

'Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg' Seminar, Dr David Larkin, 21 October 2018

1.00 – 5.00pm: Seminar on 'Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg'



SEMINAR: 'Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg' by Dr David Larkin

Dr Larkin presented a seminar as background to the new Opera Australia Melbourne production of 'Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg' on 13, 17, 19, 22 November. This seminar was illustrated with musical extracts put together by **Warwick Fyfe**, singing Beckmesser and featuring him along with other Opera Australia singers **Shane Lawrencev**, **Donna Balson** and **Dean Bassett** accompanied by **Thomas Johnson**.

David Larkin is a senior lecturer in musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, specialising in nineteenth-century music. He joined the University of Sydney in 2010, after two years as a postdoctoral research fellow attached to the School of Music, University College Dublin sponsored by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. His music education began at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, where he studied piano, violin and organ. He graduated from University College Dublin in 1999 with a first-class honours B.Mus degree, and in 2002 was awarded the M.Litt degree with distinction for a thesis exploring the musical and personal connections between Liszt and Wagner. In 2007, he gained his PhD from the University of Cambridge for a dissertation entitled 'Reshaping the Liszt-Wagner Legacy: Intertextual Dynamics in Strauss's Tone Poems.' Dr Larkin's earlier presentations to the Wagner Society include Parsifal (2017) and Tristan und Isolde – An Unresolved Enigma (2015).

1pm: Part 1 – Introducing Die Meistersinger: Wagner’s ‘comic’ music drama
1.45pm: Musical interlude 1: Beckmesser Serenade (quartet); Prize Song
2.15pm: Part 2 – Choruses and tunes? The musical language of Die Meistersinger
3pm: Tea
3.30pm: Part 3 – The dark side of Die Meistersinger: nationalism and anti-Semitism
4.15pm: Musical interlude 2 (excerpts from Kosky’s Meistersinger)
4.30pm: Part 4 – Interpreting Die Meistersinger: reception history and productions
5.00pm: Close

We were extremely privileged to be hearing from leading baritone **Warwick Fyfe**, who was singing Beckmesser in Melbourne. Warwick is an international and OA opera and concert star whose extensive repertoire includes a number of other Wagner roles such as Alberich, for which he won a 2013 Helpmann Award, Klingsor and the Dutchman. In 2015, he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study Wagnerian vocal technique in Germany, the US and the UK.



Warwick Fyfe

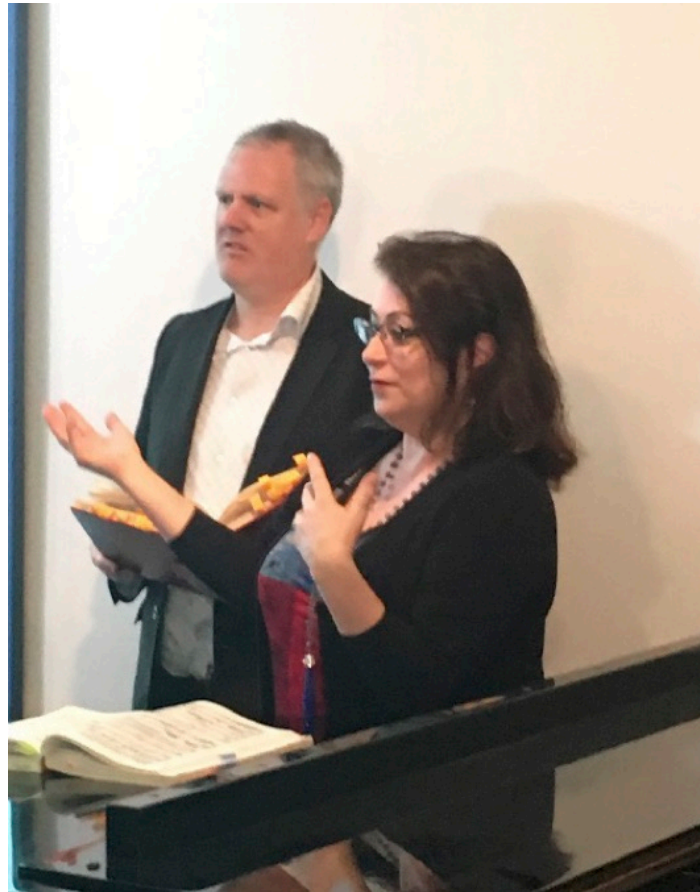
Shane Lawrence received the Robert Salzer Scholarship Award for Operatic Potential as well as a Victoria University Scholarship. In 2008, he won the Australian Singing Competition’s Opera Awards, including the Youth Music Foundation of Australia Inc Award. He has worked extensively with Opera Australia and as a leading bass-baritone concert soloist. His Wagner roles also include cover Wotan/The Wanderer in Der Ring des Nibelungen (2013, 2016) , Hunding in Die Walküre for Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and Hans Sachs in Die Meistersinger for State Opera of South Australia.



Shane Lawrencev

Donna Balson has enjoyed a multi-faceted relationship with Opera Australia for more than 30 years. Although living in Germany and the US since 1986, she has returned regularly to work as a soloist, and, since 2009, as a visiting coach. Highlights of her repertoire include the roles of Leonora in *La Forza del Destino*, Margherita in Boito's *Mefistofele*, Violetta in *La Traviata* and the title role in *Tosca*. In concert, she has sung the soprano solos in repertoire ranging from Bach and Mozart to Nono, including multiple performances of the Verdi *Requiem*.

Dean Bassett joined the Opera Australia Chorus full time in December 2004. Since then has performed with the chorus in over 30 different operas. He has covered the First Armoured Man in *Die Zauberflöte*, Herald in *Rinaldo* and Second Priest in *Die Zauberflöte* and had recent roles as the messenger in *Aida*, ensemble in *The Nose*, a Knight in *Parsifal* and Prince of Persia in *Turandot*.



Dean Bassett and Donna Balson

Tom Johnson – accompanist

Report by Terrence Watson

It was a pleasure for all the attendees of this Seminar to welcome David Larkin back to the Wagner Society for another series of illuminating and enjoyable insights into yet another of Wagner's operas in preparation for the production in Melbourne by Opera Australia at the end of November. David constructed his four hour Seminar in four parts: An overview of the work; a musical interlude; a discussion of the music—choruses, tunes and musical language; the “dark side” of Wagner and this work; a second musical interlude; and an interpretation, including the reception history and some significant productions. The following summary does not do full justice to the range and subtlety of David's presentation. Any errors in this report are due to the author's poor memory and rapidly scribbled notes.

Overview of the work's genesis

David reminded us that Wagner conceived the work in 1845, when he was on a water cure in Marienbad and began reading Georg Gottfried Gervinus's (1805-1871) History of German Literature [the 5 volume *Geschichte der poetischen Nationallitteratur der Deutschen* published between 1835 and 1842], which contains an account of the

Mastersingers and Hans Sachs. In the same year, he wrote a prose draft of a Komische Oper as a Satyr Spiel in the context of his work on Tannhäuser. In 1861, he produced another prose draft and then a poetic libretto. During this time, he also finished Tristan und Isolde.

In 1862, he composed some musical elements, including the prelude to act 1, which was performed in Leipzig on 1 November 1862. Most of the work was written between February 1866 and October 1867. Sachs's final monologue was conducted by Bruckner in Linz in 1868. The premiere of the work was conducted by Hans von Bülow on 21 June 1868. David noted that, for the first time in a Wagner production, the houses of Nuremberg were proper sets, not painted flats.

Having set up the basic history, David introduced the first musical episode, which turned out to be a coup de théâtre for the audience.

Musical Interlude 1

David had arranged for a performance of the wonderfully comic section of act 2 of the work in which Sachs marks Beckmesser's song as he attempts to serenade the woman in the window, who he thinks is Eva but is her servant Magdalene. The performance turned out to be a teaser for the production in Melbourne for which this Seminar was preparation. The singers were: Shane Lawrencev, bass-baritone (understudy for Michael Kupfer-Radecky), as Hans Sachs; Warwick Fyfe, baritone, as Beckmesser; Donna Balson, soprano, as Eva; and Dean Bassett, tenor, as Walther von Stolzing. Donna and Dean ably contributed their whispered comments from their hiding spot behind the piano. The interaction between Shane and Warwick was electrifying, as well as very funny, with Warwick bringing his characteristic intensity and comic flair to his performance. I hope that we get to hear Shane perform the whole role very soon, since he has a voice a great richness and a physical and stage presence very consonant with not only Sachs but also a future Wotan. Accompanist Tom Johnson assisted the singers greatly with clean, clear playing that brought out the comedy inherent in Wagner's score in which he is often playing games with tunes and techniques.

Discussion of the music

The musical interlude led David neatly into his discussion of Wagner's compositional achievements in this complex work. A major focus in this section was Wagner's deployment of styles and techniques from the time of Hans Sachs and the mastersingers in Nuremberg in a work that was also innovative. In 1861, David informed us, Wagner was studying Jacob Grimm's 1811 *On old German Mastersong* (Über den altdeutschen Meistergesang) [Wagner had a copy in his Dresden library]. He was also reading Johan Christoph Wagenseil's 1697 *Nuremberg Chronicle*, which contained the mastersinger guild's rules for mastersongs. [If you would like to learn about mastersongs and singing, and your old German is good enough, you can read Grimm's work at www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/grimm_meistergesang_1811?p=7.]

A central feature of Wagner's borrowing from the mastersong tradition was its Bar form: A-A-B, in which a Bar is the whole song, A represents a Stollen (or stanza) and B an Abgesang (literally "aftersong" or refrain). David then explained how one of the challenges for a Mastersinger was to create a new Ton or tune (loosely), but a new one could only be created once the Mastersinger had mastered all the Töne in their tradition. Also, a new Ton could not infringe any of the multitudinous rules, nor share more than four syllables with an existing Ton. Of all the mastersongs recorded, only 13 different Töne were attributed to the historical Sachs.

Davis also pointed out Meistersinger is more tuneful than we might expect after *Tristan und Isolde*, but this was consistent with one of Wagner's aesthetic principles: each artwork must differ from all others. In addition, Wagner now introduced duets—two singers singing at the same time, but with different texts—in contradistinction to his stated principles in his essays and earlier operas, in which singers alternated, because he wanted clarity of text above all. David suggested that, in Wagner's new Schopenhauerian perspective, textual clarity was replaced by the primacy of music. Even ensemble writing reappears in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in the form of the act 3 quintet. David then took us through the text and music of the quintet, while pointing out how Wagner varies the texts and music to characterise the singers.

To help establish the historical setting through the use of old styles in music (more or less pre-Haydn), he uses chorale style writing at the beginning of act 1 but does not use any existing chorale. He uses toward the end of act 3 a text from Sachs—"ein wonnigliche Nachtigall," well-known as an anti-Catholic poem. [The crowd acclaims Sachs: Wacht auf, es nahet gen den Tag; ich hör' singen im grünen Hag ein wonnigliche Nachtigall. (Awake, the dawn is drawing near; I hear, singing in the green grove, a blissful nightingale).] Wagner also drew on traditional guild tunes for the entrances of the guilds.

David then drew attention to the way in which Walther varies the traditional forms and manner of singing, suggesting that, in the first song in act 1, "Am stillen..." he might be speaking it, rather than singing. In his first Trial Song, according to David, Sachs senses that there is a conformity with the rules in the structure, but also innovation.

Wagner also uses counterpoint, which moves horizontally, to underscore the historical interest of the opera because it was typical of the period, rather than harmony, which moves vertically. However, David at the piano also illustrated the way in which Wagner used cycles of fifths in the chromatic style of Bach and Mozart, but also the use of augmented chords that were not used before the 19th century. [I have to confess no musical training, so my account here might be inaccurate.]

We broke during this intellectual and musical nourishment for a wonderful afternoon tea provided by some of the wonderful chefs among our members.

The “dark side” of Wagner and this work

In this section, David ventured into the complex and controversial area of Wagner’s anti-Semitism and its relationship to his artworks by setting up a dialectic between a number of commentators on art and Wagner. He quoted Schopenhauer: in the composer, more than any other artist, the man is entirely separate and distinct from the artist. Theodor Adorno: we cannot separate the ideological element and hold to a pure art as a kind of purified substrate. Dieter Borchmeyer: there is no Jewish character in Wagner’s works; his hatred of Jews is excluded from the inner sanctum of his creations. Marc Weiner: anti-Semitism is integral to understanding the mature music-dramas. David rehearsed the standard arguments or allegations about Beckmesser and his Jewish cantorial style of singing, which is, somehow, according to another view, also a parody of old-fashioned bel canto singing; the use of the Jew in the briar-bush folktale; the way in which Beckmesser appears in act 3 (shuffling like a caricature of a Jew). David also referred to Wagner’s notorious essay Jewishness in Music in which the author offered a philosophical, historical and genetic explanation of why Jews are incapable of both original music-making, and integration into German society and culture. Commentators often refer to Beckmesser’s mangling of the text of Walther’s poem as written down by Sachs as an illustration of Wagner’s point in the essay that Jews are not capable of properly understanding their adopted language. David also referred to the parallels often drawn between Beckmesser and Mime in The Ring Cycle.

David concluded this section by saying that he was grateful there is a gap between the character and such external references as the use of Jewish stereotypes.

An interpretation and some reception history

David then moved onto the slightly less controversial topic of Wagner’s nationalism, noting that the opera premiered shortly before German unification in 1870. To illustrate how Wagner’s work has been used by directors and a Fuhrer to make political, cultural and racial points, David used some video extracts from a number of productions. He began with Barry Kosky’s acclaimed Bayreuth production of Meistersinger to illustrate the way in which the Hans Sachs character is an portrayal by Wagner of himself, as an older man, and that, in his role as Sachs, Wagner expresses his heartfelt commitment to and defence of German art. Against this production, David showed a short clip of Karl Böhm with the Berlin Philharmonic conducting the conclusion to a staged performance of the opera for a Nazi Party function, in which the production looks like a Nazi rally. David suggested that there was a pattern in Wagner’s work which the Nazis found fitted their own views, but also observed that, just because the Nazis appropriated Wagner’s works does not mean that their beliefs were his. Adorno, though, claimed that the form of nationalism in which Wagner participated exploded into National Socialism, which could then draw on Wagner’s writings and artworks for its rationalisation. In contrast, David referred to the research of David Dennis, published in British journal *The Wagnerian*, showing that there is no evidence that Nazi cultural politicians or their volkisch forebears and associates referred to Beckmesser as Jewish, or to his fate as foreshadowing National Socialist policies against the Jews. On the other hand, Wagner’s representation of the Volk was fundamental to the Nazi reception of Meistersinger and Hans Sachs’s relationship to the Volk.

As a kind of Abgesang, David showed a clip of Lauritz Melchior in the 1946 film *Two Sisters from Boston*, in which the singer is being recorded on a very early acetate disk through a very large trumpet. He sings the final version of Walther's *Preislied*. The finished recording is then played back to him, to his great surprise and pleasure. This is a very funny scene, making fun of the early days of recording, with a guest appearance by the HMV dog! [You can watch the extract at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cqnATSWX6I.]

David concluded by considering Wieland Wagner's solution to the politicisation of the work. In 1956, Wieland Wagner stripped the work of all the naturalistic elements of previous stagings, presenting the work in a timeless, placeless world, with no Nuremberg, no nationalistic costumes, but with innovative lighting. However, this production was very unpopular and so, in 1957, Wieland added some kitschy design elements to suggest the beloved city. Among other productions, David also referred to Katharina Wagner's 2007 production for Bayreuth, which, among other things turned Walther into a painter, and Stefan Herheim's 2017 production, which set the work in a workshop composed of huge sets, making the performers seem like miniatures. And now for Melbourne!

The audience was immensely grateful for David's detailed analyses and deep insights into the work and the world out of which it emerged, as well as the world into which it was thrust.