

# Maximise

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# Wagner's music

Newsletter No. 122, August - September 2011

## WAGNER 2013 BICENTENARY DONATION APPEAL

see page 4 and inside back cover

### ADVANCE NOTICE: 25 March 2012

Richard Mills, Conductor, Melbourne Ring Cycle, and Ms Maureen Wheeler, donor to the Ring Cycle, to talk with the Wagner Society - see President's Letter below.

## President's Report

Welcome to the third newsletter for 2011.

Much has been happening since the last newsletter. The first and most significant development is that the Society has a new patron. Simone Young has graciously agreed to accept this position. Ms. Young, as most of you will know, is now

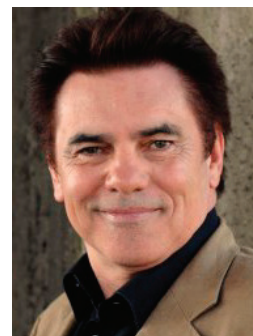


Ms Simone Young AM - successor to Sir Charles Mackerras as the Patron of the Wagner Society in NSW. Photo: Berthold Fabricius

General Manager and Music Director of the Hamburg State Opera. Many of us were in Hamburg earlier this year when Ms Young conducted an exciting Ring Cycle. Some people had reservations about the production, but I think we all agreed that it was an orchestral triumph. Ms. Young, who still has close family ties in New South Wales, has established a momentous international reputation as a Wagnerian conductor. Details of her illustrious career are set out elsewhere in this newsletter. We are extremely fortunate

that she has agreed to become our patron.

Also since the last newsletter was the filming of the Metro-politan Opera *Die Walküre* at the Dendy, Orpheum and Verona cinemas. The attendances on each occasion were very high. It is not for me to review the opera here. I had already seen it in the flesh in New York, and had generally loved it. My principal reservation related to the hazardous nature of the sets. In the performance I saw, Deborah Voigt, as Brünnhilde,



Lyndon Terracini: Artistic Director of Opera Australia – talking to the Wagner Society at the 16 October function – see President's Letter on page 3.

**PRESIDENT'S REPORT continued p.3** ►

### NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

Letter from the President	P1
Wagner 2013 Bicentenary Donation Appeal	P3
Simone Young AM – Wagner Society In NSW's New Patron	P4
(S)He's Too Fat – Letter to the Editor from Katie French	P5
San Francisco Ring Cycle (Cycle 2) - Max Grubb	P6
A Triumphant 'Ring' for San Francisco - Katie French	P8
Glyndebourne: Wagnerian Epic in an English Idyll	P10
MELBOURNE RING 2013 – Who's Who and Doing What – Robert Cousins Production Designer)	P11
Director of Bayreuth's 2013 Ring Cycle Will Be: Frank Castorf – Or Will He????	P12
Wagner 2013 Bicentenary Donation Form	P15

#### PATRON:

#### HONORARY LIFE MEMBERS:

Simone Young AM  
Prof Michael Ewans  
Mr Richard King  
Mr Horst Hoffman  
Mr Joseph Ferfaglia

## For Your **Diary**

2011		
3 & 4 December	<i>Siegfried</i> – part 3 of the New York Metropolitan Opera's new Ring Cycle	Chauvel, Paddington Hayden Orpheum, Cremorne, Dendy Opera Quays (TBC)
2012		
25 March	–Richard Mills, Conductor, Melbourne Ring Cycle, and Ms Maureen Wheeler, donor to the Ring Cycle, to talk with the Wagner Society about the Ring Cycle	2PM Goethe Institut
Monday, 4 June (6:30PM)	<i>Siegfried Idyll</i> – Richard Gill in the Sydney Symphony's <i>Discovery</i> program	Sydney Opera House
Thursday, 9 (1:30PM), Friday 10 August (8PM) Saturday, August 11 (2PM)	Wagner under the Sails: The Opening Gala Revisited – Simone Young conducts the Sydney Symphony with Soprano Christine Brewer in excerpts from <i>Die Meistersinger</i> , <i>Tannhäuser</i> , <i>Tristan und Isolde</i> , and <i>Götterdämmerung</i>	Sydney Opera House
2013		
Nov - Dec 2013	The Ring Cycle - Melbourne - three cycles ##	Melbourne Opera Theatre

## Opera Australia has started publicising Ring activities on its website and in its 2012 subscription brochure. If you go to the website [www.opera-australia.org.au/whatson/ring\\_cycle](http://www.opera-australia.org.au/whatson/ring_cycle), at the bottom of the page there's a section titled "Register for more information". If you click on the highlighted text "Opera Australia Ticket Services" you will create an email so that you can send OA your contact details, and receive more information about the Melbourne Ring as it is released. We should all consider registering with OA to show our support for the cycle.

## Meetings **Dates** & Coming **Events**

DATE	EVENTS - 2011	TIME & LOCATION
18 September	Reports from those members who attended Bayreuth 2011, and those who attended the San Francisco Ring. DVD at 1230: Part 1 of Wagner's early opera, <i>Rienzi. Or the Last Tribune</i> . Deutsche Oper 2010 Berlin. Conductor: Sebastian Lang-Lessing. Title role: Torsten Kerl. (Combined Acts 1 and 2 - 91 minutes.) **	Goethe-Institut - 2pm
16 October	<b>Special Attraction:</b> Lyndon Terracini, Artistic Director, Opera Australia –the Melbourne Ring Cycle. DVD at 1230: Part 2 of Wagner's early opera, <i>Rienzi. Or the Last Tribune</i> . Deutsche Oper 2010 Berlin. Conductor: Sebastian Lang-Lessing. Title role: Torsten Kerl. (Combined Acts 3,4,5 - 64 minutes.)**	Goethe-Institut - 2pm
20 November	Christmas Party – please bring a plate. Competitions and Raffles: great prizes to be won! Sale of books and memorabilia donated by Janet Wayland. 2.00PM Preceding DVD <i>The Three Divas</i> : interviews with Martha Modl, Birgit Nilsson and Astrid Varnay about their Bayreuth careers. Festivities start at 3:00PM	Goethe-Institut - 2pm
	<b>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: <a href="http://www.wagner.org.au">www.wagner.org.au</a>.</b>	
<b>Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)</b>		

### \*\*Brilliant introduction to 'Rienzi' – Katie French

Members who plan to see the DVD screening of Deutsche Oper Berlin's new production of 'Rienzi' at the meeting on 18 September, should ensure they arrive in plenty of time to view the Overture. In an astoundingly theatrical setting, supported by huge 'Leni Riefenstahl'- style photographs which look like the view from Hitler's Berchtesgaden, Rienzi constructs his grandiose political vision, spurred on by Wagner's stirring Overture. Members who have viewed 'The Mad Square' exhibition focussing on the artists of the Weimar Republic, presently showing at the Art Gallery of NSW, will clearly see the inspiration those artworks provided for the sets, the costumes, and the mood for Deutsche Oper's production. Don't miss either the start of the screening, or the stunning exhibition, 'The Mad Square'.



## President's Report continued

slipped and fell over when she made her first entrance. She recovered herself quickly, but she and other performers were visibly apprehensive while they were walking on the set – an apprehension which was shared by many members of the audience. To return to the Sydney screenings, those of you who attended one of them will probably have seen a member of your Committee at the entrance, handing out Society flyers. We, the Committee, decided that these screenings provided a unique opportunity to extend our membership by informing potential Wagner enthusiasts about the existence and the activities of the Society. A flyer was printed at very short notice, and was handed out to patrons at each of the screenings. As you will see from elsewhere in this newsletter, there has been a significant recent increase in our membership, and I think that much of this is attributable to this initiative. You will see us again at the screenings of Siegfried later this year!

We are in the process of organising some very exciting events for forthcoming Society functions. The two which bear special mention relate to our functions on 16 October this year, and 25 March 2012. For the 16 October function, Lyndon Terracini, the Artistic Director of Opera Australia, has agreed to come and talk about the 2013 Melbourne Ring Cycle, and the numerous initiatives which Opera Australia will be mounting in association with the Ring. I anticipate that our discussions with Lyndon will be both wide-ranging and focused (if that is not a contradiction in terms). He has said that he will be happy to take questions from the floor. So I encourage all of you to come and participate in this significant event.

On 25 March next year, we are extremely fortunate to have secured the attendance of two people who are central to the Melbourne Ring Cycle: Maureen Wheeler and Richard Mills. Richard Mills, as you will know, is to be the conductor. He conducted the Australian Youth Orchestra in a spell-binding concert performance of Tristan and Isolde in Brisbane a few years ago, which thoroughly established his credentials as a Wagnerian conductor. Maureen Wheeler's story is an extraordinary one. I am not going to spoil it by telling it here. But as you will hear next March, the fact that we are to have a Ring Cycle in Melbourne at all is essentially because of this one person's initiative, drive and generosity.

I am writing this letter from an extremely hot Florence. Today it is a relatively mild 33 degrees. A few days ago it was 41. And this is on a latitude which would lie a little to the north of Hobart, if it were transposed it to the south. I arrived two days ago, after a week in Bayreuth. This is a non-Ring year, which means that they performed five of the six mature operas: *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan*, *Mastersinger* and *Parsifal*. As always, it was an extraordinary experience to be there. The next Society function, on 18 September, features a report-back by members who were there this year, so I will leave it to them to describe the individual performances. Suffice it for me to say that the days of traditional productions at Bayreuth seem to be well behind us, at least for the moment; but that the musical standards remain extremely high.

## Wagner 2013 Bicentenary Donation Appeal

2013 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Richard Wagner and will be a significant international musical occasion. The Wagner Society hopes to pledge major support for the 2013 Wagner Bicentenary Celebrations. To achieve this, we have set up a 'Wagner 2013 Fund' and we need your support to help make this possible.

Making a donation to the 'Wagner 2013 Fund' will ensure the Society's contributions to the celebrations will be world class. We are considering a number of possible exciting projects. One of them involves supporting a major international artist participating in Opera Australia's Ring performances in November and December 2013. We will also continue to promote the life and works of Richard Wagner through performances and events in Sydney.

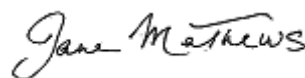
Donations are fully tax-deductible and can be made by cheque or money order by direct debit; details of the Society's bank account and postal address are given below.

### BANK DETAILS

Westpac Banking Corporation,  
Paddington NSW Branch  
Account Name: The Wagner Society  
BSB: 032040  
Account Number: 911323

Our postal address is:  
GPO Box 4574  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Thank you for considering this request for support - any donation to the Wagner Society's 'Wagner 2013 Fund' will make a difference.



The Hon Jane Mathews AO  
President  
Wagner Society in New South Wales

**THE DONATION FORM IS PRINTED ON THE INSIDE BACK COVER OF THE NEWSLETTER**

or can be downloaded at the Society's Website:

[www.wagner.org.au/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=84&Itemid=68](http://www.wagner.org.au/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=84&Itemid=68)



## Simone Young AM - Wagner Society in NSW's New Patron

It is some years since we last celebrated Simone Young's career in our Newsletter. With her acceptance of the position as our new Patron, to succeed the late Sir Charles Mackerras OBE we have a wonderful opportunity to review how her career is progressing.

Our new patron was recently awarded the 2011 Sir Bernard Heinze Memorial Award for her "outstanding contribution to music in Australia."

The award is presented annually by the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) Friends. In the press release on the occasion, the Conservatorium Director Professor Gary McPherson is reported as saying: "Over the past two decades, working with premier opera companies and prestigious symphony orchestras in Australia and internationally, Simone Young has reinforced her reputation as one of the leading conductors of her generation.

According to the University's press release, the award honours the memory of Sir Bernard Heinze (1894-1982), Ormond Professor of Music at the University for 31 years and one of the major pioneers of orchestral musical life in Australia. It includes a commemorative medal and monetary prize.

In August 2005 Ms Young took up the post of General Manager and Music Director of the Hamburg State Opera, Music Director of the Hamburg Philharmonic and has already celebrated many outstanding successes including the Hamburg Ring Cycle, *Simon Boccanegra*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Mathis der Maler*, *Salome*, *Palestrina*, the recent Australian opera *Bliss* and *Daphne*. Approximately 200 Australians attended the Hamburg State Opera's recent Ring Cycle, bringing home enthusiastic comments about the orchestral playing, the high standard of singing, including by Australians Stuart Skelton and Deborah Humble, and generally positive comments about the production.

Ms Young was Music Director of Opera Australia from 2001 to 2003, Chief Conductor of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra from 1999 to 2002 and among others has conducted the Berlin, Vienna, Munich, London and New York Philharmonic Orchestras, the Staatskapelle Dresden and the Bruckner Orchestra, Linz, and, notably assisted Daniel Barenboim at the Bayreuth Festspiele.

Ms Young was elected to the Akademie der Künste in Hamburg, nominated 'Conductor of the Year' by Opernwelt Magazine and awarded a Professorship at the Musikhochschule in Hamburg. She has received Honorary Doctorates from Monash University and the University of NSW, and has been honoured with the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from France. She was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 2004 and in 2005 received the prestigious Goethe Institute Medal.

In Harriet Cunningham's 6, August 2011 article, *Coming home*, for the Sydney Morning Herald, Ms Young comments: "We are musicians by nature and gypsies by necessity". From the perspective of the local Members of the Wagner Society in NSW, we must hope that Ms Young is able to overcome the distance between Australia and

Europe where she is based: "'There is no place on Earth I would rather live than Sydney,' Young says on the phone from Hamburg, where she holds the dual positions of chief executive and artistic director of Hamburg's symphony orchestra and opera company. 'It's where I was born, it's the most extraordinarily beautiful city.'"

Cunningham summarised Ms Young's early career: "Before Hamburg, before Opera Australia, Young did the hard yards, working as assistant to James Conlon at Cologne Opera, then as assistant to the great pianist-turned-conductor Daniel Barenboim, at Paris and Bayreuth. She soon earned enough of a reputation to secure engagements with high-profile orchestras in Berlin, London, New York, Paris and beyond." "Young was 7½ months pregnant with Lucy when she conducted the legendary Vienna Philharmonic, a notoriously conservative band that had, up until then, resolutely declined to hire women musicians (with the exception of the harpist). Young is now one of its regular guest conductors."

Cunningham reports that "A high-profile music commentator and author of *The Maestro Myth*, Norman Lebrecht, describes her as one of the leaders in her field and a contender for the next big music director vacancy - he tosses around names such as Berlin, Covent Garden and the Met."

Cunningham pointedly asked Ms Young: "should there be more opportunities for home-grown conductors such as, say, Alexander Briger?" "[Ms Young] laughs drily. 'I think there should be at least one Australian [state] orchestra led by an Australian conductor ... because we risk losing these people. But the reality of the financial situation in this country is the state orchestras and state opera companies are all out there competing for the sponsorship dollar, the marketing interest and the media interest and it's easier to sell the story of somebody coming from somewhere glamorous than somebody you've seen grow up at the Conservatorium.'"

In the ABC's program, *Mornings with Margaret Throsby*, on Wednesday 24 August 2011, Ms Young was Ms Throsby's guest. Ms Throsby recounted the story of the potentially discouraging comments about the unacceptability of her gender to members of the orchestra of the Cologne Opera who voted against her appointment as a house conductor, because of the "stature" of the Opera. Fortunately, many orchestras – opera and ballet as well as symphonic – have taken another view of her talents.

Ms Young's latest visit to Sydney is to participate in the Australian World Orchestra's inaugural four-day festival which brought together Australian players from as far afield as Vancouver, Stuttgart, Tokyo, Vienna and New York, as well as all the state orchestras and four members of the Australian Youth Orchestra. Cunningham's describes the orchestra as: "...a sort of Wallabies of classical music, made of the pick of Australian musicians working here and internationally. It is the creation of Australian conductor Alexander Briger and his sister, Gabrielle Thompson, who have spent the past two years assembling the musicians and finding the money for their dream team." In another connection with our late Patron, Ms



Cunningham wrote: "The four-concert series is dedicated to Briger's uncle, the legendary Sir Charles Mackerras, who was planning to conduct one of the concerts before his death last year." On Throsby's program, Ms Young revealed that, coincidentally, the orchestra will be playing from the edition used at a concert by Sir Charles Mackerras.

At the Opera House, Simone Young conducted the first concert on August 26, featuring the Prelude and Venusberg Music from Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*, Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony and Peter Sculthorpe's *Earth Cry*, with didgeridoo soloist William Barton. Your Editor was fortunate to attend the dress rehearsal for this concert and was impressed not only with quality of the playing and ensemble from this "scratch" orchestra, but also with the sheer enjoyment and freedom in conducting that Ms Young brought to the performance. [EDITOR]

For the whole press release from the Melbourne University, please go to <http://newsroom.melbourne.edu/news/n-593>.

Listen to the full interview on the ABC: <http://www.abc.net.au/classic/throsby/stories/s3300091.htm>.

Ms Cunningham's article is at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/coming-home-20110804-1ic5y.html>.

For more information about the Australian World Orchestra, see [australianworldorchestra.com.au](http://australianworldorchestra.com.au).

## New Members

The following people joined the Society:

Helen Halley [1007], Elizabeth George and Dietmar Tucha [1008], Nicola and Amelia Simpson [1009], Elisa Clarke Wadham [1010], David Whitehouse [1011], Andrew and Lesley Rosenberg [1012], Linda English [1013], Robert Mitchell [1014], Lachlan Astle and Neil Matthews [1015], David and Diana Bryant [1016], Neil Wilson [1017], Robert McDougall [1018], Juliet Lockhart [1019], Trevor Parkin [1020], David and Christine Hartgill [1021], Claus and Luise Diessel [1022], Antony and Sally Jeffrey [1023], Richard Toltz and Doreen Toltz [1024], John Tuckey [1025], Garry Tipping [1026], Tony and Rosalind Strong [1027], Margaret Greathead [1028], Peter Anet and Christine Hanson [1029], Peter Craswell [1030], Bob and Helena Carr [1031], Jenny McDougall [1032], Robyn Pogmore [1033], Jenny Edwards [1034], Michael and Judy Edgeloe [1035], Raymond and Beverley Hollings [1036], M Goodwin and R Duels [1037], Nicole Berger [1038], and Kay Vernon [1039].

## (S)He's Too Fat – Letter to the Editor from Katie French

Has the curtain finally come down on the singing fat lady? According to Lyndon Terracini, Artistic Director of Opera Australia, maybe it's time.

Terracini stirred up the old argument in a recent cover story for Spectrum (Sydney Morning Herald, July 2-3, 2011), and it's an argument which becomes more pertinent now that major international opera companies are going into film as a means of expanding the audiences for opera.

Terracini's argument was that movie Directors cast actors who look right for their roles, as well as being great actors. This enables them to convey totally believable performances. 'That's what I'd like in opera: for people to be fabulous singers, look wonderful and be completely and totally absorbed in their character.' In a reference which clearly relates to the large mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe who, in the Met's recent production of *Die Walküre*, presents a formidable figure riding the stage in a rams'-headed, motorized buggy from which she sang, Terracini said, 'If you can't get off the seat, if you've got to sit on a rock all night, who believes that?'

Deborah Voigt, the singer who played Brünnhilde in the same Met *Die Walküre*, had previously had to confront the 'too fat' issue when, in 2004, she was asked by Covent Garden to stand down from singing the title role in Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*, because she 'didn't fit the design concept' which included 'a little black dress'.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Ms Voigt, journalist Michael White asked readers whether opera had become ruled not only by directors, but by audience members, who increasingly believed that opera's success lay in seeing and hearing and believing.

And the men don't get off lightly in the argument about whether singers can be too fat to perform. An ever-increasingly large Ben Heppner, self-described as the 'fat kid with a bad haircut', recently announced his withdrawal from performances in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* in the Met's current 'Ring' Cycle pleading that the notoriously demanding role of Siegfried 'was just not the right repertoire for him'. This was despite the Wall Street Journal's description of his past performances of the role as 'a near-perfect Siegfried'. Were recurring voice problems the only reason for his withdrawal?

Perhaps renowned Wagner singer, Sir John Tomlinson, should have the last word. In a response in White's *Telegraph* interview he stated, 'To get through a long night of Wagner you have to be fit. It's like running a marathon, and if you're not in good condition, you won't reach the end of *Die Walküre* or *Parsifal*.'

So, Members, what are your thoughts on this touchy issue? Does anyone have a DVD of the Met's 2001 performance of *Tristan and Isolde* with James Levine conducting, and starring Ben Heppner and Jane Eagelen, two formidably large singers with astounding voices? What are your views on the performances of these two super-sized singers? Does Lyndon Terracini have a point? Send your responses to the Editor.

Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Michael White, The Telegraph, (UK), 17 August, 2009, 'Do sexy opera singers sound the swansong for the fat lady?'



# San Francisco Ring Cycle (Cycle 2)

- Max Grubb

The west coast of the United States has been alive to the sound of Wagner's Ring over the last three summers with respective productions at Seattle (2009), Los Angeles (2010) and San Francisco (2011). Having attended all productions, I think it is worth drawing some brief comparisons. Simon Wandsworth's Seattle production, termed the 'Green Ring,' was "inspired by the natural beauties of the forests and mountains of the Pacific Northwest", Achim Freyer's, dubbed the 'Star Wars' Ring, stressed 'timelessness' evoking futuristic images, using hand-held batons to simulate lasers and geometric images of circles, lines and spirals on a steeply raked rotating disc to evoke another time and place. By contrast, Francesco Zambello's San Francisco Ring is termed the 'American Ring.' It encompasses the whole American continent and unfolds in chronological sequence commencing with the Californian 'Gold Rushes' of the 1850's and concluding with the end of the twentieth century. There is much to like in this production. The text in the surtitles is updated to reflect contemporary American vernacular and there is extensive use of moving back projections, particularly in the orchestral preludes, to set the geographical context, not dissimilar to those used in the 2007/2008 Valencia Ring staged by La Fura Dels Baus, but without the acrobatics.

## Das Rheingold

The first half of the opera is set at the time of the 'Gold Rushes' and the second in the 1920's or 1930's. Alberich is a 'miner 49er', the giants Fasolt and Fafner miners labourers demanding payment of their wages (specified in their contract to be goddess Freia), Wotan as a duplicitous CEO seeking to break the contract for the construction of Valhalla and who employs Loge as a 'hot shot' lawyer to find loopholes in it. In the latter half, the gods Donner and Froh are depicted as spoilt preppy college brats with their Ivy League monogrammed blazers. The gods enter Valhalla drinking champagne as they walk up the gangplank, which is raised, leaving the Rhinemaidens at its foot as creditors, waiting for the return of their gold.

The singing overall was very good, but with some reservations. Outstanding singing from Stephen Magrit as Loge, but Mark Delavan as Wotan lacked the mellifluous tone and power of Bryn Terfel at the Met earlier this year and Greer Grimsley in Seattle, and, whilst stretched, rose to the occasion in the final scene. Elizabeth Bishop as Fricka was similarly lightweight, lacking the vocal heft that Stephanie Blythe brought to this role in Seattle and the Met. As Alberich, Gordon Hawkins sang well, but needed a much darker voice.

## Die Walküre

Iconographic images of the American landscape using moving aerial shots of mountains, canyons, deserts and forests were projected during the preludes to the three Acts. Act 1 is set in a woodsman's hut amongst Californian redwood forests, Act 2 Scene 1, Valhalla is

a corporate boardroom looking out over New York in the 1930's, which is represented in the form of a silver gelatin photographic image, and Scene 2 is set under a derelict freeway, which is a dumping ground for old cars. I doubt that freeways were built prior to the national freeway building programs initiated by the Eisenhower administration in the 1950's, let alone there being derelict ones at the time. However, it probably serves as a metaphor for the announcement by Brünnhilde of Siegfried's imminent death. In Act 3 the Valkyries drop as parachute troopers into a valley near Valhalla.

The stars of the evening were American tenor Brandon Jovanovich as Siegmund, Nina Stemme as Brünnhilde, followed by Anja Kampe as Sieglinde. Jovanovich is making the transition from lyric to heldentenor. He produced fullbodied singing with a ringing top, good legato and wonderful soft singing. This is a voice to watch and his career appears to be following a similar trajectory to that of Jonas Kaufmann. Nina Stemme making her debut in this production as Brünnhilde arrived in Act 2 looking like Queensland Premier Anna Bligh taking charge of flood relief after the February floods. She produced a good top C for the battlecry and the often omitted trill, producing fullbodied warm tones in the following scenes with Siegmund and Wotan. She is probably the best exponent of this role at the moment, and her singing reminded me of that of the young Astrid Varnay, a Swedish predecessor, as heard in recordings made in the mid 1950's, particularly the Keilberth Ring from Bayreuth in 1955. Anje Kampe gave an impassioned performance as Sieglinde, particularly in Act 3. She continues to improve in this role since I heard her in this role at Los Angeles last year. Elizabeth Bishop sang a powerful Fricka and was a great improvement from her essay of this role in *Rheingold*. As Wotan, Mark Delavan gave a creditable performance, but, as in *Rheingold* was overparted for the role and tired in Act 3. Similarly, the Australian bass Daniel Sumegi disappointed as Fafner in *Rheingold* and, as Hunding, continued to disappoint - the voice was not there.

## Siegfried

The orchestral preludes were accompanied by projection of 1950's images of America during the 1950's, beginning with the forests in Act 1 and Acts 2 and 3 taking us with the Wanderer (Wotan) in search of Siegfried on a railway journey with a diesel-hauled locomotive carrying timber milled from the forests, past factories, some of which were abandoned, and power plants connected to the electric grid. In Act 1, Mime's cottage is a plywood caravan parked amongst the redwoods and Act 2 is set in an abandoned factory littered with disused car tyres, car seats and oil drums. The giant Fafner is encased in a robotic machine that leaks oil.

American tenor, Jay Hunter Morris, in the title role looked like a middle aged Tab Hunter



and sang valiantly He moved, acted and sang very well, although the forging scene was transposed down a semitone and sang G's instead of high A's and there was no top C in the Act 3 duet with Brünnhilde. Ah where are the Wagnerian tenors with the vocal heft of a Lauritz Melchior, Wolfgang Windgassen or Jesse Thomas? As Brünnhilde, Nina Stemme again demonstrated why she is probably the best exponent of this role. She successfully negotiated the high tessitura of the Act 3 awakening scene and the final duet hitting all the top notes rising to a climatic top C. One, however, misses the power, precision and laser like projection Birgit Nilsson brought to this role in the 1962 Solti Decca Ring and the 1967 Bohm Bayreuth Ring - will we ever hear the likes of her again? As the Wanderer, Mark Delavan soldiered on. His is a very good voice whose quality is readily apparent in the soft passages, but is swamped by the orchestral climaxes, particularly at the beginning of Act 3. One wishes to hear voices of the amplitude of Hans Hotter, George London or even Theo Adam and Thomas Stewart. Hopefully Bryn Terfel will rectify this situation at the Met later this year. As Mime, David Cangelosi was the surprise of the evening. Possessing a large voice, he sang, acted and moved well. His performance was a 'tour de force'. Gordon Hawkins as Alberich sang much better than in *Rheingold* because the role lies higher and he was not required to plummet to the vocal depths of the bass register that the role requires in that opera. Daniel Sumegi as Fafner sang much better than in his previous outings as Froh and Hunding. Perhaps he had a bad patch singing those roles on consecutive evenings. Ronnita Miller as Erda had a distressing wobble that remained as apparent in *Siegfried* as it did in *Rheingold*.

### Götterdämmerung

The critique of American development depicted by the despoliation of the natural landscape, along with urban and industrial and indeed now moral decay, shifts to the 1980's and 1990's. In Act 1, the Norns weaving the rope of fate, are depicted as laying cables connected to a giant computer. The Hall of the Gibichungs is the grey foyer of a large office, with views of oil refineries, Gutrunne in Act 2 is portrayed as the hapless Anna Nicole with long red dress and blonde hair; Hagen's offiders are Navy Seals carrying assault rifles. In Act 3 the Rhinemaidens pick up plastic bottles from the river amongst discarded car tyres. The Immolation Scene contains photos of American soldiers killed in the Civil War, World Wars 1 and 2 and current engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nina Stemme again gave a powerhouse performance as Brünnhilde, with phenomenal vocal power and heft, hitting all the top notes with accuracy. Particular highlights were the denunciation scene in Act 2 and the Immolation Scene in Act 3. People I spoke to were of the view that she is the best Brünnhilde since Birgit Nilsson's last essays of this role in the 1970's and particularly since her appearances in the 1972 San Francisco Ring. It was worth attending this cycle just to hear this remarkable performance. It is a pity she is not singing this role in the complete

staging of the new Metropolitan Opera Ring next year. Ian Storey as Siegfried gave an excellent performance, a little wooden in acting, but a lovely burnished tone, baritone in quality, with good top notes, although no top C in the Act 1 duet. As is recent practice, it appears that many opera companies are now casting different tenors for the role of Siegfried in Ring productions - they are doing it at the Met next year. It appears that the current crop of heldentenors is unable or unwilling to sing both roles in the same production. This practice would have been unthinkable in the past, but, given the increasing frequency of Ring performances, there are simply not enough tenors to go round. In the role of Gutrunne, Melissa Citro failed to impress in this ungrateful role and Andrea Silvestrelli as Hagen had a rather rough voice and mellifluent and resonant tone. However, one suspects both these artists may be at the beginning of what could be major careers.

Overall, throughout the cycle the orchestral playing under Donald Runnicles was very good. There were a number of rough passages, particularly in *Siegfried* Act 3. I could be mistaken, but I noticed that there appeared to be some form of sound enhancement coming from concealed speakers on either sides of the Grand Tier. However, like the orchestras of Los Angeles and to a less extent Seattle, the orchestra is no match for the likes of the Metropolitan Orchestra under James Levine and the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra under Christian Thielemann for power, warmth and precision.

## Donations

The Society welcomes all donations and they can be addressed to the Treasurer, Wagner Society in NSW Inc, at the Society's GPO Box address shown on the back page of this Newsletter. Such donations help us to carry out our objective "to promote the music of Richard Wagner and to encourage a wider appreciation of the significance of his achievements." Donations are tax-deductible and receipts will be issued.

The following onations have been received since February 2011:

Sybil Baer, Carole Bailey, Douglas Barry, Marie Bashir, John Casey, Ann Casimir, Julie and Terry Clarke, Catherine Davies, June Donsworth, Brian Ducker, Allan B Freeman, Ingrid Garofali, Richard Gastineau-Hills, Irvine Hunter, Andrew Kaldor, John Kaldor, Julie King, Richard King, Anna-Lisa Klettenberg, Charles Manning, Dennis Mather and John Studdert, Pam and Ian McGaw, Neville Mercer, Walter Norris, Diana-Rose Orr, Dagmar Pysik and Richard Button, Kenneth Reed, Robyn Richards, Patricia and Roy Hodson, Douglas Sturkey, Terence Watson, Ann Weeden, Margaret Whitlam, Deanne Whittleston and Anthony Gregg.



# A Triumphant ‘Ring’ For San Francisco

- Review By Committee Member, Katie French

The San Francisco ‘Ring’ Cycle is most certainly a triumph. It is not just a triumph for Director Francesca Zambello, but for all who clearly worked as a team on this splendid project – glorious, confident singers (for many of whom this was their first ‘Ring’); the tireless Conductor Donald Runnicles, who was clearly inspirational for his musicians; Set Designer Michael Yeagan and Costume Designer Catherine Zuber, whose concepts, when brought to fruition, allowed performers to be at ease on stage in a created world which they clearly felt enhanced their roles; and Lighting and Projection Designers who used today’s constantly developing technologies to intensify the understanding and appeal of Wagner’s masterwork.

Director Zambello’s work is relevant, understandable and appealing. In achieving this she has not resorted to the comfortable familiarity of a traditional interpretation, nor has she sacrificed a heartfelt agenda of well-thought-out themes which she was clearly determined to achieve. Those themes, emerging continually over the four operas, are Wagner’s own timeless themes of the quest for power; corruption; the power of love; the destruction of Nature; and the plight of the powerless.

Zambello’s success lies partly in the fact that she plays out these themes in a landscape with which the majority of her audience is familiar – she calls this the first ‘American’ Ring, as she progresses through stages in that country’s history, assessing the implications of ‘the American dream’. Hence, *Das Rheingold* opens during the Californian goldrush, with Alberich a ‘forty-niner’ searching the Rhine for gold. *Die Walküre* depicts a dapper Wotan as an industrial titan like a Hearst or a Getty, in a boardroom overlooking an empire of skyscrapers. The world of Hunding and Sieglinde is a backwoods, depression world of personal militias and brutal misogyny. Counterbalancing this is the vibrant sky-world of the Valkyries, the technologically exhilarating world of a leather-clad Amelia Earhart or Amy Johnson. In *Siegfried*, Mime and Siegfried live the life of the transient homeless – in a caravan, surrounded by rubbish, under a desolate freeway. *Götterdämmerung* sees the Norns as computer technicians, operating behind a front scrim of a circuit board, while the Gibichungs reside in the penthouse of a sterile contemporary world of glass and steel, high above their polluting chemical plant.

Zambello’s success also lies in the fact that, grand in scale though her themes may be, with the ‘landscape’ familiar to the audience, she has been able to focus on her characters and their stories, and take advantage of, and heighten, the many small and intimate scenes within the operas to create a touching and personal relevance to the lives of audience members.

With spectacular ‘To jo to ho’, Brünnhilde makes her first appearance as a young, loving daughter, bursting with

enthusiasm. In Zambello’s production, she bounds onto Wotan’s board-table, grasps his spear, then confidently leaps onto his back. To much hilarity (and loud audience applause), the two ‘gallop’ off the stage. This wonderful scene makes so much more pertinent her emotional struggle as she listens to the father she adores confess his corruption, his reputation crumbling before her eyes. It makes so clear why the selfless love of Siegmund for Sieglinde would affect her so deeply, and explains her motivation in assisting Siegfried.

Sieglinde, too, emerges as never before. Zambello presents a strong feminist agenda, and is clearly aware of how women can be physically humiliated and psychologically abused. Hunding’s offensive misogynistic treatment of his wife in front of Siegmund, his groping of her breasts and bruising of her arms, heightens both audience and Siegmund’s awareness of her entrapment as a chattel in a loveless marriage. She and Siegmund share that sense of being outcasts, and it seems so natural for two such damaged people to yearn to come together.

Fricka, so frequently depicted simply as a scolding wife, is also encouraged to develop as a more rounded character. Initially, a somewhat dowdy, flighty, gold-bedazzled wife, in this production, she maintains a rather touchingly affectionate relationship with Wotan, who holds her in his arms and gently waltzes with her at one stage to charm her from her anger. When next she is seen, her opulent clothing, with its excess of feathers and silks, tells the story of a woman who has taken solace for Wotan’s infidelities in self-indulgence. For a childless goddess, having to kowtow to another goddess’s children sired by Wotan is one thing; having to kowtow to the ‘bastard child’ of a human is another. Her now-deliberate stride, her mimicry of Wotan’s reading the paper to ignore her, reveals a determined new sense of knowledge and power. After the agreement to kill Siegmund is negotiated, and she puts her arms around Wotan, only to be brusquely pushed aside, we see how this power has been gained at the expense of love. Her standing on an overhead expressway in the goddess’s full legal robes, her sprinkling the now-fulfilled fragments of the contract down on the body of the dead Siegmund in front of the enraged Wotan, speak so eloquently of the icy end of a fraught relationship – and indeed, add to Wotan’s unbounded rage towards Brünnhilde.

Both sets and lighting also work with characters to tell stories in this production. Stunning video back projections depict wild waters thundering down mountain gorges, great clouds of spume are contained within a front scrim, and a bridge provides a playground for three of the most delightfully coy, blonde and ringletted Rhinemaidens. Clad in frilly white corsets and lacy petticoats from a bygone era, they are the epitome of





Nature itself in its most pristine, unspoilt and innocent state. Such an uncommonly pretty opening.

Nibelheim is a complete hell-hole contrast, with savage red-gold lighting emerging through an iron-grated floor, a blood-red rear wall, up which stunted rag-clad children struggle and dig with bare hands, and a huge Alberich whose gross, lightning-quick movements instill screaming terror. His abuse of power, and the danger of his curse, are accentuated by the explosion of the whole stage in projections of a massive petrol conflagration.

In *Götterdämmerung*, the video projections are gone, and the Rhine, now a river created out of plastic bottles flowing through a gorge of plywood cutout silhouettes, is presided over by Rhinemaiden 'bag ladies', with torn and filthy clothes and matted hair, collecting rubbish.

The production uses video projections through all overtures and entr'actes. On only one occasion did they seem superfluous – in the first scene of *Die Walküre* when surely that raging, racing music and the thundering of Wotan's storm, create enough of a 'visual' and emotional impression. Anticipating that the projections might not be popular with traditionalists, the Projection Designer's solution was short and sweet: 'Just shut your eyes!'

The performances of the singers were remarkable, and for many of them, this was their first 'Ring'. The vocal and physical interplay between Mark Delavan, as Wotan, and both Brünnhilde and Fricka was delightful and tender to the point of being heart-breaking in the first case, and both charmingly deceptive and freezingly vicious in the second. Gordon Hawkins, as Alberich, the largest dwarf in the world, had a terrifying stage presence and a voice to match. Jay Hunter Morris, who shared the role of Siegfried with Ian Storey, gave a wonderfully nuanced performance, growing indefatigably from monstrous, petulant child to charming and infatuated lover.

The amount of action taking place on the stage was dazzling, and all undertaken quite fearlessly whilst people were singing. Valkyries whooped as they thundered up the twenty stairs of their fortress in their leather flying suits, helmets and goggles. (Daveda Karanas, who sang Wotraute in both last year's and this production, proudly proclaimed that she had lost 85lbs in last year's production alone, and was still counting!) Mime leapt in maniacal fury and did frantic cartwheels, while singing, on top of the roof of his caravan. Nina Stemme was audacious in her leaping across the battlements, and the running, teasing foreplay with Siegfried, over and around the set, was just exhilarating for both them and the audience.

However, it must be said that, in a company of champions, it was Nina Stemme who out-starred them all. Her effortless development from a vivacious young girl whose vibrant enthusiasm rang out in her voice, to an enlightened woman, her voice suffused with gravitas, totally fearless in her self-sacrifice to restore the natural order, was simply awe inspiring. Professor Hans Rudolph Veget, who many Members of the Wagner Society will know from his series of lectures

at Bayreuth, stated: 'Vocally, Nina Stemme is now in a league with the great Birgit Nilsson. In her acting and her delivery of the German text, she is in a league of her own.' Amongst Wagner aficionados, those are fighting words!

And not to forget the music: in one of the many Seminars accompanying the 'Ring' Cycle, Gordon Hawkins declared that Donald Runnicles was like an artist with 175 different colours in his pencil box, and he would strive to achieve that perfect shade for any singer and any instrument. He and the production team received deafening applause from both audience and cast at the end of the Cycle.

It is perhaps churlish at this stage to mention the only unfortunate moment in the production: the ending. It is an all-female ending, with the black clad Gibichung women, carrying portraits of their 'hero' sons and husbands, who help build up the wood for the immolation scene. They are assisted by the Rhinemaidens, and Guttrune (absolved from guilt by Brünnhilde). After Brünnhilde has descended into the flames, the Rhinemaidens retrieve the Gold, a huge silken banner now cleansed, from the river. (They also suffocate a lurking Hagen with a bright yellow plastic bag – a most fitting ending!) They then arrange the gold banner as a triumphal walkway, and a small child in Greek robes, and carrying a young World Ash tree, moves down to the front and plants the tree. Enough said: it was one moment of distasteful kitsch in an otherwise splendid performance. Audiences will not see and hear an equal challenger to this 'Ring' for quite some time.

## Email Addresses

Email is for many members the communication method of choice, and it's vital for us to have your current email address if you want to receive reminders about Society functions, or in the future to receive the Newsletter electronically. The Society's email address is [info@wagner-nsw.org.au](mailto:info@wagner-nsw.org.au) (info at wagner hyphen nsw dot org dot au).

If you'd like to receive reminders about forthcoming Society events and occasional matters of interest to members, just send us an email from your current email address, with "Email reminder service" in the "subject" line. If you'd like to take part in the pilot for electronic delivery of the Newsletter, make sure that we have your current address by enrolling (or re-enrolling) in the Email Reminder Service.

Some people have particularly avaricious anti-spam programs which devour emails from nice people like us, and each different email program (such as Outlook) has its own way of avoiding this. Some programs let you nominate the Society as a "favourite" or "trusted address", to ensure that our emails do not suffer that fate, and if you take the time to make us "trusted" you'll ensure that you receive our emails for as long as you want to.



# Glyndebourne: Wagnerian Epic in an English Idyll

Members Charles Manning and Colleen Chesterman have drawn your Editor's attention to a fascinating article by Rupert Christiansen in *The Telegraph* of 13 May 2011 about the spread of Wagner music-drama performances around the English countryside. Members may be interested to read the full article at *The Telegraph's* website: [www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/glyndebourne/8509703/Glyndebourne-Wagnerian-epic-in-an-English-Idyll.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/glyndebourne/8509703/Glyndebourne-Wagnerian-epic-in-an-English-Idyll.html).

"When the curtain rises next week on the first ever Glyndebourne production of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, the ghost of the festival's founder, John Christie, can finally sleep easily. It's an opera that he always dreamt of staging in the grounds of his mansion, and one that started the now world-famous summer festival on its 83-year journey.

"In 1928, this eccentric Sussex landowner presented the first scene of the opera's third act in a costumed amateur performance in the house's Organ Room (a large vaulted salon designed for music, still used by Glyndebourne patrons today)." "Christie, an ardent Germanophile, who collected German wine and wore lederhosen, himself took the comic role of the pedantic town clerk Beckmesser, to piano and organ accompaniment provided respectively by a Mrs Lampson and a Mr Potter.

"Five years later, after building an opera house of village-hall dimensions in his back garden, Christie announced that its purpose was to emulate Wagner's summer *Festspielhaus* (festival house) in Bayreuth and that the programme would be inaugurated by *Die Walküre*, to be followed in subsequent years by the complete Ring cycle and *Parsifal*.

"In true Wagnerian style, this was insanely ambitious. Fortunately, his more rational wife, the soprano Audrey Mildmay, persuaded him that the stage, auditorium and pit were far too small to do Wagner's music any sort of justice and that he would stand a far better chance of artistic success if he plumped for the more modest requirements of Mozart.

"Her wisdom prevailed, and Glyndebourne's opening production in 1934 was *Le nozze di Figaro*, the opera that defined the place's identity.

"In 2003, however, four decades after Christie's death and nine years after his son George had rebuilt the original opera house at almost double the size, an entire Wagner opera was presented for the first time.

"The huge success of this *Tristan und Isolde* has emboldened the current management to embark on *Meistersinger*, a work on an even grander scale, requiring a larger chorus than Glyndebourne has ever used."

Christiansen continues to report on the Longborough Festival Opera's plans for "their own version of an English Bayreuth, with a full-scale production of the Ring cycle now in progress." Similarly, "Hampshire's summer festival at Grange Park, near Alresford, is presenting its first Wagner opera in June, following in Glyndebourne's wake with a *Tristan und Isolde*." "Even more daringly, the semi-professional festival held in the tiny but beautiful north Cornish church of St Endellion is presenting *Die Walküre*, with a cast led by Covent Garden's next *Brünnhilde*, Susan Bullock." [Editor]

## **Die Meistersinger** at Glyndebourne

- Colleen and Michael Chesterman, Charles Manning

In June this year, Glyndebourne Opera in the Sussex countryside near Lewes opened its season with Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. This followed a successful 2003 production of *Tristan und Isolde*, since the larger new theatre built in 1994 enables Glyndebourne to tackle such operas. So great was the enthusiasm that the opera was sold out to members before it reached public sale; Charles went with a subscriber earlier in the season and through obsessive persistence and many 'phone calls we obtained tickets late in the season.

One of the strengths of Glyndebourne is that its in-house orchestra is the London Philharmonic conducted by Vladimir Jurowski, The musical direction was superb; dignified in the Prelude, but in the later acts full of emotion, emphasised by magnificent oboes and clarinets. The opening curtain that reproduced the first page of the Prelude underlined the centrality of music to this opera.

The opera was directed by David McVicar. We had seen his work only in cinemas (a brilliant Covent Garden *Figaro*,

the Met *Trovatore*) and at the Proms (the Glyndebourne *Julius Caesar*). He is a director who avoids the imposition of a 'konzept'; instead he distils the essence of the work and subtly enhances it.

The production did not remain in its 15<sup>th</sup> century setting. McVicar updated it to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, still placing it in the past but reminding us of the emergence of Germany as a nation during this period. The designer Vicki Mortimer presented a handsome vaulted canopy, which served as the ceiling of the church, a porticoed street, Sachs' workshop and a bandstand in the final scene. The 130 strong crowd in this scene crammed the stage, indeed overcrowded it, with carnival acts, jugglers, unicyclists and children everywhere, but the overall effect was of midsummer jubilation. Rather than marching militaristically, the guilds had to push through the crowd, breaking off to greet friends and family; this added to a sense of celebration.

This gave enormous strength to Sachs' last monologue. This production made it clear



that the driving force of the opera is the creation of a beautiful song, a blend of fine poetry and stirring music and that Sachs is talking about how this can be done. For him, German Art is holy; it can be under threat from external forces or thoughtless leaders, but can be protected by groups like the conservative Mastersingers. He is not saying that Germans should conquer other nations and become the master race or indeed conveying any anti-Semitic message. We have seen in the various iterations of Walther's Prize Song that great art benefits from innovative creative ideas but is strengthened by drawing on the best of old traditions. In explaining this Sachs directed his speech to individuals in the crowd and among the masters, particularly Walther, trying to persuade them of this point, rather than giving it as a piece of demagoguery. It followed brilliantly the wonderful Schopenhauerian 'Wahn' monologue, in which Sachs renounces the folly and vanity of human striving and conflict as demonstrated in the street fight the night before (which itself was one of the most believable that we have seen).

McVicars' major strength is encouraging the singers to create detailed characterisations. This had enormous benefits for this opera. Each of the Meistersingers was a distinctive individual; they formed factions and argued with each other. The longeurs of the first Act did not exist as you watched this group of men debating. Johannes Martin Kränzle's brilliant Beckmesser was utterly believable as one of this group, just slightly more

intense and neurotic than the others in his defence of the rules. Alastair Miles' Pogner was a dignified, ponderous leader. The apprentices were well characterised, none more so than the gangling and stumpy David, beautifully sung by Finnish-West Australian baritone Topi Lehtippu. Eva (Anna Gabler) looked charming; Walther von Stolzing (Marco Jentzsch) presented well as a stiff and formal young man but as singers these two were the least distinguished.

The dynamic centre of the production was Gerald Finley as Hans Sachs. This is a younger man than we are used to seeing, thin, nervous and emotional, still suffering from the loss of his wife. His temper is volatile; he becomes irritated with both Walther and David. His attraction to Eva is absolutely believable and there is a real tension in their scenes together, wonderfully resolved in the last scene when she spontaneously takes the winner's garland from Walther and crowns Sachs as the crowd celebrates his contribution to the city. Finley is not a tall man, but grew in stature as the opera progressed.

The joy for Wagner lovers in the UK was that Glyndebourne beamed the last performance into cinemas throughout the country, including a large screen in London's Science Museum. For the following week it was also live on the Guardian's web-page, where, from San Francisco, Colleen and Michael enjoyed seeing sections of the last act, beautifully filmed. We can but hope that an enterprising cinema chain brings it to Australia.

## Melbourne Ring 2013 - Who's Who and Doing What - A Continuing Series - Robert Cousins (Production Designer)

Robert Cousins trained as a graphic designer and began designing sets for theatre for the Company B Belvoir production of "Cloudstreet" in 1997. Since then he has designed sets for "Page 8," "As You Like It," "Twelfth Night," (directed by Richard Roxburgh), "Aliwa," "Waiting for Godot," "The Threepenny Opera," "Gulpilil," "A Midsummer Night's Dream" for Company B; "Julius Caesar," "Kafka's Metamorphosis" for Sydney Theatre Company; "The Eternity Man" for Almeida Theatre, London; "Night Letters" for STCSA, and "Shades of Gray" for Sydney Dance Company. He has also designed both set and costumes for "House Among the Stars," "The Merchant of Venice," "Drowning in my Ocean of You" for STCSA; "The Dreamed Life" for Comeout01; "The Duckshooter" for Brink Productions, and "Worry Warts" for Monkey Baa Theatre Company. The 2006 *Candy*, starring Heath Ledger and Abbie Cornish, was Cousin's first feature film.

Cousins has also written a history of Belvoir Theatre: "Edited by the designer Robert Cousins, *25 Belvoir Street* combines an impressive pictorial survey

of numerous productions with essays about its precarious history, rough-and-ready rehearsal spaces, and a galvanising artistic vision that has sustained the company in the best and worst of times." (*SMH*, 31 July 2011)

"Cousins' book, which also includes essays by Armfield, Myers and several other key players, admirably steers the tone away from hagiography. We get hints of early tensions - these might have been elucidated a little more but were essentially about programming diversity versus artistic cohesion - as well as an accounting of Belvoir's box office failures: prior to staging *Hamlet* in 1994, the company faced insolvency (*Age*, 31 July 2011). [EDITOR]

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/people-you-meet-on-belvoir-street-20110730-1i575.html#ixzz1Vf9LpuMf>

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/belvoir-proves-why-sydney-loves-a-winner-20110530-1fd6i.html#ixzz1Vf7qtD2r>



## Director of **Bayreuth's 2013 Ring Cycle** Will Be: **Frank Castorf** - Or Will He????

According to the very entertaining website of Till Briegleb, "As confirmed by Katharina Wagner today [25 July 2011] - sort of. Still in negotiation it would seem (trying to find a production team that he would be happy with?) but for Bayreuth to announce at this late a stage...? And plus, his production style is certainly the sort of thing that seems to be "all the rage" at Katharina's Bayreuth."

"Yes that Frank Castorf. Nearly as well known as Wim Wenders of course and needs no introduction we are sure.

"What? You have never heard of him? The man whose best productions have been called "illogical", "rejecting a linear narrative"? The man who describes himself as an "quarrelsome" individual" - a sort of German version of the UK's "angry young man" - but not that young? The Director keen to use multimedia in his stage productions; in a manner reminiscent of "reality TV shows? The man who adopted Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and had his actors sing songs by Britney Spears. You know, that Frank Castorf. The man who's *Meistersinger* production involved him interpenetrating it with readings from Ernst Toller, a Jewish writer who escaped Nazi Germany and hanged himself in a New York; and wherein he replaced the orchestra with two pianos and a chorus made up of untrained stage hands? What? You have never heard of him?

Briegleb has also written an extensive biography for the Goethe Institut that includes the following information:

"Frank Castorf's best theatre evenings are demanding, long, complex, loud, exalted and illogical. They reject a linear narrative and conclusive interpretations. Psychological interpretation of characters is anathema to the manager of the Berliner Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz [since 1992] and undisturbed acting is right next to the trivialisation of reality by art as an object of hate. For almost fifteen years now, this concentrated "anti" position has resulted in the most important contemporary theatre in Germany.

"The tremendous energy that characterises Castorf's productions comes from the confrontation of harmony and violence. When he was a young director in the GDR, bureaucratic socialism provided the first opposition for Castorf's anger. Banished to Anklam in the provinces, he continued to offend against the tolerated canon of hidden criticism of the system that was established in East German theatre until he was allowed to produce in the West. After Unification his revulsion at false common features, and especially of the "all's well"

politics of victorious capitalism, exploded. Nowhere in the art of the years immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall was the smile of the state power so fiercely confronted with the depressing reality of the system take-over as in Castorf's theatre."

According to Wikipedia, Castorf is a practitioner of German "post-dramatic" theatre, which Wikipedia also helpfully describes as:

"The notion of "post-dramatic theatre" was established by German theatre researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann in his 1999 book with the same title, summarizing a number of tendencies and stylistic traits occurring in avant-garde theatre since the end of the 1960s. The theatre which Lehmann calls postdramatic is not primarily focused on the drama in itself, but evolves a performative aesthetic in which the text of the drama is put in a special relation to the material situation of the performance and the stage. Thus postdramatic theatre is more striving to produce an effect amongst the spectators than to remain true to the text.

"In its most radical varieties, postdramatic theatre knows no "plot" at all, but concentrates fully on the interaction between actors and audience.

"Some names associated with postdramatic theatre are Heiner Müller (Berlin), Robert Wilson (New York City), The Wooster Group (New York City), Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers and the Needcompany, Josef Szeiler/TheaterAngelusNovus (Vienna), Heiner Goebbels (Frankfurt), Forced Entertainment (Sheffield) and Teater Moment (Stockholm), Apocryphal Theatre (London)."

See more on Briegleb's website: <http://thewagnerian.blogspot.com/2011/07/and-director-of-bayreuths-2013-ring.html>

For more of Castorf's biography see the Goethe website: <http://www.goethe.de/kue/the/reg/reg/ag/cas/por/enindex.htm>

See the Wikipedia article on postdramatic theatre at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postdramatic\\_theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postdramatic_theatre), [EDITOR]



## 'Ring' Festivals - Katie French

As more and more opera companies gather their resources to prepare 'Ring' Cycles for the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of Richard Wagner in 2013, regular opera goers are increasingly being invited to enrich their enjoyment of the four operas in the Cycle by attending a programme of events associated with, and inspired by, these productions. Under the umbrella of a 'Ring Festival', both San Francisco Opera in 2011 and LA Opera in 2010 were able to bring together a wide range of varying organizations – and not just the local Wagner Societies – to contribute to the celebration, and broaden its appeal.

For example, in San Francisco, the Contemporary Jewish Museum held a panel discussion entitled: 'Who's Afraid of Richard Wagner?'; the Centre for the Pacific Rim brought together a panel to discuss 'Buddhist Influences on Wagner's *Ring*'; the California Academy of Sciences held discussions on 'Environmental Awareness: Science and Wagner's *Ring*'; organist James Welsh performed Wagner Transcriptions for Organ at St Mary's Cathedral; there were associated performances of other Wagner works such as the 'Wesendonck Lieder' by artists in the *Ring* itself; and the Wagner Society of Northern California presented three symposia – a new one for each cycle – entitled 'The Love of Power, the Power of Love'.

2010 saw Los Angeles' first *Ring*, and in true Hollywood fashion, it mounted a 'Festival of the *Ring*', and yes, it was bigger than *Ben Hur*. There were lectures at the Huntington Library, seminars at the Norton-Simon gallery, and exhibitions at the Los Angeles Museum of Art, to name just a few of dozens of activities available for new Wagner initiates as well as old hands.

Both cities hosted zany drama productions—ironically, both parodies on the dramatic convolutions of *Götterdämmerung*. Surprisingly, the most successful of these theatrical performances was in Los Angeles, the city of the least successful *Ring* Cycle. San Francisco, where the Opera company presented a *Ring* which was an absolute triumph, had to endure the appalling 'Merry Nibelungs: A Night in Wahnhalles', a performance which would have had its original composer, Oscar Straus, turning in his grave.

The Festival drama production in Los Angeles was the Musical Theatre Guild's performance of **Das Barbecu**, a zany parody of Wagnerian proportions, where **Wagner's One-Eyed Bandit comes to a fiery end in a Wild-West ho-down showdown! Das Barbecu** originated in Seattle, a brainwave of Speight Jenkins, Director of the Seattle Opera, local composer Scott Warrender, and librettist and lyricist, Jim Luigs, a Texan (which explains its ho-down style and Wild West flavour).

The Musical Theatre Guild's risky strategy is to take musical works that other tiny theatres wouldn't dare tackle, and over a long-weekend, (and with script still in hand), conduct a basic musical rehearsal, a run-through of the script, then put the work on the stage, add the 'technicals' and the orchestra – and it's Opening Night! – for one night only, and scripts still in hand. It's a wonderful recipe for creating the chaos of the end of the world, if not for an on-stage disaster!

Did it have the L.A. Opera/ Achim Freyer-production's cast of thousands? No: there were just five actors doubling as every character. (Hilariously, the almost seven foot tall Gordon Goodman played Wotan, the One-Eyed Bandit; Gunther; Hagen; a Texas Ranger; and a Giant.) Did it have the usual colossal Wagnerian orchestra? No: there were five musicians, two of whom played guitar, fiddle and mandolin, just perfect for that Hill Billy effect. In true opera mode, it did have sur-titles, including a very fetching photograph of the entrance gates to 'Valhalla Ranch', and a 'Let's Re-cap' visual reminder whenever it was necessary for the cast to provide a 'flashback', in true Wagnerian manner.

There were some rousing musical renditions including a clap-along, thigh-smacking number called 'There's a Ring of Gold in Texas' with which the entire Company opened the show. Fricka and Freia tenderly conveyed 'A Little House For Me', whilst the Norns gave witty advice on what to do with a rope in 'Hog Tie Your Man'. Siegfried and Fricka's 'Wanderin' Man' had an unusual poignancy, perfectly counterpointed by Wotan's 'River of Fire'. 'Barbecue For Two', a duet between a very angry Brünnhilde and an already very pregnant Guttrune provided a portentous indication of things to come.

All this was a blend of Texan hootenanny and university revue – with the usual 'highs' and corny 'lows' typical of both. Did it take itself seriously? Lordy, No! This was Hill Billy at its silliest. Po-faced Wagner purists left very early, closely followed by wide-eyed and bewildered newly-initiated Wagnerites.

But for those Wagner stalwarts who can (almost) sit through a preliminary evening and three days of the 'real' *Ring* without a break, there were hilarities including the incestuous Hill Billy delights of Siegmund and Sieglinde's passion; a post-nuptial Hog Shoot during which a narcoleptic Hagen dozed as Siegfried decided to 'just sit down on this log and sing for a bit'; a luminous vision of the Rhinemaidens whose hair went chlorine-green when the Gold was stolen; and a truly surreal version of the dwarf Alberich sung by that nearly seven-foot actor (who also doubled as a Norn.) What a wonderful breath of fresh air and a welcome break it was from all the *Sturm und Drang* going on at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, with Achim Freyer's



outdated and horribly pretentious Brecht-inspired, audience-estranging interpretation of the 'Ring'.

San Francisco's 'Merry Nibelungs' was another story – a coarse, crude, vulgar travesty and a tragedy, yet the potential was there. The singers had all performed in opera companies, at least in the California state. It was performed in 'cabaret style' in the intimate Shelton Theatre, they had performed to three full houses, and they were selling 'standing room'!

Originally composed in 1904 by Oscar Straus, a Viennese composer perhaps best known for 'The Waltz Dream' and 'The Chocolate Soldier', as well as film scores, and over 500 cabaret songs and other choral works, and with lyrics by Fritz Oliven, the piece was a send-up not only of *Götterdämmerung*, but of German militarism, big business and the stock market. More in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan than Wagner, it managed to upset both Wagner enthusiasts, and German nationalists who accused Straus of undermining national confidence.

The version in San Francisco, with translation by Ross Halper and extra material and songs by Quade Winter, became totally lost in translation, being reduced to a burlesque.

Siegfried, wearing a nasty blond wig and wearing an Iron Maiden T shirt, sings the 'Heldentenor Aria' in which he outlines how he owns a cannabis farm which he grows

hydroponically with water from the Rhine, and from which he has made his 'Rhine gold'. Unfortunately, he 'inhales and forgets'. He is welcomed into the 'Wurm' family, who marry him off to their daughter, and send him off in his gold vinyl Tarn-cap to secure the 'Bitchling' Brünnhilde – wearing huge horns on both breasts and head – for the lovesick King, Gunther. (Brünnhilde provided the only glimmer of amusement by drinking her morning coffee from her helmet, using the platinum plaits as handles.)

Let's go no further with the main plot, except to say that Cosima Wagner appears intermittently to make the most appallingly arrogant and racist comments! 'English is a dialect: German is a language.' was considered to be most amusing by the audience. And in a section where she conducts auditions, she opined that 'Strauss was one of the better of her husband's imitators.' (These are the only two comments repeatable in print.)

It must be admitted that Wagner's works are ripe for parody, even satire on occasion, but it backfired in this paltry production as it made the Company look coarse, crude and ridiculous. So won't it be interesting to hear Lyndon Terracini when he talks to the Wagner Society members on 16<sup>th</sup> October? Meanwhile, we can only wonder what Opera Australia has under its 'Festival Umbrella'!

## The **Raven's** Reporting - Compiled by Camron Dyer

There is a regularly updated comprehensive list on the Society's Website <http://www.wagner-nsw.org.au> that takes the list to 2014.

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Website: [www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au)

Website enquiries: [wagner\\_nsw@optusnet.com.au](mailto:wagner_nsw@optusnet.com.au)

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