. The following three operas were directed by Viesturs Kairiņš, and lacked continuity and, sometimes, cohesion. The orchestra was consistently good, as were most of the singers, almost none of whom I had previously heard of. Deserving of special mention are Marcus Jupither as Alberich and Gunther, and Katrina Gerstenberger as Brünnhilde in *Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*. Roger Cruickshank's review of the cycle is included in this edition.

Most people have never heard of Longborough in the UK. Nor had I until I read Terry Clarke's rave review of last year's *Götterdämmerung* in our Newsletter. It was this which encouraged me to apply for tickets for this year's performance of the entire cycle, and I am so glad that I did. Terry and Julie's description of the event is contained elsewhere in this newsletter, so I will not repeat it here, except to say that it was a wonderful experience in every way. In particular, I must endorse what Terry and Julie said about Rachel Clarke's Brünnhilde. She was extraordinary. I think that we will be hearing a lot more about this young soprano.

The Ring in Bayreuth had very mixed responses from the audience. Musically it was generally extremely good. The orchestra, under the baton of Kirill Petrenko, was of a uniformly high standard, only exceeded by the same orchestra under the baton of Christian Thielemann in *The flying Dutchman*. Wotan was Wolfgang Koch, known to many of us as Alberich in the 2011 Hamburg Ring Cycle. He was good, but not as outstanding as I had expected after the Hamburg experience. Lance Ryan was Siegfried, and made it easily through to the end of the opera *Siegfried*, only to be booed when he made his curtain call – something which amazed me. His voice was flinty, but he did not deserve this! Catherine Foster was generally a very good Brünnhilde, although her lower registers almost disappeared in the earlier operas. She came into her own at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, when her voice rang out beautifully. It was just as well, because virtually nothing else was happening on stage at this time, when – according to the text – the existing world order was meant to be coming to a dramatic end. This takes me to the Frank Castorf production, which was by far the most controversial part of this Ring Cycle. This is not the place for an analysis of this extraordinary production. It was based on the proposition that oil is the modern form of gold, and is thus desired by all people in search of power. This makes some degree of sense, but in much of the cycle it was very difficult to discern any connection at all with oil. Nor, sometimes, with the original text. Nevertheless, I enjoyed much of the cycle, obviously a great deal more than most of the audience. The end of each opera was met with resounding boos from throughout the auditorium.

In addition to the Ring Cycle at Bayreuth, there were performances of *The flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Now is not the time to describe them, except

to say that – for the first time ever, to my knowledge – two of these operas were interposed between the major Ring operas. This meant that the total experience was almost too concentrated: instead of seven operas spread over nine evenings, we had seven operas in seven evenings. It also meant that the Ring journey was broken up, which I thought was a very great pity.

Back to matters directly relating to our Society. During the first six months of this year we received donations from 37 people, totalling \$4,545.00. I would like to express our deep thanks to all of them. During the same time we have committed ourselves to scholarships or sponsorships to the tune of \$22,700 (in addition to the \$41,000 paid to Opera Australia, which was subsidised by individual donations from members). This might sound as if we have exceeded our financial allotments, but in fact the Society is in a very healthy financial position, as the overall figures show. It is opportune to add here that the Wagner Society has, for the first time, awarded a prize to Rachel Bates in the 2013 Sydney Eisteddfod for a singer of Wagner works as part of the Society's fostering of local singers and Wagner performance. Our congratulations to Rachel, who has promised to perform for the Society in the future. The Society looks forward to being able to award a similar prize for Wagner singing in future Eisteddfods.

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An occasional column on aspects of the Society's History and Highlights

MELBOURNE RING PROGRESS REPORT: NEIL ARMFIELD IN CONVERSATION AT THE WAGNER SOCIETY SUNDAY 8 SEPTEMBER

by Leona Geeves & Terence Watson

To a packed house of 106 at the Goethe Institute on Sunday, iconic Australian theatre and opera director, Neil Armfield, outlined his plans for the Melbourne *Ring Cycle*.

He responded to questions from Wagner committee member, Colleen Chesterman, his former board colleague from Belvoir Theatre days. Neil touched on his career at Nimrod and Lighthouse theatres, as well as Associate Director of Company B. He has directed works by Patrick White, Shakespeare and David Hare amongst others. Neil also mentioned previous operas he had directed. He was first invited to direct opera in 1987; the scary *Turn of the Screw* with Eilene Hannan. He went on to direct more Benjamin Britten, such as the brilliant *Peter Grimes* (Opera Australia and Washington National Opera coproduction), *Turn of the Screw* and the Janacek cycle—Cunning Little Vixen, Makropoulos Affair, Káťa Kabanová and Jenůfa—as well as the wonderful *Tristan und Isolde* with Brian Thomson’s perspex set, and initially conducted by the late Stuart Challender.

It should be said that Neil has never seen a full Ring Cycle. He has seen *Die Walküre* many times, *Das Rheingold* a few times, but never *Siegfried* or *Götterdämmerung*. The invitation to direct The Ring Cycle started as another coproduction with Houston Grand Opera, one opera a year, but with the departure of HGO’s general director, Anthony Freud, their vision changed. OA decided to go alone with the four operas in one year.

Neil sees the main theme of the work the plundering of the earth’s resources to make the rich richer; conflagration and the rising of the waters, which is still happening in the 21st century. Neil considers the animals and wildlife mentioned in the Ring and he envisages a world museum of nature; an arc of civilisation with all the DNA of the animal world. He was influenced by a film, “Act of Killing” about warlords and the killing of endangered species, and of course there have been references in the press to taxidermy. But there won’t be a display of technology, such as appeared in the Met Ring. His designer is Robert Cousins, with whom he has previously collaborated, and his associate director is movement specialist, Kate Champion.

Neil is committed to giving us “...the best – by which I mean the deepest and richest – communication of the work that has ever been realised on the stage.” But Neil is on record as candid in his apprehension in staging this peak work of western culture: “I’ve been asked about it a number of times over the years, and I’ve always stood back from it a little. Maybe it was fear. But I think ostensibly it was a worry that it can be done for the wrong reasons, as a display of wealth itself.” As for the production itself, Neil is maintaining a strict “no comment” policy apart from saying the staging will be simple and the work set will be “nowhere other than a stage.” From other comments, it is apparent that Neil is aligning himself with other directors who have seen The Ring Cycle as, among many things, a parable about our impacts on our

environment: “It will be a contemporary story, he says: a tale about the destruction of the natural world, the extinction of the species, and what humans give up to pursue their desire for control. “But set against that, there is a sense of the human population as optimistic, a constant resource of variety and joy,” he says. This means, he says, that at the end of the work “There is a sense both musically and dramatically that this is a new dawning. Wagner himself saw his revolutionary work as a kind of social gesture that would help to clear away greed from which the human race might start again.”

Your Editor is reassured that Neil has the right perspective on this massive work, that of the intimate human scale that determines most of the narrative and emotional content: “The work is extremely intimate. Most of the time in the Ring is taken up with scenes between two or three characters. It’s a family story about dealing with destiny. About responsibility. About consequences. Big things are being negotiated, but if you don’t get those moments intimate and true, that’s when it becomes boring and declamatory.” He summed up his approach as “It’s a basic principal [sic] that you have to tell the story as though you were telling it for the very first time. It’s my job to reach into the work and help it to come to life.”

For the Society, Neil also put on record his extreme admiration of the technical demands placed on singers who have to be consummate actors as well, including the covers with whom he is working until the overseas singers arrive much later in the season; he is up to *Siegfried* at the moment. He responded to questions from the floor and shared some fascinating gossip from his time on *Tristan*.

Reference: “A singular vision: Director Neil Armfield on Wagner and his Ring Cycle” by Jennifer Williams at melbourneringcycle.com.au/about/behind_the_scenes/news/director_neil_armfield.

NEW MEMBERS

Dr John M O’Brien [1119], Dr Glynis Johns [1120], Mrs Rhonda Dalton [1121], Dr Rowena Cowley [1122], Mrs Ricky Davis [1123], Mr Kurt Looser [1124], Dr Lee Edwards-Crane [1125], Barbara and Andrew Dowe [1126], and Mr Ian Marsh [1127]

DONATIONS

No donations were received since the June-July Quarterly report.

THE RING AT LA SCALA JUNE 2013

by Liz Jacka, Colleen & Michael Chesterman & Lyn Longfoot

A sizable contingent from Australia, including a number of members of the Wagner Society in NSW attended La Scala's staging of the Ring Cycle in June. The production was the one already mounted at the Staatsoper in Berlin and was conducted by Daniel Barenboim, directed by Guy Cassiers with production design by the team of lighting director, Enrico Bagnoli and the Belgian video artists, Arjen Klerkx and Kurt D'Haeseleer. A controversial addition to the production concept was the choreography of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, which was seen in *Das Rheingold*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.

This brief report on the cycle has been compiled from the impressions of several members who attended the first cycle from June 18 to 22. Colleen Chesterman was impressed by the theatre itself and its recent restoration. Her observations were as follows. "Barenboim's Ring was an opportunity to spend a week in Milan, a city I had visited only for a day or so. And that was wonderful – splendid art galleries, interesting early Christian churches, great food, stylish window displays and shops, interesting villas. And la Scala itself is magnificent – a beautiful building which was extensively renovated from 2002-4 under leading architect Maria Botta. It was extraordinary to see the additions that were made to the historic building – including a huge fly-tower visible from the neighbouring streets, but the improvements are marked – seven flies can be held at a time, the huge backstage means sets can be stored, great doors at the back means trucks can deliver directly from the government-provided workshops at a disused steel factory at Ansaldo, the removal of carpets means that the sound is improved, the pit has been increased in size and there are back of seat surtitles in languages other than Italian. None of this has affected the romantic atmosphere in the tiers of boxes, the curving corridors, mirrors, and curtains, nor the splendid reception rooms. One felt great sadness at the limitations imposed by our wonderful Opera house! But –here are problems, which we experienced in a very well placed box diagonally below the Royal Box, which a Milan friend had organized. The boxes, seating six, have only two chairs with backs and there are only three surtitle monitors. There are real problems in sitting for the length of a Wagner opera! And the boxes designed to give their owners great privacy, also impose a real distance from the stage action. A great experience, but the stalls from now on!

The organization of the Festival was excellent, particularly for premium subscribers–welcome drinks and snacks, tours of the backstage, museum, boxes and a separate one of the Ansaldo workshops, 20,000 square metres of set design, carpentry and assembly, costume design, rehearsals. They store 60,000 stage costumes, and show historic ones and also have miniatures of sets, by Visconti, Zeffirelli and others. Visits to these can be booked separately. The Festival also included introductions to the operas and films such as Visconti's *Ludwig* and Tony Palmer's 8-hour *Wagner*."

There was general agreement that the quality of the orchestral playing was superb – with Barenboim conducting the Orchestra de Teatro alla Scala. However, most found Barenboim's tempi dangerously elongated, proving most damaging in the final opera of the set. Michael Chesterman describes the effect of the slow tempi: "I never thought I would find a lack of drama and tension in Barenboim's conducting of Wagner. But I did, particularly in the Immolation scene. At other times, I had liked his willingness to point up different phases of the score by slowing down the pace at appropriate times and allowing quite long pauses. But increasingly he overdid this form of expression. Or perhaps he and/or the orchestra had got tired. (Or I had.)"

There was much enthusiasm for the quality of the singing with the exception of the usually faultless Rene Pape, who played Wotan in *Die Walküre*. While tonally sure, he was strangely low-key, almost withdrawn, and thus the emotional impact of the usually highly moving third act of *Walküre* was dissipated. We were extremely impressed by the wonderful singing and acting of Terje Stenswold (due to sing Wotan in the Melbourne Ring) in the role of The Wanderer in *Siegfried*. There was also high praise for the Brünnhilde of Irene Theorin, the remarkable Waltraud Meier's singing of both Sieglinde and Waltraute in *Götterdämmerung*, and for the very moving Fricka of Ekaterina Gubanova. The difficult role of Siegfried was filled by two different singers, the not very vocally secure Lance Ryan in *Siegfried* and the much more assured Andreas Schager in *Götterdämmerung*. The other male roles of the Giants, Alberich, Mime, Loge, Gunther, Hunding and Hagen were as usual splendid.

The two most controversial aspects of the production were the production design and the introduction of extensive dance sequences. Another Wagner Society NSW member commented as follows on the production: "Huge waste of resources. No story, no message (I see the Ring Cycle as about exploitation at the very least, with the message that to advance at another's expense is no advance at all). The direction was at odds with the text often enough, let alone the music. It was a big disappointment. However it was abstract and visually interesting, enough, on a frame by frame basis, to be entertaining. But overall, despite some spectacular singing and playing, and undoubtedly spectacular images, any message was trapped in a series of musical and visual tableaux lacking the essential sense of inevitable self-inflicted downfall as a consequence of the original wrong – the rejection of love.

Guy Cassiers, the Belgium director, used the Jef Lambeaux (Belgium 1852-1908) marble bas-relief "Human Passions" as his template to build up his concept of the Ring, and I wonder if that is where he, and it, stalled. Because, like the bas-relief, static and sculptured is what the finished product seemed to me to be, a dissected and pulled apart jigsaw



(wikipedia)

reassembled over sixteen hours and, after enormous efforts at theatricality and display, ended up really having taken the audience anywhere.”

Most supported this view; however, my own thought was that, very far from being static, the visual design was ever-changing. While many of the video projections were based on the bas-relief they were put through a constant metamorphosis which ended up presenting more visual information than it was possible to assimilate. I saw the visual design often emulating the motivic structure of the music with visual elements being echoed and re-echoed in the way the score recalls musical symbols of the ring, the Rhine, the magic fire, the spear, the blood of blood brotherhood etc. When the visuals were not acting on this symbolic level they were quite wonderfully and delicately calling up images of the forest, the mountains, and so on.

Of the dancing Lyn Longfoot comments: “Excited by my first visit to La Scala and the prospect of seeing the Barenboim / Cassiers Ring, and eventually sorting out my box seating issues to my satisfaction, I settled back to enjoy *Das Rheingold*. It soon became evident that my appreciation and tolerance levels were going to be seriously challenged by the appearance of a number of extraordinarily supple and expressive dancers, cavorting like mobile sculptures around each other, the stage and particularly up close and personal with the vocalizing characters. I could only ask, ‘Why are they there, demanding so much of our attention?’ It was impossible to ignore their intrusive presence.”

My reflections on the role of the dancers included that they were providing the audience with the opportunity of experiencing a new and additional element on stage, of what could be described as ‘high art’ comparable to a live, fluid expression of classical Greek sculpture, as seen on friezes, buildings and sarcophagi. As the bodies writhed around in at times tormented movements, coming together to form and then unpack amazing tableaux, or taunting the singers, I could only see in them classical sculpture in movement. was echoed in the large frieze which appeared as a classical backdrop to sets, most effectively at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. The dancers were like characters from the Commedia dell’arte, featured in ceramics and etchings in the historic exhibits in La Scala’s museum, now practising their art once again in a contemporary setting. Expressive

in their movements and faces, which ranged from playfully mimicking, teasing and taunting, they challenged the characters to reveal greater depths to their inner turmoil and darker sides.

Would the Master have liked these dancers? If he wanted to challenge his audience to experience an even deeper engagement with what was happening on stage, I think he would have been OK with them. After all of the intellectual exercise of coming to grips with the dancers, it was somewhat of a relief to later see that they weren’t needed in the following three operas. For my part, I was more engaged with this production of *Das Rheingold*, than I have been with any other I’ve seen.” Others found the dancing gratuitous and observed that the dancers’ presence, especially in *Das Rheingold*, simply interrupted the communication between the singers and thus disrupted the dramatic and emotional flow of the work. Overall, as evident from the diversity of views outlined above, this production was stimulating and perhaps provocative, but ultimately artistically satisfying.

LISA GASTEEN – PREPARING FOR MAJOR WAGNER ROLES

by Leona Geeves

On August 11, Professor Lisa Gasteen spoke candidly to some 96 members of the Wagner Society at the Goethe Institute about her opera career (she was the first and only Australian to win the Cardiff Singer of the World Competition), her present concert career - she was appearing with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra singing Wagner’s *Wesendonck Lieder* under her mentor and friend Simone Young. Lisa also spoke about her latest “baby” as Professor of Opera at Queensland Conservatorium. She runs an annual Lisa Gasteen Summer School with such luminary mentors as Maestro Giovanni Reggioli, and Siegfried Jerusalem. Some of the singers she is fostering there have sung for or been helped in their studies by, the Sydney Wagner Society. Her comments and demonstrations about various conductors she has worked with were very funny. Many Members continued her discussion over afternoon tea.

While most Members will be familiar with Lisa’s career, it is worth recalling that her repertoire includes the principal female leads in such operas as *Tosca*, *Andrea Chenier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Electra*, *Salome*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. She has worked with such conductors as Simone Young, Antonio Pappano, Lorin Maazel, Kiril Petrenko, Sir Bernard Haitink, Sir Charles Mackerras, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Sebastian Weigle, Donald Runnicles, Franz Welser-Möst, James Levine, Zubin Mehta, Christof von Dohnanyi and Valery Gergiev. (As her webpage on the Griffith University website rightly notes “Lisa is greatly admired in the industry not only for her poignant voice and exemplary diction but also for her integrity as an artist and colleague, and the emotion she imbues in the characters she portrays.” Editor)

RING CYCLE IN RIGA, LATVIA 4 TO 9 JUNE 2013

by Roger Cruickshank

Das Rheingold, director Stefan Herheim. Premier of this production 21 April 2006, performed at the Riga Opera Festival on 4 June 2013; *Die Walküre*, director Viesturs Kairišs. Premier of this production 2 March 2007, performed at the Riga Opera Festival on 5 June 2013; *Siegfried*, director Viesturs Kairišs. Premier of this production 6 June 2008, performed at the Riga Opera Festival on 7 June 2013; *Götterdämmerung*, director Viesturs Kairišs. Premier of this production 2 March 2007, performed at the Riga Opera Festival on 9 June 2013.

Richard Wagner lived in Riga between June 1837 and July 1839, working as music director of the Stadttheater. It was here that he began work on *Rienzi*, and to commemorate this brush with fame the Riga Summer Opera Festival staged a single cycle of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, between 4 and 9 June 2013. Riga's unknown unknowns (a phrase for which we thank Donald Rumsfeld) made it irresistible for two friends and me, especially with the chance to see its Stefan Herheim *Rheingold*. We had to go.

First, the singers were outstanding. Drawn from the Latvian National Opera with stars from opera companies in Scandinavia, Russia and Germany, they sang with the strength and subtlety that comes from mastery of familiar material. Crowd favourite was the Mariinsky's Liubov Sokolova, who sang Erda (*Rheingold*, *Siegfried*), Rosswisse (*Walküre*), First Norn and Waltraute (*Götterdämmerung*). Ralf Lukas, the *Rheingold* Wotan, was born in Bayreuth, where he appeared in the recent Ring conducted by Christian Thielemann, and was a superb actor-singer, much appreciated by the audience. There were three Brünnhildes – German sopranos Katrin Gerstenberger (*Walküre*) and Sabine Passow (*Siegfried*), with English soprano Catherine Foster (*Götterdämmerung*), who sang all three roles in Bayreuth this year, to some acclaim. There was only one other Wotan-Wanderer, Latvian bass-baritone Egils Silinš, but amazingly he looked and sounded so different in *Walküre* and *Siegfried* that I took some convincing that the programs were right, and that they were both the same singer. His Wanderer was breathtaking. It's embarrassing to listen to such vocal riches having never heard of the singers before, and being unable to pronounce many of their names, let alone commit them to memory.

The Riga opera house auditorium is small, and therefore singers can fill the hall without strain, which may explain some of the streams of glorious unforced sound that seemed to come from all of the major roles.

The orchestra, on the other hand, often sounded under-rehearsed, and there were two major disasters in the big set-pieces. At the very outset, they failed to bring the *Rheingold* overture together. There were no surging waves, no creation of the world. Miraculously, there was so much happening on stage that this almost didn't matter, and once the singers entered everything seemed to come together. Hearing the worst *Rheingold* opening of your life doesn't fill you with confidence about the next 15 hours of playing, but remarkably while the bad was dire, the good was often very good indeed.

The second set-piece disaster was Forest Murmurs, which never really came together either. It was more like the Belanglo Forest Murders. Everyone has a bad day, muffs an entrance or hits a wrong note or phrase of wrong notes, but generally it's only one or two players who lose it, and such completely human mistakes are solved fairly quickly when everyone gets back in the groove. This mess lasted most of the set-piece, but as soon as Siegfried began to sing and fashion his reed into a pipe, everything came together and we were back on our journey.

The orchestra played right through each opera, without having relief players to take over after 2 or 3 hours as many orchestras do, and the strain of playing for long periods in an opera house pit without air conditioning wouldn't have helped.

This appears to have been the first complete Ring cycle for 33-year-old German-born conductor Cornelius Meister, and overall despite some glitches, it was an outstanding musical success. The orchestral playing for *Götterdämmerung*, the most recently produced of the cycle, was the stand-out, which suggested that the rehearsals and performances in 2011 were still fresh in the players' minds (and lips and fingers). I don't know who conducted that premier season.

The productions can be viewed as two separate groups – *Rheingold*, directed at its opening in 2006 by Stefan Herheim; and everything else directed at their openings in 2007, 8 and 11 by Latvian Viesturs Kairišs.

The *Rheingold* was a visual feast despite having little to do with Wagner's locations, text and plot. It was set on an over-stage, perhaps a metre above the real stage, built of planks running away from the audience, with fairly large gaps between some of them. During the overture, a Wagner body-double in silk jacket and large floppy green beret organises the three little maids from school, who are in dodgem cars with seats and school desks, running up and down the stage towards and away from the audience, spinning round and round, and having a great time without the possibility of collision. When these school girls settle down with their seats and desks at the front of the stage, facing towards a second curtained stage at the rear, Wagner writes in the air with his quill pen the words "Es war einmal..." ("Once upon a time...") which appear on the scrim curtain in front of the set, and as the girls are about to sing, Wagner leaves the stage.

The Alberich-Rheinmaiden scene is a schoolroom, with Alberich the school teacher, and how could you have a school without the teacher molesting the children? After Alberich has tried fiddling with the first two sisters and been rebuffed, he sets his heart on Flosshilde, and during their exchange I experienced my first X-rated Wagner Moment. While teacher-Alberich has his hand up school-girl-Flosshilde's skirt, and she has her hand down the front of his pants, Alberich is singing about the difficulty he has clambering over the moss-covered rocks at the bottom of the Rhein in his lust-filled pursuit, and

in Latvian and English the surtitles proclaim something about “slithering and slimy”. It nearly brought the house down. The three little maids then undress and morph into blue-sequined aquatic cabaret Andrews Sisters, who stand on the teacher’s desk and admonish Alberich. But what of the gold; and what is the gold? The curtains hiding the stage at the rear of the set then open to reveal a model of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. The roof opens, and out pops Alberich, who steals this “gold” by climbing back inside and closing the roof behind him, after which the model trundles back behind the curtains. Scene one is over, and you, gentle reader, are hoping that someone takes a sharp editing knife to the rest of this review, or else it will take longer to read than it would have taken to watch the whole production.

What of Scene 2 on the Grassy Knoll? Well, this opens with Wagner (or rather Wotan-Wagner) back on stage with his silk jacket and large floppy green beret. Yes, it wasn’t Wagner who was organising the Rheinmaidens during the overture, it was Wotan. How we laughed. With him on stage are the usual Gods, and 20 or so of his closest friends – Liszt, Nietzsche, Goethe, King Ludwig and swan, Freud, Schopenhauer, Bismarck, the Kaiser, blah blah blah. All blokes. There’s a grand piano on stage, and it bursts into flame when a portly Donner dressed as a Brown-Shirt leaps on top to sing his entrance. Froh is Goebels, and Fricka is Cosima, so that, when everyone tries to steal the gold religious icons with which the Gods ransom Freia, Cos takes a gigantic gold cross and tries to lug it Golgotha-wards across the stage, good little Catholic that she is. There’s also a couch on-stage, on which Freud and Nietzsche force poor Ludwig and his fake swan to lie down so they can pull out their notebooks and question him. Never an idle moment. Generally, these meaningless extras act out their parts without interfering with the text or music, although when they’re particularly impressed with something, they clap.

Then we descend into Nibelheim, and discover that Alberich is – you’ve guessed this already - Adolf Hitler. Nibelheim is like a concentration camp out of an Art Spiegelman *Maus* comic, with a giant swastika revolving like a windmill. And here we have one of the genuinely moving moments; the Nibelung hordes prostrate themselves on the stage, stretching out their arms, pleading with Wotan-Wagner and Loge to free them from Alberich’s accursed tyranny. It happened again when, after the Ring is stolen from Alberich, the horde was brought on stage to ransom Freia. Like the prisoners’ chorus from *Fidelio* but silent, this was so moving that it almost made the previous hour worth watching.

One unscheduled bonus occurred two hours into the performance, when in time to the music part of the vast glass chandelier that hovered above the patrons in the stalls exploded, showering glass on half-a-dozen or so surprised watchers. None of them left the auditorium, and instead remained in their chairs, nervously glancing upwards, holding tissues and handkerchiefs to their wounded heads and faces to stop the blood from interrupting their viewing pleasure.

There are a thousand other vignettes and moments involving the *Rheingold* cast you know, and the 20 extras you don’t, who became 40 when they changed into evening attire and

returned accompanied by their wives. Without his beloved swan and out of uniform, King Ludwig was alas just another unrecognisable extra. I believe that this fashion for covering the stage with meaningless extras has taken off in Europe, and common gossip has it that we will have up to a hundred meaningless extras on-stage in the Neil Armfield Ring in Melbourne. How lucky are we? Some of them will probably be in Speedos and called Tony. Or is that the lead float at the next Mardi Gras? And is there a difference? Cornelius Meister took this *Rheingold* at quite a clip, and although it was over in 2 hours and 15 minutes, the after-match discussions carried on much longer; but we must move on.

The second group of productions was directed by Latvian Viesturs Kairiņš – *Walküre*, *Rheingold* *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. After the bright lavish and frenetic activity of, these three presented a much darker world, seemingly on a much tighter budget, yet not without occasional humour and much humanity.

The highlights of these productions, a very subjective view, included Act 1 of *Götterdämmerung*, where the Hall of the Gibichung was replaced with a bedroom, almost completely filled by a giant bed, on which the three siblings romped in skimpy underwear. Gunther was a very large man, and what we all feared as he romped in the skimpiest attire came to pass – for no good reason, we saw him naked. Hagen had a hard time deciding whether he’d sleep with Gunther or Gutrune, but in the end Siegfried’s arrival, crashing through a large painting of trees and water on the wall above the bed-head, gave him something more interesting to think about. This bedroom setting may seem unconventional, but it worked amazingly well.

There were other entrances by crashing through things. When Siegfried, now in the form of Gunther by the magic of the tarnhelm, goes home to Brünnhilde, he arrives in their small one room dwelling by crashing out of a large analogue box TV. When Siegfried is standing in a derelict swimming pool with a washing machine to the side for no good reason, we know that someone will come crashing out of that as well – but I’m giving away the plot.

Siegfried is stabbed and killed by Gunther with a wire barbecue fork (on whose prongs sausages have been sizzling) in a scene set in a sauna, so that all the blokes get to be naked except for their white welcome towels. Few have any modesty left to protect, but we appreciate the gesture.

The Valkyries, who look like stunted bumble-bees, litter the stage of *Walküre* Act 3 with naked heroes, which provoked much doctrinal disputation; were they polystyrene fake naked men with their heads covered because it cost less to hire faceless bodies, or were they just thin extras with their heads covered out of embarrassment? There were claims that, like one of the male ballet dancers in Antony Ernst’s production of *Salome* here in Sydney, one of the naked men showed an alarmingly real physical reaction, but I didn’t have my binoculars so this little extra was lost on me.

When Hagen summons the vassals, he stands on a banquet table with a large horse’s head mounted on the tiled wall

behind him, which is the Siegfried swimming pool recycled. The bastards have killed Grane, and the wedding feast was probably horse meat.

Mime in *Siegfried* seems to follow Alberich's first vocation as a school-teacher, and the Act 1 setting is a bourgeois room with walls lined with books, which gives Siegfried something to burn to get the furnace hot enough to re-forged Notung. (Get it? Burning books, just like the Nazis. Very subtle.) One of my companions teased the cognoscenti by commenting, a little too loudly, that Mime "wasn't Jewish enough." The forging scene like most descended into a sort of mechanical Masterchef, with Siegfried whipping out the sword he'd forged earlier in the day at the crucial point. We weren't fooled. There was a giant TV screen, across which the same tedious message scrolled on and on for nearly an hour. Occasionally, the TV would burst into life, splutter, and then die, much to our relief. If you have a message, send a telegram.

The Catherine Foster *Götterdämmerung* Brünnhilde is rendered by the director as a flaxen-haired hippy in an American Indian outfit with tassels, who smokes dope, rolls a joint for Waltraute, fries eggs, and generally is very annoying and out of time and costume with everyone else on stage, until she frocks up in her wedding gown and things really start to go down-hill.

Siegfried's funeral is a magnificent Brezhnev-era scene, with massive wreaths with the hero's picture at their center, and the Gibichungs stolidly massed around the pyre. Here Foster takes command and becomes completely believable. By now, of course, the fact that she's singing about stout logs being piled up and no-one is taking any interest is no surprise, since the production has never followed the text. But somehow in the home stretch it no longer matters.

In spite of the occasional hiccup, and some questionable directorial decisions, the cycle is a triumph, which makes me wonder what it is about the Ring that makes it seemingly impossible to mount a bad cycle. Perhaps it's because professional artists and musicians will always ensure that the music, singing and staging are the best that they can be, within the constraints of the budget and director. If one of them falls over, most often these days the stage direction, the others will carry the work forward. In the end, two out of three ain't bad. We were told that this cycle would be repeated, possibly in 2014 or 15, but the English-language websites for events in Latvia don't mention it. If you're in the region and have a spare week, you could do far worse than spend it in Riga, sampling the local food and history, and putting another Ring Cycle under your belt. At least you now know some of the delights that await you.

THE LONGBOROUGH RING by Terry & Julie Clarke

I have written before about performances of Wagner's works in small private opera houses in the English countryside. For the past ten years Lizzie and Martin Graham have pursued the almost impossible dream of mounting a full Ring Cycle at their home in Longborough in the beautiful Cotswolds Hills west of Oxford.

The Opera Theatre was once a barn, which housed chickens amongst other animals, and has been converted to a 500 seat auditorium. The seats themselves were rescued from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden after the renovation there. The barn has been faced with an imposing façade and statues of Wagner, Verdi and Mozart adorn the roof.

This year, as is fitting, the dream became reality and in June and July three complete Rings were performed. A surprising number of members of the NSW Wagner Society, including the President, were present for the second cycle which proved to be an unforgettable experience.

The project under the musical direction of Anthony Negus and the direction of Alan Privett started with *Das Rheingold* in 2005 and the succeeding operas performed on a biannual basis so it has been meticulously prepared. The small size of the house dictates a reduced orchestra but nonetheless there were eighty players which made for a delicious sound without drowning out the singers. The direction was straightforward and sensible with single sets for each act. There were three black clad dancers who moved furniture and props around appropriately, acting somewhat like Norns.

But the joy was in the singing, particularly the Brünnhilde of Rachel Nichols. She sang *Götterdämmerung* in 2012, taking over from Alwyn Mellor's Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* in 2010. Mellor has moved on to more prestigious houses having been a sensation then but Nichols has a strength and clarity which appears effortless supported by her innate acting ability, she left the audience in awe. Anthony Negus nurtures these young performers and did not consider the now 38 year old taking on the role without consulting Dame Anne Evans, who is a great mentor. There were two Siegfrieds, the rather older Hugo Mallet was surpassed by another 38 year old in *Götterdämmerung*, Jonathan Stoughton. This was his first Siegfried, he looks just right, is a wonderful actor showing a maturity beyond his years in his portrayal of the role and his voice was a sensation. Two singers took double roles, Lee Bissett was a touching Sieglinde and a restrained Guttrune and Alison Kettlewell a furiously scorned Fricka in Act Two of *Die Walküre* and an anguished Waltraute in *Götterdämmerung*.

The performances started at 3 pm so there were long intervals where the predominantly formally dressed audience could picnic on the lawns and in marquees and admire the beauty of the rolling Cotswold countryside when the sun shone.

A truly remarkable experience then, made wholly memorable by the wonderful singing of Rachel Nicholls, who should surely be on the verge of an international career.

PARSIFAL - METROPOLITAN OPERA MARCH 2013 by Max Grubb

I attended the last three performances of a new production of Parsifal on 2, 5 and 8 March, 2013. The first performance on Saturday 2 was a live relay to the Ziegfield Cinema on W 53rd Street and the final two performances in the 'house'.

Production and set design by Canadians Francois Girard and Michael Levine respectively replaces the conservative and visually beautiful one by Otto Schenk first staged in 1991. The opera is set around the sanctuary of the Knights of the Holy Grail in the mythical location of Montsalvat somewhere in Spain during the Middle Ages., but the new production places the opera in an indeterminate time frame. The costumes of the men are black trousers and jackets with white shirts and the women white gowns. The only concession to medieval imagery is the golden Grail and the spears carried by the knights. The set design uses the latest visual technology for back projections, in particular swirling clouds in Acts 1 and 3 and changing images of the world. To some extent this production recalls images of some of the 'neo Bayreuth' productions of the Ring by Wieland Wagner in the 1950's and 1960's and that by Francesco Zambello for the 2011 Ring in San Francisco, whilst the changing images of the world owes much to space movies such as, 2001, Star Wars and Star Trek. What is old is new again - the wheel turns!! There are some stunning visual images: in Act 1 a brown arid stage bisected by a shallow gully which runs with blood, in Act 2 the blood red floor of Klingsor's castle, and finally Act 3 when Parsifal returns to a desolate Montsalvat where the stage looks like a dark monochrome Hieronymus Bosh painting.

Singing was of the highest order from a superb ensemble cast. In the title role German tenor Jonas Kaufmann was excellent, his vocal production thrilling with clarion tone trumpeting into the auditorium over the thundering orchestra as well as hushed pianissimo that one could hear throughout the house. Arguably he is the best heldentenor to grace the Met stage since Lawrence Melchior in the 1930's and 1940's, notwithstanding Jesse Thomas and James King in the 1960's and 1970's and Placido Domingo in late 1980's to 2009. Kaufmann certainly has an arresting stage presence. In Act 2, when the Flower Maidens ripped off his clothes, and Act 3, when Gurnemanz removes his shirt to cleanse his body, Kaufmann revealed a very trim, muscular body for a male opera singer in his mid-40's. You could hear the matrons in the house having an attack of the vapours.

Katarina Dalayaman played Kundry at the Saturday simulcast, Michaella Martens replaced her at Tuesday's performance, with Dalayaman returning for the final performance on Friday. Dalayaman was in excellent form on the Saturday and still seemed to be suffering from a cold on the Friday. Michaella Martens made an impressive debut in the role on the Tuesday, but her vocal production was not as smooth as that of Dalayaman and she tended to lunge for the top notes in Act 2. Rene Pape as Gurnemanz sang beautifully and with great authority, demonstrating his position as the leading German bass of his generation, although lighter in tone than his predecessors in this role, such as Gottlob Frick and Josef Greindl. Peter Mattei as Amfortas sang superbly and with great intensity and the assumption of this role was surprising as I have heard him previously only in Rossini and Mozart roles.

The evil Magician Klingsor was sung by the excellent Russian bass Evgeny Nikitin. Indeed, his portrayal was enhanced by the presence of tattoos on his arms, hands and neck and I thought this to be part of his 'schtick,' only to be told by the Canadian sitting next to me that his whole body was covered with them, including some with a Nazi swastika, which, when viewed in rehearsal at Bayreuth in 2011, led to his withdrawal from that house's production of *Der fliegende Holländer*.

The orchestra of some 120 players produced a beautiful luscious sound. The style of the music is almost liturgical with the use of bells, gongs and offstage and onstage chorus, whilst the pace is processional. These characteristics probably explain why the length of performances can vary between four and four and a half hours, some conductors, such as Wilhelm Furtwangler and Herbert von Karajan, erring on the faster pace, whilst James Levine, Danielle Gatti and Asher Fisch (the latter two who conducted the current offering) paced the music much more slowly - some four hours and forty minutes, plus two half hour intervals - making for a long afternoon and two long evenings.

The differences between seeing the opera as a high definition broadcast in the cinema and in the house itself can be best appreciated when seen consecutively in their respective locations. Most new productions at the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden, La Scala and the Paris Opera are designed with the intention of simulcast relays to cinemas and later release on DVD and Blu-Ray, and as such can recoup the outlays from lavish production and casting. The simulcast offers greater immediacy to the action in terms of close-ups to the singers, indeed sometimes too close. However, this reinforces the drama, but at the same time this is often at the expense of obtaining an overview of the stage.

For an opera house of the size of the Metropolitan Opera, with a seating capacity of just under 4000, the sight lines and acoustics are remarkable. However, the experience in the house still determines where you sit and what patrons are prepared to pay. In the house the best view of the stage is in the first twenty rows of the centre stalls (\$360 a seat), but the sound is slightly muted. The front of the Grand Tier (\$360 a seat) and Dress Circle (\$170 a seat) offer excellent views of the stage and superior sound in terms of balance between orchestra and singers, whilst the Front Balcony (\$100 a seat) offers even better sound, but is a long way from the stage. At the simulcast I noticed a slight harshness in the sound and have noticed this in other simulcasts here in Australia. On DVD and Blu-Ray however the sound is far superior to that experienced in the cinema and I look forwards to its release, particularly on Blu-Ray. The sound in the theatre is much warmer and nuanced and the impact of loud passages much greater, particularly in the entry of the Knights of the Holy Grail in Acts 1 and 3, where the sound was thrilling and almost blew one out of the theatre. To this extent the high definition broadcasts offer an alternative opera experience. However, at an average cost of \$29, the cinema offers great accessibility and affordability to the highest standards of performance for the public at large. At last count, the Metropolitan Operas were streamed into over 1800 cinemas throughout the world and the box office takings for Parsifal grossed \$1.6 million in North America alone (New York Times, 15/3/2013).

THE DUTCHMAN SEMINAR - 14 JULY 2013

by Terence Watson

The Seminar, organised primarily by the hard work of Vice-President Leona Geeves, was a great success; some fifty members and others arrived to hear a range of views about the work and Wagner at the time of its composition.

STEERSMAN

Dr David Larkin: Lecturer in Musicology, Sydney Conservatorium of Music. David Larkin is a lecturer in musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, specialising in nineteenth-century music. His research interests are centred on the works and aesthetics of Richard Strauss, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner; program music; the analysis of music; and issues such as originality, influence, and historiography. He is the author of several journal articles and book chapters, and his work has appeared in *The Musical Quarterly*, *Music and Letters*, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* and *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*. He is currently working on a study of the relationship between Liszt and Wagner.

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David's specialty is 19th century repertoire. His research centres on the works and aesthetics of Richard Strauss, Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner; program music; musical analysis; and influence and historiography.

CREW

Benedict Anderson: Australian-born Benedict works in architecture, film, dance, dramaturgy and scenography. He has designed for opera, ballet and contemporary dance and collaborated on projects with RIPE and independent choreographers. He has won prizes for his academic research design work (MA, study of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle and PhD, reconstruction practices, Berlin / Dresden). Benedict is Professor at the University Technology Sydney.

Colleen Chesterman, Vice-President: Colleen's career path has been varied, including teaching at both school and university level, publishing, Deputy Director of the Women's Coordination Unit, NSW Premier's Department, Director

of NSW Council of Social Service and Director of a national Executive Development program for Senior Women for the ATN universities. For ten years she also ran her own consultancy in Arts and Community Services and has been a board member of Company B Belvoir and Playworks.

Anthony Pasquill, Chorus Master: An instrumentalist by training, Anthony was head chorister at Lichfield Cathedral and studied at Leeds University and the University of North Texas. He works at The King's and Wenona Schools. Anthony is the Assistant Chorus master of the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and Musical Director of Bel a cappella.

Emilie Lemasson, Dramatic Soprano: Emilie was born in France, and studied voice and piano from an early age. She gained a Bachelor of Music and a Diploma of Opera at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and several Helpmann awards at the Conservatorium and Sydney Eisteddfod prizes. The Wagner Society sponsored Emilie for German course and expenses involved in attendance at Lisa Gasteen summer school last year. Since 2012, Emilie has been the principal soloist for "Vavachi." As well, Emilie sings with "Resonance," is a soloist for the Joubert singers and recently performed a concert of highlights from masses by Haydn, Mozart and Verdi.

Eugene Raggio, Bass: A singer, pianist, organist, composer and music director, Eugene graduated with Honours from the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide, giving recitals and touring with Co-Opera. He is now a student at the International Film School Sydney, as well as organist and assistant music director at St Peters, Surry Hills. His operatic credits include roles in *Die Fledermaus*, *Tosca*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *La Traviata*, *La Boheme*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *L'Orfeo*. He has also appeared in plays, musicals and films. He writes for stage and screen and was a recent quarter finalist in a screenplay competition in Hollywood.

Bradley Gilchrist, Accompanist: Bradley is a graduate of the Western Australian and Sydney conservatoria and the *Escuela Superior de Musica*, Madrid. Bradley worked as a ballet répétiteur in Korea and as accompanist and coach at the *Accademia Europea di Firenze*. As opera répétiteur, he has worked for several Australian opera companies and studied at the Lisa Gasteen Opera Summer School. Bradley was accompanist for the Society's 2013 concert, *Faeries & Vampyres*. He is in demand as a freelance accompanist and répétiteur in Sydney, specialising in vocal repertoire.

In his talk "The Dutchman and Wagner's First Maturity," David Larkin gave us a focussed and critical overview of the opera, as well as critiquing some of Wagner's claims about the work and his intentions in creating it. David drew our attention to some of the stylistic differences between the immediately preceding work *Rienzi*, as well as what became the *Faust* overture, which complicates the picture Wagner later tried to paint of the utter originality of the *Dutchman*. What *Dutchman* was important for, as Wagner claimed, was

a demonstration that he had turned his back on history as the subject matter and was now interested in saga and its musical form as the basis for his work; the ballad is the heart of the work and reflects Senta's increasingly emotional state. David suggested that Wagner was re-writing the history of his composition of the work when he suggested in his 1852 *A Communication to my Friends* that he had "unconsciously laid out the thematic germ...instinctively over the whole drama." David highlighted for us some of the traditional elements – the Daland and Dutchman duet in Act 1, the Spinning Chorus in Act 2 and Erik's cavatina in Act 3 – and the "progressive" elements – the Dutchman's Act 1 monologue, Erik's dream in Act 3 as more episodic, less predictable and less structured. Wagner claimed in the above essay that "I had completely learnt the speech of Music: I was at home with it as with a genuine mother tongue [...]it stood ready at my call. However, as David has shown us, we need to take such claims with a grain of salt, since the next two operas also contain admixtures of traditional and "progressive" music.

Following David's illuminating and witty introduction to the whole work and its context, Benedict Anderson, in his talk entitled "The Scenography of Inner and Outer Worlds: Landscape within the characterisation of people and the representation of place," told us of his development of a set design for a production of *The Ring Cycle* that drew on WW2 and post-war experiences of Berlin, including after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to create a design that would reflect that history as well as the new Berlin that is still being built, as an analysis of and comment on the identity of the new Berlin. (Anyone who has been to Berlin recently will know what Benedict means, as the entire museum island and the old palace site is one huge building site - Editor.) Benedict was also influenced in his design by the bunkers of Normandy and the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden.

This wide range of stimulations gave rise to the notion of a design whose elements would be built on sand into and out of which the set could rise and fall. The set elements would be derived from distinctive modern and traditional architectural element (such as the V-shaped concrete supports for an office block and the shelves at Dresden holding the remains of the Frauenkirche). To illustrate what his design might look like if constructed for a production, Anderson had created a short stop-frame video showing how the set would be built up from the elements and then taken apart in the reverse movement of the film, to give a sense of the rise and fall of civilisations. He also wanted to move well away from the kind of didactic sets that productions of *The Ring Cycle* often use and focus more on architectural and scenographic elements that would suggest in an allegorical way, but not dictate, political, historical, landscape and cultural ideas.

Colleen Chesterman, in her talk "Strong Nordic Lass or Dangerous Dreamer: Changes in the representation of Senta," built on the review that she wrote for the *March Quarterly* (2/129) about a number of books dealing with "Wagner's Women" by analysing Wagner's heroines from a feminist and musicological perspective. For example, Senta is consistently characterised by the use of the "womanly" sounding cor anglais and oboe in the overture. While Daland talks to Senta

as if she were still a child, her ballad reveals that she is very sensuous, with its wild cries and big vocal leaps. One of the authors, Nila Parly, points out that Senta intervenes in her own ballad with an "explosion" of her own emotional state and aspirations.

Colleen also drew attention to the many changes that Wagner made to the original score, especially in 1860, to bring it into line with the ending of *Tristan und Isolde* and its concept of transfiguration. Colleen also briefly looked at the differences between post-war east and west German approaches to Wagner productions, with Wieland Wagner attempting to de-Nazify his grandfather by focussing on a more naturalistic approach, while in the east his works were interpreted along more socialist-realist line, often by such anti-Wagnerians as Bertold Brecht.

The final presentation was given by Anthony Pasquill, Assistant Chorus Master for the Philharmonia Choir, who were to be the chorus of sailors and townsfolk for the Sydney Symphony's concert performance under conductor-designate David Robertson. In his talk, "Conducting the Chorus: Page to Stage," Anthony gave a witty and lucid account of how he and Chorus Master Brett Weymark, and Nico Castel, were preparing the male and female choruses for "the bloody big sing" that is the *Dutchman*. Anthony noted that Wagner was very precise about the rhythms he wanted from both the chorus and orchestra and so a large part of the preparation was to hone the chorus's rhythmic accuracy.

Anthony also noted that one of the challenges for a concert performance of an opera was to both help the audience see the work, but not to interfere too much with their own imaginative construction of the work as they heard it. He hinted that the audience would get some help in the performance. [Your Editor was delighted and amused to see the male townsmen attempting to dance while drunk, while the women on the other side of the orchestra laughed at them. Your Editor also thought that Robertson's suggestion that the Dutch sailors use megaphones (of rolled black cardboard) to give their voices additional projection and changed timbre was effective.]

Eugene tackled for us one of the most demanding of Wagner's early attempts to break out of the mould of either French Grand Opera or Italian *bel canto* with *Die Frist ist um* and many of us wondered why he was not being used by opera companies around the country as he brought the appropriate *gravitas* to the role with a rich, resonant bass. Emilie gave us *Senta's Dream* that reminded us of the power of Wagner's writing at this early stage, but also delighted us with Emilie's beautiful voice and engaging characterisation of this demanding set piece aria. As always, Bradley accompanied the singers with the sensitivity and musicality that many Members have already come to appreciate through his previous performances for the Wagner Society. The musical contributions to the seminar meant that attendees had a much more rounded appreciation of Wagner's "break-through" work than if we had merely had the talks. Our thanks to the presenters, singers and to the organisers for a valuable preparation for enjoying even more the Sydney Symphony's tremendous performance of the work on the following weekend.

DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER - SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA 20 AND 22 JULY by Terence Watson

For *Limelight* magazine, Clive Paget entitled his review of this concert performance by (unwittingly no doubt) continuing Leona Gieves' metaphor for the Wagner Society Seminar: "David Robertson and a world-class crew bring the Dutchman triumphantly into port." Paget, like your Editor, had much praise for this venture into Wagnerian waters: "this was an evening of unadulterated triumph from start to finish."

Paget effectively conveyed the impact of the back projections designed to complement the surge and crash of the musical storm and emotional tides of the work: "To enhance the experience the SOH Concert Hall stage was surmounted by two enormous sails upon which were projected the impressively detailed work of American video artist S Katy Tucker. Strong, dynamic imagery held the attention without ever detracting from the singers. From the start of the overture ominous, treacherous water crashed over the brooding face of the Dutchman before slowing for the Senta theme (a reverie [sic] in passionate [sic] reds and golds). At other times we saw black rain, grey seas, blood in the water and a host of other powerful effects, but nearly always those dark, soulful eyes."

Your Editor also agreed with all of Paget's assessments of the singers – especially the Senta of Irish soprano Orla Boylan (easily the equal if not better than the other two Sentas your Editor has heard this year (Anja Kempe in Stuttgart and Ricarda Merbeth in Hamburg). The heroic bass of Estonian Ain Anger as Daland gave the character a nobility he probably doesn't deserve, while the British John Daszak's Erik was a little strained in his upper register. The Australian mezzo Sally-Anne Russell gave a fine vocal portrayal of Mary, a not particularly interesting or attractive character, while Canadian tenor John Tessier brought a bright, focussed tone to this role. However, your Editor differs from Paget (along with a number of people with whom your Editor compared notes after the two performances) in finding the star attraction, the charismatic Alberich from the Metropolitan Opera's current Ring Cycle, Eric Owens, to be the surprising weak link in the otherwise powerful cable of vocal power. I thought initially that it was a result of his placement in the middle of the orchestra, but then so were the other singers, and other auditors found that, from a number of vantage points in the Opera House concert hall, his voice simply didn't project, leaving your Editor wondering just what Senta might see/hear in this Dutchman.

Given Anthony Pasquill's account of the intense preparation of the Sydney Philharmonia Chorus during the *Dutchman* seminar, it was not surprising that the chorus brought off Wagner's complex demands of them so well, but a source of delight and appreciation for their commitment and energy. Similarly, the Orchestra itself seemed to have spruced itself up and be on its best behaviour for its new boss and responded to David Robertson's mercurial changes of tempi

and dynamics with élan and clean, precise playing. As Paget also notes, Robertson showed his extensive operatic conducting experience in controlling the orchestra to support the singers, but allowing it to speed with full sail through the orchestral interludes.

Given this electrifying performance of Wagner's "break-through" opera, tickets for 2014's concert performance of Strauss's *Elektra* will undoubtedly sell very quickly.

SWORDS & WINTERSTORMS: AUGUST 2013, MOSMAN ART GALLERY

David Corcoran began singing in 2002, and then moved to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, with coaching at Covent Garden and the English National Opera. He won the McDonald's Aria Competition and the Opera Foundation Australia (OFA) Italian Award, giving him performances in *The Elixir of Love* in Europe. David's Opera Australia performances include *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, *Peter Grimes*, *La fanciulla del West*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Of Mice and Men*, *For the Love of a Nightingale*, *Turandot*, *Die tote Stadt*, *Salome*, and the world premiere of Brett Dean's *Bliss*. David was supported in German lessons by the Wagner Society in NSW. He is understudying Siegmund in the Melbourne Ring to perform that role in Act 1 of *Die Walküre* with Harbour City Opera, also assisted by The Wagner Society.

Tamworth-born Amanda Windred studied at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, and then moved to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, performing in *Lenfant et les Sorciers*, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *L'Orfeo*, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, *Il Campanello di Notte*, *Albert Herring*, *Tamerlano*, *Les Malheurs d'Orphée* and *Trouble in Tahiti*. She has also performed in *La rencontre imprévue*, and the world premiere of Anne Boyd's *Daisy Bates* at Ooldea. She also workshoped George Palmer's *Cloudstreet*, *the Opera*. In 2012, supported in part by the Wagner Society in NSW, Amanda attended the Lisa Gasteen National Opera Summer School, working with Lisa, Siegfried Jerusalem, and Giovanni Reggioli. Later this year, Amanda will perform in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Information about Bradley Gilchrist's biography is included in the report on the *Dutchman* seminar above.

The well-balanced program included both arias from *Die Walküre* ("*Winterstürme*" ("Winter storms") and "Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater..." ("My father promised me a sword...")) and lieder: Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder" and Mahler's "Five Ruckert Lieder," and "Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen" ("Songs of a Wayfarer").



SWAN LINES

An occasional column on aspects of the Society's History and Highlights

The Society's logo was designed by Michel Arnould during the Foundation meeting on 26 October 1985.

IN MEMORIAM: JOSEPH FERFOGLIA by Roger Cruickshank

I heard third-hand, a few months ago, that Joseph Ferfaglia had died. I met Joseph and his second wife, Judy, through the Wagner Society, and we became good friends in a period late in their lives, before the slow descent into old age shut them off from the world. I thought I should gather together some of the fragments I recall of Joseph (and Judy), in a vaguely chronological order, so that they weren't lost, at least for a little while.

Joseph was born on 31 March, around 1923 (as best I can work out), in Trieste, a heritage of which he was intensely proud. Trieste was the Mediterranean port for the Austro-Hungarian empire, and during the Great War, Joseph's father had been a driver for the German imperial army; a photo of his liveried father standing next to an extraordinary motor vehicle hung on their wall. Between wars, the family ran a delicatessen, and from an early age Joseph enjoyed the best of food from his region.

As Joseph told it, when the German army occupied Trieste in WW2, they assumed its people would be natural allies, but their fierce nationalism outweighed their Austro-Hungarian heritage. Joseph was caught up in anti-German activity, captured, and sentenced to be deported to a labour camp. Joseph was being escorted across the great marble concourse of the Trieste railway station by a young German soldier. Both were 18, and they talked to each other in German. Suddenly, the soldier looked at Joseph and said "Run!" and Joseph did, not looking back, not knowing if he would be shot while escaping, far into the hills and mountains surrounding Trieste, where he remained in hiding until the end of the war. When he returned home, Joseph found that many members of his family had been deported and died in labour camps, mainly from starvation in the closing days of the war.

Trieste had an opera house perhaps second in importance to La Scala in that part of the world, and when he joined the payroll section of the Trieste police, Joseph was able to attend concerts and operas almost every night, resplendent in his dress uniform, and to experience first-hand what he came to see as the close of a golden age of European music and culture. Trieste was now under the control of Italy, which Joseph saw as a betrayal, a perverse reward to Italy for siding with Hitler.

He decided to leave, and around 1955 boarded a boat for Sydney where he found work as an accountant. According to the Wagner Society's membership records, Joseph and Judy joined on 20 March 1981, Members number 45. After he retired, he and Judy built a home in Leura, incorporating green building techniques which were almost unknown at the time, such as passive solar heating from a large concrete slab extending well beyond the northern side of the house, which helped conduct heat to warm the marble floors in every room. He had brought a little Trieste to Leura.



Judy and Joseph at the Opera house for the farewell concert for Maestro Cillario, on 23 March 2003

Like many Society members, he and Judy met and became friends with the dynamic Olive Coonan, and Joseph audited the accounts in the 90s while she was treasurer. Olive would stay in their Leura home and look after it while they were holidaying overseas, and she nominated Joseph as an honorary life member of the Society, in recognition of his many services. He was devastated when Olive was found to have committed a substantial fraud over many years while in various positions in the Society, and realised that the records he had audited had all been forgeries. He never fully recovered from her betrayal of his trust and friendship.

Around this difficult time we became close friends, and I enjoyed Judy and Joseph's generous hospitality over many weekends in Leura. Joseph was an avid and excellent photographer, and Judy a careful diarist, and I enjoyed many happy slide evenings with them, as they showed the pictures of their European trips, including to Trieste, Cremona, and the Dolomites, all meticulously catalogued and beautifully presented. The secret to a peaceful slide evening was to control the slide advance mechanism, and to moderate the occasional disputes when the memory of the photographer and the evidence of the diarist differed.

Whenever I visited, we took long walks in the bush, or through the streets of Leura. As Joseph's hearing diminished, he found that the best way to communicate was to stand directly in front of you and watch your lips carefully, which made telephone calls a waste of time, and frequently brought our walks to a halt. I think he had a hearing aid, but preferred not to use it. Stubbornness was another of his virtues.

Joseph found modern opera productions generally not to his taste, and was forthright in his views. He also thought that there was a decline in the standard of opera singing at the highest level, and often recalled the singers he had heard at the Trieste opera. Joseph and the Argentinian conductor Carlo Felice Cillario met in Australia, became friends, and corresponded until Cillario's death in 2007. According to

Joseph, Cillario shared many of his views on the standards of signing and productions.

When Judy and Joseph realised that their health no longer allowed them to live comfortably without care, they moved to a retirement village in Waitara, where I last visited them in 2006. As their health declined, they postponed visits until they were able to make lunch and once again offer their warm and generous hospitality. Those days, sadly, never returned.

Joseph had a son by his first wife. His son married and left Sydney, after which he had no contact with his father. Over 30 years later, now living alone on the Central Coast and dying of cancer, Joseph's son asked mutual friends to contact his father

and they were reunited; Joseph was able to visit him daily until his son passed away.

Joseph possessed the best values and traditions of a European. He was warm, generous and passionate in his friendships and his life, and in his love of music and Wagner; he shared these passions with anyone who would listen. Leaving behind the events and the aftermath of the war, he created a new life enriching his new country with the values and culture of the old. He passed away in his 90th year, and is survived by his wife, Judy, whom I'm told has now moved to a retirement home back in the Blue Mountains. His was a hard life honourably lived, and I am proud that, for some of that life, he called me his friend.

NO! WAHNFRIED HASN'T BEEN BOMBED AGAIN by Terence Watson

Prior to his recent visit to Bayreuth, your Editor had been warned not to be shocked or dismayed to see Wahnfried looking as if more bombs had hit it. I wasn't, though, prepared for the scale of the "damage." However, numerous placards around Wagner's largely inaccessible last home attest that it will rise from the rubble a gloriously enhanced phoenix. Apart from renovations to the interior of the house (described in one of the information placards as "the constructive-technical renovation"), there is to be built a very large museum and exhibition space on the right hand side of the house as one approaches the statue of Ludwig II, (described as "the new construction of the museum as an outwardly visible expression of forward-looking creation," but also, it would seem, creating space under the statue – as far as I could work out for the Wagner Archives:

The placard also contains a plea for sponsorship: "within the scope of the respective personal interests and at the same time to become involved for the complete project." The City of Bayreuth and the Richard Wagner Foundation "have set the goal of developing an up-to-date, information and a culturally high-quality museum. The common mission of communicating the cultural-historical knowledge for the visualization of our cultural roots, our cultural identity and with that of a joining public spirit so always will follow Richard Wagner's forward-looking request: 'Kids, make something new!'" The Wagner Museum website also calls for sponsorship in return for a "Patronage Certificate:"

Website Intermezzo reports that "The first step has been taken with the signing of a financing agreement for 30 million euros, most of which will come from public funds." The German

government, for one, has announced plans to invest €500,000 in the project. According to a report for the New York Times' Arts Beat by Dave Itzkoff, the money is coming "from an economic stimulus package for improving infrastructure. Also according to Herr Friedrich, "all the functional buildings on the Villa Wahnfried property that are not contemporaneous to Wagner's time or listed for historical preservation are being torn down. In the spring, the excavation pit for the new building and the storage facility in the forecourt will be dug out." Rather optimistically, the new museum was scheduled to open for Wagner Year 2013. Indeed, on 26 July 2013, the cornerstone was laid for the extension of the Richard-Wagner-Museum. The scale of the project has resulted in the extension of the completion date to 2021, with building works to be interrupted each summer for the festival.

In addition to these renovations, the front of the Festspielhaus was clothed in a fabric image of itself behind which some apparently unspecified renovation work was being undertaken – at least, I could not find a sign explaining the situation. However, according to web reports, the German federal government has committed to help fund the current renovations of the Festspielhaus (with 10 million euros).

http://intermezzo.typepad.com/intermezzo/2013/09/bayreuth-builders-in-till-2021.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+typepad%2FjLm+n+%28Intermezzo%29

http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/germany-to-renovate-wagners-bayreuth-villa/?_r=0
www.dreso.com/en/company/news/detail/aktuell/neubau-des-richard-wagner-museums-bayreuth/



Artist's impression of new museum for Wahnfried, Bayreuth



Excavation in front of Villa Wahnfried – possibly for the Archives

ADDRESS

Please note our permanent address for all correspondence:

The Wagner Society in New South Wales Inc
GPO Box 4574 SYDNEY NSW 2001

Telephone: 9360 9822 (Jane Matthews, President)

Website: www.wagner.org.au | Website enquiries: wagner_nsw@optusnet.com.au

(All website addresses used in this Newsletter are reproduced in the PDF version of the newsletter on the Wagner Society's website in the relevant article - Members Area)

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The cafe attached to Sappho serves great coffee and wine and snacks.

BRANGAYNE OF ORANGE VINEYARD

Brangayne of Orange has kindly agreed to offer Members a 10% discount if they purchase any of their wines. Please call and order by phone and mention your membership of the Wagner Society.



Eugene Raggio, Emilie Lemasson, Leona Geeves (Vice President) and Bradley Gilchrist at the *Dutchman* Seminar



Wagner and his beloved Robber

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY FUNCTIONS

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