

# **Seminar On 'Bach To The Future: Wagner's Roots And The German Nation' By Dr Antony Ernst, 6 & 7 August 2016**

**2.00pm, 6 August 2016, part 1 of seminar by Dr Antony Ernst  
10.00am, 7 August 2017, part 2 of seminar by Dr Antony Ernst**

On 6 & 7 August 2016, 104 members and interested others registered for a seminar on the North German music tradition, which saw the development of both Bach and Wagner, in particular the cities of Leipzig and Dresden. Some attended both Saturday afternoon and all Sunday; others came to what sections they could. Overall, it was an outstandingly successful seminar, with a positive response from all participants. We were delighted to welcome Trevor Clarke from the Melbourne Wagner Society, and John Meyer, President of the WA Wagner Society. The enthusiasm of all was expressed by one member: A wonderfully informative weekend of music, history, philosophy, the birth of nations and where Wagner fits into all of the above. Organisation of the seminar, on behalf of the Wagner Society in NSW, was undertaken by Colleen Chesterman, Michael Day, Barbara de Rome, Jenny Edwards, Leona Geeves and Margaret Whealy. Florian Hammerbacher also provided much appreciated assistance.

## **REPORT ON THE SATURDAY SESSION**

A large and attentive audience comfortably filled the auditorium at the Goethe-Institut for Dr Antony Ernst's weekend seminar. On the Saturday afternoon, 6 August, there were two sessions.

### **Wagner's Upbringing in the North German Tradition**

In *Mein Leben*, Wagner stresses his identity as a musical radical – “rediscovering” Beethoven, following Weber (*Der Freischütz*) and so forth. This is all well and good, but Antony asked us to consider what other influences, perhaps equally important, had been omitted from the accepted narrative of Wagner's musical development. This may not just be a case of Wagner fashioning his history to suit his own ends: some things may have just been assumed and not thought worthy of mention.

Wagner, the first major Protestant composer, was born in Leipzig, the city where Bach had been Thomaskantor for twenty-seven years until his

death in 1750. The post of Thomaskantor gave Bach responsibility not only for music at the (Protestant) Thomaskirche, but also at several other churches in Leipzig. He also taught music to the students at the Thomasschule and of course was director of the Thomanerchor, the choir of the Thomaskirche, with its 800-year history (it was founded in 1212). The Thomaskantor was thus basically in charge of music in Leipzig.

Dresden is the capital of Saxony. The Kreuzkirche in Dresden had a history comparable with that of the Thomaskirche; it also had a choir and an associated school, the Kreuzschule, where Wagner was a pupil for five years, and where several famous musicians from the former East Germany have been educated, including Peter Schreier and Theo Adam. Antony pointed out that the Kreuzschule and the Thomasschule, have an absolutely rigorous and thorough musical curriculum: their successful students become extremely accomplished.

The traditional view is that Bach's music was not performed after his death in 1750 and more or less subsided from view until Mendelssohn's Bach revival beginning with his performance of the Matthäuspassion in Berlin in 1829. This is not completely true. Although Bach's church music was probably not performed publicly outside Leipzig, in Leipzig and Dresden it was at least studied and rehearsed. The choirs continued to sing the cantatas at the Thomaskirche, whose archives held the scores. It is therefore inconceivable that Wagner, growing up in Leipzig and Dresden and studying at the Thomasschule and the Kreuzschule, could not have known the music of Bach.

Bach's successors as Thomaskantor included Johann Gottfried Schicht (from 1810 to 1823) and Christian Theodor Weinlig (1823-1842). Antony played us some music by these composers – a rather sweet Schubertian chorale by Schicht and a "Laudate Dominum" by Weinlig, who taught Wagner. The choral music of the time was much denser and heftier than the orchestral music (typified by the classical symphony) – rather reminiscent of Tallis.

When we consider Wagner's approach to music drama, we can observe how he brings in influences from outside opera. Antony played us Bach's motet, "Singet dem Herrn" and compared it with the Rheintöchter singing in close harmony in *Götterdämmerung*. A striking and well-known example is found in *Die Meistersinger* – the Prelude to Act One, itself a very complex piece of counterpoint, leads straight into a Lutheran chorale.

## **The Great Passion and The Ring**

In the second session, Antony explored the links between the tradition of clear storytelling as exemplified in the Protestant settings of the Passion texts, and Wagner's development of music drama, which has more in common with the passion settings than with 19th century opera in the Italian and French tradition. Opera is essentially a Catholic art form: its natural home was in Italy, France, Austria and Bavaria, where the great Catholic monarchies and courts were located. There was a cultural milieu of conspicuous display. Northern Germany was different. Frederick the Great of Prussia is thought of as a great supporter of the arts, mainly because all his predecessors were not, and he stood out.

Protestantism can be thought of as a priesthood of believers – each believer has his or her individual relationship with God, who is not accessed through priests or saints. Catholicism holds out the priest as the intercessor in the relationship between believer and God. In the Catholic tradition, this involves much music and display for the glory of God. Catholic church music is liturgical – focused on the priest, the intercessor.

In contrast, many Protestant sects (Dutch Calvinists, English Puritans) did not have any music in the church. North German church music had to take on the showing, enactment and demonstration of the biblical stories, which was not available on stage. The Protestant Church had to be in the vernacular: Luther complained that the congregation did not speak Latin and could not understand what their intercessor/ priest was saying. Passion Plays were performed, including in (Catholic) Southern Germany, but were not quite theatre, and not quite liturgy. Musical settings of the Passion date back 100 years before Bach. Schütz composed at a time when instruments were forbidden in church – it is for choir and soloists – texts and recitatives are in German. The recitatives sound like liturgy. When it is sung as set, this sounds much clearer and more intelligible than operatic music of the time. It is not about how beautiful the voice is, or how agile and clever the singer – the focus is on the text. The text of an opera is made up. The text of the Passion is prescribed – it is the Gospel – you cannot leave anything out. Consider the Miserere scene from *Il trovatore*. It is not gospel but pseudo- liturgical – in Italian [“Miserere d'un alma già vicina”] – they made it all up to create an impression.

This is not how Wagner worked, at least after *Lohengrin*. Antony pointed out how *Lohengrin* breaks new ground, unlike *Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, where everything is very clearly constructed – there are “numbers”. In *Lohengrin* he does not leave anything out – he treats it like a Passion,

reporting the whole conversation. In Act I, everything is included – King Henry explains why he has come to Brabant, every trumpet fanfare is included – the final trumpet call – the waiting....Wagner portrays, at first, the doubt that anyone will come forward, then the glimmer on the horizon as the swan approaches, the word spreads through the crowd and Lohengrin arrives.

Consider Bach's setting of the narration in the Matthäuspassion at the time of Jesus' death: the Evangelist [Nr. 63a] describes the veil of the temple being rent in twain, the earthquake, the dead rising and so on. Then the Centurion and the bystanders are deeply moved and sing [Nr.63b] "Truly this was the Son of God." Compare this with, for example, Siegfried, Act III. "Das ist kein Mann! Brennende Zauber zückt mir das Herz.....[observe how the setting creates the feeling in us].... "Wen ruf ich zum Heil, daß er mir helfe? Mutter! Mutter! Gedenke mein!"... "Wie weck ich die Maid?.....Im Schlafe liegt eine Frau: - die hat ihn das Fürchten gelehrt!" There are often lines where there is no accompaniment – either a shimmering piece of music, or interpolated chords as in recitative.

To summarise and conclude, Antony cited two aspects of the Protestant tradition that led the way for Wagner. Firstly, we have the example of the priesthood of believers.

- In Holländer, there is an angel ("Dich frage ich, gepries'ner Engel Gottes, der meines Heil's Bedingung mir gewann...").
- In Tannhäuser, the Pope rejects him – the Pope is not a good intercessor with God.
- In Lohengrin, everyone has his own relationship with God.
- In Parsifal, it is Parsifal's relationship with God.

Verdi does not necessarily approve of the situation, but he accepts that there is a hierarchy in the stories he tells: the Grand Inquisitor in Don Carlos, the priests in Aida, Padre Guardiano in Forza can redeem people – he pardons and redeems Alvaro.

Secondly, we have the Catholic tradition of redemption through good works, versus the Protestant tradition of redemption through faith - there is no relationship between what you do and what happens to you.

- Senta doesn't have faith in the Holländer and he doesn't have faith in her. But she kills herself and they are both redeemed.
- Tannhäuser should end up damned – he has committed the sin of despair – but he is redeemed.
- Lohengrin ends tragically for lack of faith, not lack of good works. What does this mean about our concept of time? If it's all about good works, what happened in the past is important. It affects who you are

now and your destiny. In the Protestant conception, you are in a timeless space. We know that Wagner was not a deeply religious person. He turned away from organised Christian religion and flirted with pantheism and Buddhism. But even if you are not a strict observer of a particular faith, you may not easily escape the cultural and other influences of your upbringing.

Antony finished the session with a story about an Irishman who met another man in the street and asked him, “Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?” The man replied, “I’m an atheist.” “Yes, but are you a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?”

By William Beck

### **REPORT ON THE SEMINAR RECITAL - AYSE GOKNUR SHANAL ACCOMPANIED BY EVGENY UKHANOV**

After the first day of Antony Ernst’s wonderful seminar, soprano, demonstrated some of the glories of Wagner’s music. Ayse sang from Wagner’s Wesendonck Lieder: Der Engel (The Angel), composed November 1857; Stehe still!(Be still!), composed February 1858; Im Treibhaus– Studie zu Tristan und Isolde (In the Greenhouse), composed May 1858; and Schmerzen (Sorrows), composed December 1857

These were followed by Antonín Dvořák’s Songs My Mother Taught Me (Czech: Když mne stará matka zpívát učívala; ) the fourth of seven songs from his cycle Gypsy Songs for voice and piano written in 1880, set to poems by Adolf Heyduk. The pair closed with Ochi Chernye, (Dark Eyes) the famous song, by the Ukrainian poet and writer Yevhen Hrebinka, published in 1843; the music was composed by Adalgiso Ferraris.

Soprano, Ayse Goknur Shanal, whom the Wagner Society sponsored at the Lisa Gasteen Summer School, studied at the Royal College of Music and the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program at the Metropolitan Opera, NY. Her awards include amongst others, Australian Singing Competition, and the McDonalds Operatic Aria. She played a significant role in developing and major vocal works for the commemoration of the ANZAC Centenary in Australia and the USA. You can keep up with Ayse’s activities at: [www.aysegoknurshanal.com](http://www.aysegoknurshanal.com).

Evgeny Ukhanov came from Ukraine to Australia aged 15, on scholarship and was the youngest finalist at SIPCA. He has performed as a soloist with the SSO and the ACO. He has appeared in concerts in Russia, Ukraine, France Germany, Spain, Italy, Japan and Norway. He

has featured on ABC Classic FM and his CDs include some recorded by ABC Classics.

Ayse and Evgeny had their CDs available for purchase after the concert and they are now available from a.g.shanal@ gmail.com (uploaded on itunes shortly) . Ayse and Evgeny are giving a recital at the Sydney Opera House, Utzon Room on 6 November 2016. Ayse will be featured in the National Anthem at the opening of the Test Cricket Match.

By Leona Geeves

## **REPORT ON THE SUNDAY SESSION**

Antony opened the Sunday seminar by setting the scene of German nationalism, or the lack of a cohesive nationalism during the 1800's, the history of the time, and the influences of change and traumatic conflicts on Wagner and his music.

Germany was a divided nation, with multiple smaller independent states interspersed throughout, which Antony highlighted by projecting a map to show us their various locations. Napoleon had dissolved the Holy Roman Empire and the French Revolution was in its throes next door, with subsequent implications for the German states and the prospect that a similar revolution might happen in their country. The divisions within the "Guilds" of these states posed the dilemma "What is it to be German"? The Brothers Grimm had looked at this question as they researched the origins of their folk stories, publishing their most authentic versions around 1805—1808. Other local folk stories were published at the same time, also in the quest for finding what was most authentically German.

Leipzig in 1813 was suffering from the effects of the conflict with the Russian army, which had followed a "scorched earth" policy, burning fields and crops, so that the Napoleonic army, which was used to foraging the land, had no food. Napoleon had based himself near Leipzig, at the intersection of three rivers. Anticipating the battle to come, many residents left Leipzig, where the ensuing battle left behind 100,000 casualties. The equivalent of nine football fields full of dead and dying people left a huge legacy with ongoing effects for the people who had not fled and were left to clean up after the chaos.

Significantly, the state of Saxony, which included Leipzig and Dresden, had been saved, and the constant struggle to work out which culturally diverse groups were part of "Germany" continued. The Prussians? The Austrians?

From the 1820's to the 1830's, at the same time as these issues were unfolding, industrialisation was developing together with its inherent changes. France was something of a model, with its unified states, however, the local state rulers in Germany proved to be more problematic, not wanting to relinquish their power over their own smaller states.

As a rising tide of nationalism was making its voice heard, Wagner was incorporating this movement in his operas, *Tannhäuser*, *Dutchman* etc, and drew on examples of the great "Germany" of the past in *Lohengrin*, setting it in the context of the creation of a unified German nation.

By 1848, ideas of creating a unified German nation, along the lines of the more liberal government being formed in France, were thwarted for Wagner, having to flee the uprising of that time in Dresden and adjust to the necessity of the economic pressures of the time.

War in the 1860's saw Prussia overcoming Austria and Germany, becoming a Protestant nation, but not a "cultural" nation. Driven by Prussian influence, the culture was dour and rigidly militaristic. Wagner, living in Switzerland, was separated from these influences and was radically re-thinking his own position. *Meistersinger* is centred around the "middle" classes, rather than the nobility, the "guilds," with their artisan skills including the cobblers etc. A "Marxist" parable, the fading of the aristocracy and new radical ideas, could be expressed in an acceptable format. It was a time of evolution. Hans Sachs's final address is a rejection of power, with the core of German-ism being culture, not power, as in his aria "Holy German Art." Should Germany be overcome by a foreign entity, it was of utmost importance that "German" art should continue to be held sacred.

Hence, the Ring is embedded in Northern Germanic cultural mythology, rather than Roman or Greek mythology. Of note, is also the influence of King Ludwig of Bavaria's financial support of Wagner and his work.

The 1870's saw the Franco Prussian war, with Northern Germans defeating the French and driving back Napoleon's army. The Prussian army was very organised and well stocked as it occupied Paris. Allies in Northern Germany, including Bavaria (and Wagner), became united in a new German empire with a more unified nationalism and cultural themes incorporated into music (later adopted by the extreme

German nationalism of the 1900's). Wagner, not wanting to identify with this development, escaped to Bayreuth and Bavaria to create his own cultural community. Influenced by the protestant musical tradition and the

music of Bach which he had grown up with, he focussed on writing into the Ring a mix of the culture, the politics, the ethics and the influences from his readings of Schopenhauer and Buddhism.

### **WAGNER'S BUDDHISM**

Antony went on to speak on Antony went on to speak on Wagner's interest in and academic study of Buddhism—also of particular interest to Antony in his own life journey and deeper understanding of the Ring. Although Antony claimed that Wagner would never have met a Buddhist, references to Buddhism underpin much of the Ring's journey and have given Antony clarity on a number of Ring dilemmas he has struggled to understand and come to terms with. Antony referred to Buddhism as a “tool” to better understand Wagner's characters, especially the character of Siegfried.

His talk included concepts such as:

- The Ring as a reaction to the popularism and authoritarianism of Germany at the time (as described in the morning talk) - he related this to the Buddhist philosophy of renunciation and detachment.
- Social thinking—reflecting transformation and evolution.
- Themes of renunciation and detachment throughout the Ring.

Antony raised the issue of “What does it mean to be a God?” As distinct from the human condition, a God exists outside of time, is eternal and immortal and can predict the future, the consequences of what has happened in the past. Hence the “Curse” of the Ring bound together the past and the future, and desire and fear became part of the human condition.

- Buddhist teaching includes “you construct yourself,” i.e. by our unease at looking at what may happen in the future, our unease stands in the way of enlightenment— the opening of the eyes. Renunciation of the things we are caught up with, being able to look outside ourselves and experience compassion for other people—leads to enlightenment.
- The Ring is an extreme example of being tied to self, egotistical, desiring what is not possessed.
- The Curse—an example of the “Law”—if something happens, there is a later consequence, such as Wotan's legal contract he had to abide by. Wotan tries to find a solution by adding interventions, but he just makes

the situation worse. There are, though, opposite guiding force in acting out of “love”—as in Siegmund and Sieglinde’s relationship.

- There is a Buddhist tenet is that “Everything Changes,” for example, when Brünnhilde wakes up on the rock and still “out of time”, goes on to experience humanity, of remembering what happened in the past, but not yet fully aware of “Everything Changes.”
- Buddhism espouses the “Don’t Know” mind, e.g. worry about the future? Why? For example, Siegfried is not worried about the future; he “Didn’t know” what might happen. He lived in the present, with little awareness of the past (apart from knowing he didn’t know from where he’d come) and had no fear of the future.
- Rather than saying “I can’t do it,” Buddhism espouse the concept of “I haven’t done it yet.” Siegfried was yet to experience love.
- Another example : when Wotan asked Erda “How to stop a turning wheel,” a Buddhist response would be “You can’t stop it, but you can step away from it.” Wotan understood that he could not stop what had been put in motion, however, he now has to step away from the situation, to remove himself from what is to happen.
- Siegfried’s experience on the rock: for the first time, he feels “fear” as a result of his new experience with desire: confidence in the love he was experiencing took away his fear.
- Both Siegfried and Brünnhilde’s actions reflect Buddhist teaching: “If you refuse to accept the legitimacy of authority, then it has no power over you.” Hence their “love” was more important to them than the “law.”
- Antony’s theory is that now that Siegfried and Brünnhilde both have knowledge about what has happened and awareness that the ring can only be returned and the “curse” lifted following the destruction of Valhalla, enlightenment has been reached. In the Immolation scene, Brünnhilde declares she now knows everything.
- Wagner’s journey from a place of bitterness in a changing world and a sense of outrage to evolve to a place of love and compassion is both a mental and philosophical journey and an incredible achievement for him and is a reflection of Buddhist beliefs of bitterness progressing to a state of charity and renunciation of self, including a relationship between the individual and the divine; that is, enlightenment.

- In Buddhism, intentions count a lot. The reason people do things is very important. The same could be said of Wagner's writing!

By Lynette Longford