

The Wagner Society



IN NEW SOUTH WALES INC.

Newsletter No. 102, December 2005

President's Report

Dear Members

Wagner performances in 2006

I ended my letter in the last Newsletter on a rather bleak note, lamenting that Opera Australia's 50th anniversary programme for 2006 included no Wagner, and that Sydney concert goers in 2006 could expect slim pickings indeed when it came to Wagner performances.

I am therefore delighted to be able to report that the pickings are not as slim as I thought, and that there are some Wagner performances in Sydney next year. The Australian Chamber Orchestra celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2006, and they will include the *Siegfried Idyll* in a series of concerts billed as "The Giants". In Sydney, this concert is on 9 and 12 September in Angel Place and on 10 September at the Opera House, and also in Canberra and Wollongong, Adelaide and Melbourne.

In addition, although not exactly music by Wagner, the SSO is featuring a concert entitled "The Ring – An Orchestral Adventure". According to the programme, as well as Mozart's Piano Concerto number 15, we will hear the highlights from the Ring, woven into "a seamless orchestral adventure" by one Henk de Vlieger "lasting a little over an hour", and conducted by Edo de Waart. Wagner without words, edited by Mr de Vlieger, will probably be to Wagner as instant is to coffee, or Bell to Shakespeare. Naturally, I've already booked.

It is not to Sydney that we must look in 2006 for Wagner works performed whole, but east to Wellington and west to Perth. In our last Newsletter we mentioned that there will be two "semi-staged" performances of *Parsifal* in Wellington on 17 and 19 March 2006, with an all New Zealand cast, including Sir Donald McIntyre in the role of *Gurnemanz* and Margaret Medlyn as *Kundry*. If Ms Medlyn can bring off a

performance that is anything like her *Kundry* in Adelaide in 2001, you will hear something truly superb.

These performances are part of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra's Wellington subscription season for 2006, and preferential bookings for NZSO subscribers have been open for some time. Seats are now on sale to the public, and although we looked at organising a small invading theatre party to attend one of the performances, this has not turned out to be feasible. It's therefore a case of every member for her- or him-self, and you should contact the New Zealand International Arts Festival on 0011 64 4 473 0149 (fax 0011 64 4 471

But I think that the jewel of 2006 will be found in Perth, where the West Australian Opera as part of its 2006 season is staging three performances of Neil Armfield's production of *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by Richard Mills, on November 4, 8 and 11, 2006. The cast is Isolde, Susan Bullock; Tristan, Alan Woodrow; Brangäne, Bernadette Cullen; Kurwenal, David Wakeham; King Marke, Bruce Martin and Melot, Barry Ryan.

From the advertising, this looks like the Opera Australia production that was staged in Melbourne in October 2001, with Simone Young conducting. It starred Lisa Gasteen (*Isolde*) and Horst Hoffman (*Tristan*), whose pictures appear on the West Australian Opera's website advertising these 2006 performances. It also uses the same cast and conductor as we heard in a concert performance in Brisbane in July this year, except of course that the Australian Youth Orchestra, which played so brilliantly in Brisbane, will be missing, and in place of Lisa Gasteen (*Isolde*) and John Treleaven (*Tristan*) Perth will hear Susan Bullock and Alan Woodrow.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT continued p.2

PATRON:	Sir Charles Mackerras
HONORARY LIFE MEMBERS:	Prof Michael Ewans
	Mr Richard King
	Mr Horst Hoffman
	Mr Joseph Ferfaglia
	Mrs Barbara McNulty OBE

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For Your **Diary**

<i>Tristan & Yseult</i>	Sydney Festival January 2006 - Kneehigh Theatre, Britain, and Company B The Seymour Centre	January 11 - February 19
<i>Parsifal</i>	New Zealand International Arts Festival in partnership with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra – 2 performances during the 2006 Festival – see details below.	Friday 17 & Sunday 19 March
<i>The Ring: An Orchestral Adventure</i> (art Henk de Vlieger)	Edo de Waart conductor, Andrea Lam piano – together with: Mozart Piano Concerto No 15 K 450	April 6, 7, 8
<i>Siegfried Idyll</i>	Australian Chamber Orchestra – the rest of the program is: Schumann Cello Concerto in A minor, Op.129, Demenga Les Adieux [Australian Premiere], and Beethoven Symphony No.5 in C minor	September 9, 10, 12, 13, Wollongong: September 14 and Canberra: 16 September
<i>Tristan und Isolde</i>	His Majesty's Theater, Perth WA. Featuring West Australian Opera Chorus and West Australian Symphony Orchestra This is Opera Australia production is presented by arrangement with that company	5.30pm 4, 8, 11 November 2006

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

DATE	EVENTS - 2005	LOCATION
November 20	Alan Whelan "Perception and Reception of Wagner in the Nazi period"	Goethe Institut - 2.00pm
December 11	End of year function - Please bring a plate	Goethe Institut - 2.00pm
2006		
February 19	A window on the work of the Conservatorium of Music: Professor Kim Walker, Dean of the Conservatorium, will introduce the work of the Conservatorium, especially its Opera Unit. Then Sharolyn Kimmorley will illustrate the coaching techniques she uses with singers by conducting a class with a pupil from the Con	
March 19	<i>Parsifal</i> performance in Wellington, New Zealand (see For Your Diary above) + 17 March as well.	
April 2	Alan Whelan: the life and works of Siegfried Wagner.	
May 21	Annual General Meeting and recital by the students from the Conservatorium who received scholarships to study German language at the Goethe-Institut, accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley	
July 16	Nigel Butterley's second talk: on the music of Franz Liszt.	
September 17	Report back by members who attend the Bayreuth Festival in 2006 - on the new <i>Ring</i> production, the first Bayreuth Ring conducted by Christian Thielmann	
October 15	TBA	
November 19	Alan Whelan: an illustrated talk on <i>Rienzi</i>	
December 11	End of year function - Please bring a plate	
Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)		



President's Report continued

Perth has heard these two wonderful singers before, in February 2003 in two concert performances of *Götterdämmerung*, as *Brünnhilde* and *Siegfried*. In the Newsletter at that time I wrote "I doubt that I will hear the *Siegfried-Siegfried* prologue sung live with such power and searing incandescence as Susan Bullock and Alan Woodrow delivered in ... these Perth performances ..." and I recommend these 2006 *Tristan* performances with Bullock and Woodrow to you all. Perth is setting itself a very high target indeed with a staged production so soon after the wonderful concert performance in Brisbane. It is a pity that Opera Australia does not feel that it can set itself targets like this.

As with the Wellington *Parsifal*, the Perth *Tristan* is part of the WA Opera's 2006 subscription season, and seats for non-subscribers go on sale on 1 December 2005 through His Majesty's Theatre in Perth, phone (08) 9321 5869, fax (08) 9324 1134. His Majesty's Theatre seats just under 1,250, so if you want tickets it will be something you should book sooner, rather than later, and as with the Wellington *Parsifal*, it is a case of every member for her- or him-self. If you need more information go to the West Australian Opera's website, <http://www.waopera.asn.au/>, where you will see an open-air performance of *Samson and Delilah* with Stuart Skelton (*Siegmond* in the Neidhardt Ring).

Wagner Society Functions in 2006

Our first function in 2006 will be on Sunday 19 February, and will be a window on the work of the Conservatorium of Music. We hope that Professor Kim Walker, Dean of the Conservatorium, will be able to open this window with an introduction to the work of the Conservatorium, especially its Opera Unit. Then Sharolyn Kimmorley, who needs no introduction, will illustrate the coaching techniques she uses with singers by conducting a class with a pupil from the Conservatorium.

Because the Wellington *Parsifal* is on the weekend on the third Sunday in March – our traditional meeting date - and because April has Easter and Anzac Day public holidays around its third Sunday, we will be combining the March and April meetings in 2006 and having a single function on Sunday 2 April, at which Alan Whelan will speak on the life and works of Siegfried Wagner.

On Sunday 21 May – the Sunday closest to Richard Wagner's birthday – we will have our Annual General Meeting, to be followed by a recital by the students from the Conservatorium who received scholarships to study German language at the Goethe-Institut, accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley, and then our annual birthday party for Herr Wagner. This is usually our best-attended function of the year, despite the AGM, which in 2006 will include deliberations on the vexed question of how we should apply for and allocate tickets for the Bayreuth festival each year.

On Sunday 16 July Nigel Butterley will present his second talk, this time on the music of Franz Liszt. Nigel's talk at our October meeting on "Wagner and Liszt" was particularly well received, and Nigel has agreed to return and speak about another aspect of Liszt's music.

On Sunday 17 September, we will ask those members who attend the Bayreuth festival in 2006 to speak on the new *Ring* production, the first conducted there by Christian Thielmann. The enthusiasm for this new Ring has led to us receiving more than three times our normal number of applications – 28 in total – for next year's festival, although I have heard that some members will dispose of their tickets Bayreuth's current production of *Parsifal*, and in some cases to the productions of *Tristan* and *Hollander*.

We are waiting on confirmation of the availability of our speaker for Sunday 15 October.

On Sunday 19 November, Alan Whelan will give an illustrated talk on *Rienzi*. Alan says that it can be argued that the libretto for *Rienzi* is the best libretto that Wagner wrote before *Rheingold*, and also that *Rienzi* is a superior work to *Hollander*. This should be an interesting and possibly controversial talk.

On Sunday 10 December 2006, we will have our end-of-year party.

This time last year

This time last year most of us were in or on our way to Adelaide for the Neidhardt Ring. It's sad to reflect that, a year on, the promised recording from the federally-funded Melba Foundation has not appeared. Their website, <http://www.melbarerecordings.com.au/>, now does not

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President's Report continued

appear to list the Ring at all, and perhaps it has been buried like so much else from that glorious production. For example, despite recording some 90 hours of film, the ABC could manage only a one-hour documentary, and that was rescheduled a few times before it was finally broadcast, because Aunty didn't think that anyone would be interested.

The Goethe-Institut is to be congratulated for sponsoring an exhibition of photographs of the production by Michael Scott-Mitchell, the set designer for the Neidhardt Ring, which is alas as close as we have come to seeing a book or any other pictorial record of that wonderful event.

The whispers about the production being taken up by another country – China? the USA? – have been stilled, and the sets now probably lie sadly in warehouses or containers, somewhere in Adelaide, waiting for an

Australian revival of one or all of the works so that they can be brought back onto a stage. And just as those old whispers have been stilled – like the whisper that the State Opera of South Australia may never recover from the financial impact of the bailout - new whispers have taken their place, such as the rumour that any restaging of the *Ring* will be shackled with meeting the cost of the storage since the debut in 2004, in effect making any revival financially impossible.

I hope that these whispers too will be proved wrong, but the suspicion remains that, after all, we lucky few saw the only staging of the Neidhardt Ring.

And on that ambiguous note, I wish you all a very happy new year, and all the best for 2006, with its promise of great things in Wellington and in Perth.

Roger Cruickshank 14 November 2005

New Members

The following persons joined the Society between September 2005 and October 2005:

Paddy Trumbull (941), Douglas Barry (942), Amanda and George Rosenberg (943) and Glen Barnwell (944).

Donations

Donations were gratefully received from the following members between September 2005 and October 2005:

Sybil Baer Carole Bailey, Anthony Jones, Bituminous Products Pty Ltd and Janet Nash and Alan Hauserman.

“Charles Mackerras, in his prime at 80, Conducts a Crackling *Fidelio*” – Congratulations to Sir Charles!

Just to acknowledge the significant achievements of our Patron, here is an extract from a review by Edward Seckerson from *The Independent* [London] - 14 October 2005: “Sir Charles Mackerras began his 80th birthday celebrations as if in wilful defiance of them. He strode purposefully on to the Barbican platform and, with the dynamism of a 21-year-old, kick-started the Scottish Chamber Orchestra into an account of the overture to Beethoven's *Fidelio* that gave urgent notice of the performance to come. Pacing was imperative, rhythms tightly sprung, inner parts sang, timpani cracked home, and period trumpets lent a brassy determination. Yet because Mackerras — one of the great musical stylists — has learnt to hurry slowly, dynamism was tempered by a lifetime's wisdom.

“It was a great night for Sir Charles and the orchestra, then, but also for Christine Brewer, his spectacularly accomplished Leonore. Her flawless account of the great Act I aria '*Abscheulicher!*' brought on shining 'visionary' *legato* and defiant pyrotechnics plunging to resolute chest tones. She was rightly and properly the tower of vocal strength at the heart of this performance, her singing at once consistently beautiful and heroic”. It seemed worth including also for a different opinion of Christine Brewer from the comments by the editor in the overview of *Tristan und Isolde* below.”



Congratulations to Simone Young – Goethe Medal

The latest edition of the Goethe Institut's magazine, *Kultur* (October 2005), contains an article about the German Government's awarding in Weimar of the Goethe medal to Simone Young, one of five recipients in 2005. *Kultur* reports that "Since it was set up in 1955, 291 people from 52 countries" have received the award and only one other Australian, Professor Leslie Bodi has received the award, in 1991.

Ms Young was awarded the medal for, among other things, "forging a strong link between Australia and Germany, introducing Australian music, musicians and singers to Germany and – as fair exchange – programming a broader repertoire of German works in Australia...". The article reminds its readers: "Simone Young was the first woman ever to conduct the Wiener Philharmonic in Austria and, in Berlin, the first female conductor of the entire Ring Cycle...".

For her part, Ms Young says: "The more I improved at the language, the greater become my grasp of German musical works. The structure of these great works became clearer and, therefore, it got easier for me to conduct them.... I'm surrounded by philosophers, authors and writers who put profound thoughts down on paper. That isn't my profession. My language is music. If you want to hear my deep thoughts, you will have to come to Hamburg and listen to one of my concerts." If any of our members is able to take up Ms Young's invitation to listen to her conducting at Hamburg, we would be very pleased to print your review.

Great News: Parsifal in New Zealand 2006

We hope you remember that the New Zealand International Arts Festival in partnership with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra will present two semi-staged performances of **Parsifal** during the 2006 Festival on Friday, 17 and Sunday, 19 March, including Sir Donald McIntyre, Gurnemanz; Simon O'Neill Parsifal; Margaret Medlyn, Kundry; Paul Whelan, Amfortas; Martin Snell, Klingsor (currently the Steersman in Bayreuth's Dutchman; Grant Dickson, Tituleu. The conductor is Anthony Negus; the Director, Bernd Bentaak; Designer, and Tollis Papazoglou.

There is now more information about what else is on during the festival (24 February to 19 March 2006), although no news on booking individual tickets to *Parsifal*. However, the festival website -<http://www.nzfestival.telecom.co.nz> - has package deals available: Premier option

Simone Young Conducts Vienna Philharmonic – Another Laurel for the Sydney Born Conductor

Australia's Simone Young has conducted a concert by the Vienna Philharmonic. The orchestra says it is the first time it has been led by a woman. In the two concerts on November 12 and 13 in the Wiener Musikverein, Ms Young conducted Leonard Bernstein's Overture to *Candide*, Aaron Copland's Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra and excerpts from Gustav Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and Robert Schumann's Symphony Number Four.

According to the report on the ABC website, "There was huge applause at the Concert Hall in Vienna. Young has conducted philharmonic musicians before at the Vienna State Opera, hidden in the orchestra pit. But this is the first time she has stood at the podium during an official concert by the world-famous orchestra. Only one sour note marred the triumph of the concert. A report in an Austrian newspaper saying that Young may not in fact have been the first woman to have conducted the orchestra. The newspaper says that honour went to Carmen Studer-Weingartner in the 1930s."

– \$800 'A' reserve ticket to 10 different Festival events or Lite option – \$450 'B' reserve ticket to 7 different events.

Other attractions include Tan Dun conducting the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in the opera, *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* in the Opéra National de Lyon's production. Composer James MacMillan will conduct a concert that will bring include his *Britannia* and *Quickening* and New Zealand composer Ross Harris's *Music for Jonny* and *As though there were no God*. There will also be a production of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* play starring Richard Griffiths. Also on the bill are French aerial trapeze artists Les Arts Sauts in a new work *Ola Kala*. The details of the Parsifal performances are at <http://www.nzso.co.nz/html/concerts/2006-season.php#special-parsifal> Jennifer Jarden, Marketing Co-ordinator, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra advises that you can book through NZS) The prices per seat in NZ\$ are Premium - \$165, A Reserve - \$140, B Reserve - \$110, C Reserve - \$49, D Reserve - \$25. The NZSO will take cheques (made out to NZSO), Visa or Mastercard or you can fax through your credit card details to 64 4 801 3976 if you are booking by credit card.



The Prague Ring 16, 18, 20 and 22 May 2005

The presentation of a Ring Cycle in Prague, the first since World War II, was eagerly anticipated. The advance publicity did not make it clear, however, that it would be an imported production from Deutsche Oper am Rhein, acquired through a cultural agreement between the German and Czech Governments. The Czechs seemingly supplied the orchestral players, *comprimario* singers and chorus.

The production concept was that Wotan had bankrupted the 'state' and himself, morally, in the construction of an extravagantly large castle. Remember that this production was being staged in a region acquainted with the scale of Schloss Schonbrunn with its 1440 rooms. At almost every turn, the audience was reminded of the folly of the investment in Valhalla. Wotan's machinations to secure the future of the gods were frequently conducted within its innumerable chambers; and many external scenes contained vestigial architectural elements.

Complementing this Galsworthian accent on property was an emphasis on Victorian/Edwardian social morality, personified in Fricka. The devious and deviant behaviour of others contrasted with the values that she projected. Renee Morloc's interpretation of the role was one of the stronger features of the production. No shrew or nagging housewife, she urged the cause of marital fidelity with the quiet certitude of a woman imbued with mid-Victorian respectability. (Ms Morloc returned to sing Erda in *Siegfried* and Waltraute, but was not so effective in either of those roles despite her lovely voice.)

A feature of the production was a number of delightful stage-pictures. The dawn lighting the river surface in *Das Rheingold* scene i was one of these. The gods first appeared in Sc.2 camped precariously on an exposed mountainside, bestrewn with furniture and furnishings intended for the new house. Fricka appeared in profile as an imposing Seurat-like figure holding a parasol during a light snowfall. From the outset, she was a stand-apart figure. Hunding (Johann Tilli) and Sieglinde (Therese Waldner) occupied a house that could well have been a wing of Valhalla. Within one of its rooms, a long empty dining table, suggestive of guests who are never welcome, nestled under the ash tree. The tree's green crown brought colour to the all-white dining room and, while unusual, was in keeping with the aspidistras and palm courts of the late nineteenth century in which the production was set, as well as Wagner's direction. The Norns' web was a thread that tied together parts of the castle: things began to fall apart when it broke. The Gibichung's hall was likewise part of the castle, draped in black crepe portending the Cycle's *denouement*. The Vassals were in deep mourning. The wedding ceremonies that they had been summoned to witness were no cause for celebration, and they sat in banks along the back and one sidewall like burghers in a Dutch painting, observing

Brünnhilde's (Linda Watson) struggle to prevent the ceremonies taking place.

Other scenes were notable for their staging. The first act of *Siegfried* was performed superbly, possibly the best of the entire Cycle, and drew spontaneous applause even as the curtain fell. Siegfried (Alfons Eberz), the Wanderer (John Wegner) and Mime (Torsten Hofmann) were in excellent voice and acted very well. The forging scene was particularly convincing as sparks flew from the sword with every blow of the hammer. When the dragon was slain, its floating image collapsed and the mortally wounded Fafner staggered out of the forest to utter his final words. And Erda's return in *Siegfried* was to the castle where Wotan, at home and in his normal guise, displayed subtle hints of residual attraction for his former partner.

Other scenes were less convincing. The Valkyries brought dead heroes to their meeting place, and propped them up around the walls of yet another of Valhalla's rooms. Thereafter the sisters stood about screaming, a far cry from the imaginative staging at Adelaide. At the appropriate time a catafalque arose from the floor of the room to serve as Brünnhilde's rock. There she lay, separated only by fire from mortal heroes. The lifeless bodies were still in place when Siegfried entered the necropolis. Their presence on the 'rock' was an unnecessary distraction. (So immobile were they that it came as a surprise to many when the presumed mannequins rose for the curtain call at the end of Act 1 of *Götterdämmerung*.)

Perhaps the greatest disappointment, to one whose introduction to the Cycle included the Metropolitan Opera's flexible staging of the transition scenes, was the closure of the curtain for scene changes. Not only was this interrupting, it revealed a weakness in Kurt Horres' s staging. Time and again the singers would exit the stage just before the final musical passage and the closure of the curtain, destroying the dramatic tension. The most egregious example was the departure of the gods for Valhalla. There was no rainbow bridge. They danced off-stage, holding hands, leaving Loge (Udo Holdorf) alone, laughing at the foibles of gods, giants and dwarfs.

The musical direction was under the command of an American, John Fiore. He shaped the Cycle well and drew commendable playing from the orchestra of the National Theatre. The orchestra was not, however, as good as that which performed in Adelaide and some exposed passages, such as Siegfried's horn, were uncertain. Nevertheless, it provided solid support for the principal singers, all of whom were in good voice. Mr Wegner trended to rumble in the more reflective passages, but produced a clear stentorian sound for the climaxes. Ms Watson has a clean, unforced, and seemingly untiring, soprano. Her Brünnhilde was an authoritative figure determined always to get her own way, conveyed in part by her regal stature. Two Siegfrieds partnered her. Mr Eberz in the younger role, managed to be boyish, energetic and irrepressible. His fine heldentenor remained focussed to the end, matching Ms Watson in power and excitement in their grand duet. Wolfgang Schmidt,



who also sang Siegmund, sang the elder Siegfried. Mr Schmidt also possesses a powerful heldentenor voice and is a capable actor, though a preference is expressed for Mr Eberz in the role of the hapless hero. Hans-Peter Konig was a dominant figure as Hagen, a huge man with a huge voice; Ms Waldner showed, as Sieglinde, promise of a considerable Wagnerian career. Ms Morloc was the best Fricka I've ever seen. With so strong a cast and musical direction, and so coherent a production (quibbles aside), the Prague Cycle was an undoubted success. The international community of worshippers around me all wanted to come back tomorrow to see it again. [Dr Douglas Sturkey – member No 902]

Tristan und Isolde

In the previous Newsletter it was lamented that there appeared to be no review other than that by Vincent Plush reported in the Newsletter of the Brisbane concert performance of *Tristan und Isolde* on July 30 2005. Our assiduous member, Shirley Robertson (member No. 416) has, however, tracked down a review from the following week's Brisbane *Courier Mail* by James Harper (p.13). In a review entitled "Wonder Work", Harper contends: "Whether it strikes you as emotionally and philosophically profound, or a farrago or overheated nuttiness, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is unquestionably a pivotal point in the evolution of Western art". Of the performance he said: "Lisa Gasteen and John Teleaven...left no doubt about why they are amongst the world's foremost Wagner interpreters." Harper also noted that, in supporting such highlevel singers, the "role of the orchestra is crucial. It is the medium for expression the characters' inner states" and "Richard Mills and the Australian Youth Orchestra rose fully to the occasion". Again, our congratulations to the Queensland Music Festival and its Director, Lyndon Terracini.

I was lucky enough to attend two other performances of *Tristan und Isolde* to compare with the one in Brisbane. The second was the full production in Bayreuth by Swiss Director, Christoph Marthaler and the third was also a concert performance in the Edinburgh Festival with the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra. The advantage of a concert performance is being able to concentrate on the musical values; with full productions one can often be distracted by the shenanigans (or, in the Bayreuth production, the general lack of them on stage).

In **Brisbane** the cast was Cornish heldentenor John Teleaven, Lisa Gasteen, Bruce Martin as King Mark, Bernadette Cullen as Brangäne and David Wakeham as Kurwenal; Barry Ryan, Melot, Jaewoo Kim a shepherd and the young sailor, and Lionel Theunissen, the helmsman, with the Australian Youth Orchestra conducted by Richard Mills.

In **Bayreuth** on 26 August, the cast was Robert Dean Smith, Tristan, Nina Stemme, Isolde, Petra Lang, Brangäne, Kwangchul Youn, König Marke, Andreas Schmidt (Hartmut Welker, by the time I saw the production), Kurwenal, Alexander Marco-Buhrmester, Melot, Clemens Bieber, Junger Seemann, Arnold

Bezuye, Ein Hirt, Martin Snell, Ein Steuermann (and to be Klingsor in Wellington's performances of *Parsifal*), with the Orchester and Chor der Bayreuther Festspiele, conducted by Eiji Oue and with Christoph Marthaler the director.

In Edinburgh on 30 August, it was Christian Franz, Tristan, Christine Brewer, Isolde, Jane Irwin, Brangäne, Juha Uusitalo, Kurnewal, John Reylea, King Mark, D'Arcy Bleiker, Melot, the Shepherd and Young Sailor, Andrew Kennedy, Steersman, Jonathon Hawkings, with Jonathon Nott, conductor of the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra and the Edinburgh Festival Chorus.

Overall, the Bayreuth Dean Smith and Nina Steeme were the singing "dream team" of the year, with Teleaven and Gasteen close behind. Christian Franz probably acted Dean Smith off the stage, even though his was only a concert performance in Edinburgh, which says as much about the directorial constraints on Dean Smith as about Franz's impassioned embracing of his music stand. It must be said that Franz received no emotional or acting support from Brewer whose Isolde stared stolidly into the middle air and sat whenever she was not needed to sing. Her singing was, by far, the least accurate and stirring of the sextuplet of leads. Jane Irwin would have been a better match for Franz; her Brangäne had the passion and focus lacking in Brewer and, despite clearly being in the early stages of her career, was a match for Petra Lang in Bayreuth and probably, more passionate than Bernadette Cullen in Brisbane.

All three Tristans were a balm for grateful ears in Act III when singers often start to show wear and tear and start bellowing. Sometimes, as with Siegfried Jerusalem in 1997, intensity of action helps to mask a voice struggling with Wagner's impossible demands. However, Teleaven, Dean Smith and Franz had no trouble finding the stamina and the rich quality of voice that makes for a heartstoppingly memorable Act III. I have to say that Dean Smith took the cake, if only for having to sing his despair and ecstasy while either confined to an electrically-operated hospital bed or sprawled over the floor. I would happily listen to any of these heldentenors any time.

As suggested above, I would not go out of my way to hear Brewer as Isolde, but I would love to hear Gasteen and Stemme again to hear how their voices develop. In Brisbane, I was surprised and pleased by the evidence of greater lyricism in Gasteen's voice than was evident to me in her performances as Brünnhilde in Adelaide. Part of the explanation, no doubt, was that, for the Brisbane performance, Gasteen was not required to throw herself around the stage as in her very physical performance in Adelaide. I hope that Gasteen's ability to soften and float her voice grows. With Stemme, there is no doubt that she has a tremendously strong and accurate instrument, wonderfully strong in the lower register, although there were comments in Bayreuth that her top notes were a bit wobbly and harsh (another reason to hear her again – to check these comments). What was not evident to me in Bayreuth was her ability, as Gasteen showed, to lighten and float the voice in those lyrically ecstatic passages in Act II. You can hear her singing this role, with Plácido Domingo, on the recent EMI recording with Anthony



Pappano and the Chorus and Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

The three King Marks, Bruce Martin, Kwangchul Youn and John Reylea each brought heartfelt passion and despair to their roles. Youn's portrayal had the advantage of some of the small gestures towards "storyline" in the Marthaler interpretation. Before his entrance, this King Mark is seen spying on his wife and her lover with binoculars from the back of the set. As he laments his friend's betrayal and upbraids him for his actions, Youn tenderly straightens his wife's twin set jacket and pearls and touched her face and hair. This small action, bespeaking great love, brought tears to my eyes on one of the few occasions this production achieved memorable passion. (For another review it was this moment: "Only for one brief moment in "Sink hernieder! Nacht der Liebe" is there a frisson of eroticism as Tristan coyly nestles his head in Isolde's lap and gently pulls off her elbow-length gloves. Apart from that, the unhappy lovers do not touch at all. In fact, their passion is depressingly destructive, leaving not only Tristan and Isolde high and dry in their inability to communicate, but also severing the ties between Brangäne, King Marke, Kurwenal and Melot, who in the end are left scrabbling in autistic isolation" – Simon Morgan of the website **Seen and Heard International** www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2005/Jul-Dec05/bayreuth05.htm.)

David Wakeham and Juha Uusitalo had no problem outsinging Hartmut Welker in Bayreuth who sounded increasingly as if his singing days were over, his limitations made more obvious and unforgivable in contrast with Dean Smith's and Stemme's glorious ringing tones. Hartmut Welker was no better as Telramund in *Lohengrin*, where one wished heartily that John Wegner could also have done this role again, as well as his marvellous singing in Schligensief's production of *Parsifal*.

While Mills achieved wonders with the AYO in Brisbane, his lack of experience with Wagner showed in the relatively straightforward interpretation he offered. This is not to say that it was without its moments; in fact, the brass playing was on a par with the other two orchestras, a considerable achievement, given the significant role Wagner always gives the brass. In Bayreuth, Eiji Oue received mixed reviews, many finding his volume too loud and his overall approach lacking in subtlety and sensuality. However, Oue has some interesting things to say about his debut in Wagner-heaven (see below). He was the first Asian conductor to work at Bayreuth. He was also the only conductor I have witnessed being booed at Bayreuth – for his interpretative shortcomings, not his nationality!

In a refreshingly direct and modest interview on the Daily Yomiuri Online website: www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/, Oue said: "Pierre Boulez and Christian Thielemann, who were my fellow conductors at the festival, gave me a lot of advice. Mr Wagner, the general director, told me my sound was too loud and needed to be better balanced. I also learned from the outspoken reviews, especially the ones in the German papers.... It was a challenge for me, but I accepted many of the criticisms as a way to improve my performance. In the end, I was happy with

my performance." Oue has been the conductor of the Hanover North German Radio Orchestra since October 1998, which is where Wolfgang Wagner heard him conduct in January 2003, leading to his invitation to Oue to conduct *Tristan* at this year's performance.

According to Daily Yomiuri Online, "With such celebrated singers as soprano Nina Stemme as Isolde and heldentenor Robert Dean Smith as Tristan, Oue said that he at first thought the singers would control the show, but gradually realized that he needed to bring his own style to the work."

Simon Morgan for AFP wrote: "Oue, 48, former protégé of the late Leonard Bernstein, is currently music director of both the Osaka Philharmonic and chief conductor of the North German Radio Philharmonic in Hanover."

Jonathon Nott, however, was able to bring a revelatory intensity with his interpretation of the score that was aided and abetted by the Usher Hall's wonderful acoustics and the superb musicianship of the Bambergers. I was lucky to hear them in the rest of their concert series, which included a wonderful performance of Bruckner's 9th Symphony (only just overshadowed by Christoph Eschenbach's compellingly intense and searching performance of the 8th with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in the BBC Proms a week later!)

With another perspective, **Jim Pritchard**, also of the website **Seen and Heard International** (www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2005/Jul-Dec05/edinburgh_tristan.htm) wrote that "At Bayreuth this year the debutant conductor, Eiji Oue went compellingly with the flow but had not yet learned what to do when the music lingers and then it all appeared to drift (he will not be returning to conduct it again next year and has been replaced by Peter Schneider). In Edinburgh it was another young man's account of the score. However, here Jonathan Nott never allowed the pace to slacken even though he tended to skim over the more reflective episodes in readiness to give those moments of supreme drama everything he and the orchestra could offer. As a result he sometimes let his musicians have their own way too much and a shift in dynamics towards the singers would have been appreciated as they were occasionally floundering against the sheer volume of exquisitely burnished tone coming from the massed ranks behind them, with some individuals in the orchestra making significant solo contributions throughout the evening particularly from amongst the woodwind. However I felt that Jonathan Nott, unlike the conductor at Bayreuth, had an emotional grip on the music that belied his experience of conducting it." Generally, I would concur with this assessment.

Now to the Bayreuth production! In an interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, of 25 July 2005, just before the premiere, the stage designer, Anna Viebrock, was interviewed by Wolfgang Schrieber who wrote: "About their collaboration, Viebrock says, 'It's typical of our work that we don't theorise too much. We go at it simply, quite intuitively.... For me 'Tristan' is a kind of obsession. I'm particularly interested in what happens between man and woman, between men and women. The



whole thing is about injuries and wounds, it's an extremely sad story'. " According to Schrieber, Viebrock thought it unlikely that they would produce another Wagner work together: "Christoph always says, 'Tristan' is the only Wagner work for him. The other works, with all those gods - that's not his style...".

In a review entitled "Bayreuth's Barren *Tristan und Isolde*" (Copyright © 2003 **andante** Corp.), Larry L. Lash lashes the director: " According to Marthaler's paper* — there has to be a paper, you can't tell your *Regietheater* directors without a paper — his production contrives comparison to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, to light bulbs flaring up before they burn out, to a longing for death for want of any alternative, and the observation, "When examined under a microscope, what appears to the melancholy observer to be a lonely process of dying is in fact the collapse of countless related chemical and physical functions." (Did he lift that last one from Schlingensiefel's *Parsifal* paper?) (* A mysterious ritual in which the Director issues an explanation of his concept for the particular production — mainly for the media representatives who are clearly incapable of "getting it" and hence need a crib! I have never seen one. If any members have copies of ones from Bayreuth, the Editor would love to see it — perhaps with a view to informing our readers.)

"What Marthaler actually delivers is a whole lot of nothing. By comparison, one of Robert Wilson's slow-motion extravaganzas seems like a night with the Rockettes. I have seen more character development in concert performances with the singers' heads buried in their scores. I have even seen more character development in a flea circus." While this is over-statement for effect, it is not without much truth — especially for the minor characters. However, I was convinced that Tristan and Isolde do develop within the strictures imposed by Marthaler.

Lash also whips Viebrock, "Isolde and Brangäne are frumps in dresses and pleated skirts which could be from the 1940s or 1950s. Isolde is enveloped in a 1920s wrap at the end of Act I and appears in slacks and a trench coat in Act III. Tristan wears a blue blazer and club tie, Kurwenal a kilt, Melot a World War I uniform and King Marke something forgettable and gray". These comments are both accurate, but, I think, also contain part of the answer to what is happening on stage.

Lash, however, is generally caressing about Nina Stemme: "her Irish princess here was resplendent, but I wonder if it was prudent. She has a big, powerful instrument, but warning signs of vocal trouble were all too evident: vibrato in the upper register spread under pressure; low notes were starting to disappear; all the Cs *in alt* were there (one written, two optional), but they were merely touched upon and sounded forced; the Liebestod was hasty and lacked depth (more likely the fault of the conductor)... Stemme should watch the competition: today there are Waltraud Meier, Lisa Gasteen, Deborah Voigt and Deborah Polaski, all of whom can toss off an Isolde as easily as Lily Pons could toss off the "Bell Song." For now, Stemme's Isolde is impressive, but making it a mainstay of her repertoire could have dire consequences.

"Neither warnings nor punishment need be meted out to Robert Dean Smith. His is a well-

thought-out career based around a sizeable *Heldentenor* of uncommon sweetness, inherent lyricism, and a fresh, metallic quality. Smith's Tristan was beautifully paced, and that alone is no small feat. By the time he reached Tristan's "mad scene," he shifted gears into a white-hot intensity, nailing not only the delirium of the scene, but every note smack on pitch (something even Jon Vickers could rarely achieve). I wished this, the longest solo sequence in the opera, could have gone on longer." However, Lash saves his final flagellation for Marthaler: "What can be one of the most passionate and moving love stories of all time seemed more a sterile, static trifle about some people who are mildly cheesed off".

Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich entitled his review "The unspectacular failure of 'Tristan and Isolde'" at Bayreuth (on the website **Seen and Heard International** www.signandsight.com/features/283.html, but originally in German in the "Frankfurter Rundschau" on July 27, 2005) and contends the production team "presented the key and crowning work of the night-blue music of the Romantic period in a decidedly sober state. It was sobering but not annoying: an unspectacular disappointment. The idea was interesting: putting the opera of the most extreme rebellions and exaltations together with the directorial master of abysmally shrewd and pensive staidness. What resulted was the insight that a good piece plus a good director does not necessary equal an extraordinary performance if those 'goods' are of a controversial nature, as was the case here. Christoph Mathaler's "Tristan and Isolde" didn't really send up sparks".

Jungheinrich goes on to say: "The middle act, flooded with all of Eros' demons, awakened more of Marthaler's parodying life spirit. While waiting for Tristan, the fatigued Isolde keeps nodding off. Then, in a 1950s cocktail dress, looking like Doris Day as a college girl, she meets up with a stuffed Jerry Lewis, in the role of a shy young bank branch director on a first date. Things get erotically charged when Isolde slowly peels the glove off her hand and sticks it in her mouth, where the ecstatic Tristan grabs at it. But of course the delirium is just an adolescent little breeze...".

My tuppence-worth on what Marthaler might have been trying to achieve is based on some of the aspects already mentioned: the king with the binoculars (and a team of spies flitting around the back of the stage during the early part of Act II), the 1940s to 1950/60s costumes, the restrained (if not straitjacketed) behaviour, and the bare if not sterile settings. It seemed to me that Marthaler was working with the proposition: What would the most impassioned music drama in the Western canon look like if re-set in one of the periods of Western culture conventionally taken to be the most emotionally constipated (the 1940s and 1950s), within the prevailing bourgeois attitudes to marriage and public expression of emotion.

To me it seemed that Marthaler's "storyline" (to use Robert Graham's useful term — see issue No 99 for his review of the Adelaide Ring Cycle) was to treat Tristan and Isolde and Mark's inter-relationship as a middle-class



divorce film, with possible references to films such as *Belle de Jour*. Rather than the “adolescent little breeze” that Jungheinrich mentions, the production seemed to me to be an expression of a sadly emotionally repressed, even atrophied, society in which marriage was an artificial construct that inevitably leads to disaster – usually without any hint of the ecstatic connection that Tristan and Isolde momentarily and, probably, frustratingly experience in their encounter. It is probably indicative of a Freudian comment from Marthaler about the neurotic nature of the society of this period and the lack of emotional maturity in the people it produces, that Isolde’s final act is to curl up in the foetal position on Tristan’s bed (he is now sprawled out on the floor) and pull up the sheets over her head – although that could also be a symbolic statement of her entry into the world of darkness to meet Tristan.

There was little in Marthaler’s production that made it significantly more memorable and worth watching than the two concert performances where one could at least concentrate on the beauty of the orchestral tone and the expressive power of the singers’ voices and faces, without being distracted by strange behaviour on stage and puzzling stage pictures.

[Editor October 2005]

Tristan und Isolde in Perth in November 2006

To round off my overview of Tristan und Isolde, it is with pleasure that I can inform you that the Western Australian Opera is mounting a production of this opera in November 2006 (4, 8.11). Conductor, Richard Mills has the opportunity to build on his experiences of conducting the concert performance in Brisbane with a fully staged production in Perth. The production team includes Director, Neil Armfield, Rehearsal Director, Anatoly Frusin, Set Designer, Brian Thomson, Costume Designer, Jennie Tate, Lighting Designer, Rory Dempster,

The Cast includes Isolde, Susan Bullock, Tristan, Alan Woodrow, Brangäne, Bernadette Cullen, Kurwenal, David Wakeham (Kurnewal in Brisbane), King Marke, Bruce Martin, Melot, Barry Ryan. For more information check out the website: www.waopera.asn.au or you can contact the His Majesty’s Theatre, at 825 Hay Street, or PO Box 7052, Cloisters Square, Perth WA 6850, or call Tel +61 8 9321 5869 or Fax +61 8 9324 1134. Tickets can be ordered through BOCS www.bocsticketing.com.au

Tristan & Yseult – Sydney Festival 2006

As a kind of introductory warm up to Wagner’s version in Perth in November 2006, you can see another version by the Kneehigh Theatre Company B at the Seymour Centre, 11 January - 19 February. According to the Sydney Festival program, “Charged with naughtiness, wit and tender observation, this energetic and anarchic production brings Cornwall’s oldest love story crashing into the 21st century.

“An evening for the loved and the unloved, Tristan & Yseult is a poignant and hilarious production by Kneehigh Theatre, Britain’s most innovative and exciting independent theatre company.

“Set in a time when Cornwall was the world’s richest kingdom, Tristan & Yseult tells the story of King Mark and the passionate love affair between his bride Yseult, and his trusted friend Tristan. The production is a letter to love. It explores what it means to love someone you shouldn’t, to betray someone you love and to be betrayed. To be left, and most painful of all, to be unloved.

“The chorus, a mob of anorak-clad ‘love-spotters’, guides us through the evening with music, dance and dark humour”.

If you’re game, you can book tickets for \$48/30 at Festival Ticketek, or call (02) 9266 4890 or Company B on (02) 9699 3444.

Wagner’s Ring Cycle Debuts in Beijing

It is worthy of note that the number of Ring Cycle performances in the Asia-Pacific region is increasing. The Eighth Beijing Music Festival ran from 15 October to 5 November 2005. Wagner’s epic Ring Cycle arrived in Beijing from the Staatstheater Nürnberg with Philippe Auguin conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and is the first appearance of the Ring Cycle in Asia outside of Japan. No Wagner operas have yet been staged in Beijing.

The Eighth Beijing Music Festival Grand opened with Dimitri Schostakovich’s [sic]: Violin Concerto No.1 in A minor, Op.99 with Sara Chang, violin, and Richard Strauss’s Eine Alpensinfonie, Op.64, with the China Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edo de Waart. Singers included Gerhard Siegel and Cheryl Studer in Walküre and Alan Woodrow in Götterdämmerung. There were also two concerts by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle.



Toronto Ring Cycle

If you were interested and able to do it, you could do two Ring Cycles in North America in about three weeks. The other Cycle is being done by the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. Cycle 1: 12, 13, 15 and 17 September. Cycle 2: 19, 20, 22 and 24 September. Cycle 3: Sept. 26, 27, 29 September and 1 October. As with the Mariinsky Ring at Orange County, this Ring Cycle will celebrate the opening of a new hall for the Canadian Opera, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. Ticket prices range from Ca\$300 to 2,200 – and are 70% sold, according to the website; some price categories are sold out for all 3 cycles. If you are interested, check the website: <http://www.ringcycle.ca/>

The Creative Team includes: Richard Bradshaw, Conductor; and Michael Levine, Production Designer. Like the Stuttgart Ring Cycle, the Toronto will be using four directors to create the Cycle: Director, Das Rheingold Atom Egoyan; Director, Die Walküre François Girard; Director, Siegfried Tim Albery; Director, Götterdämmerung.

The cast includes Frances Ginzer as Brünnhilde, Peteris Eglitis as Wotan/The Wanderer, Christian Franz as Siegfried, Adrienne Pieczonka as Sieglinde, Clifton Forbis as Siegmund, Judit Németh as Fricka, and Richard Paul Fink as Alberich

Who Pays for the Bayreuther Festspiele?

It is always enlightening to come across any explanation about the internal workings of the Bayreuther Festspiele, especially among the rumours and gossip that hover like the sultry mists of Das Rheingold) over der Grune Hügel. The following information comes from a Süddeutsche Zeitung article entitled "Fifty years of federal government support for the festival". "In light of its national and international importance the Bayreuth Festival has been eligible for federal government funding for the past fifty years. A third of the money provided for the festival comes from the budget of the federal government commissioner for culture and the media, a contribution that amounted to 1.67 million euros this year [2005]. A further third of the tab is picked up by the Bavarian state government. The remaining third is paid for by the city of Bayreuth, the district of Upper Franconia, and private donors. So, one wonders where our ticket money goes – unless we are also defined as private donors?

The Mariinsky's Opera Company's Ring Cycle Travelling to Orange County, California

The Mariinsky's Theatre's Ring Cycle is travelling to Orange County under conductor Valery Gergiev for one cycle from, 6 October 2006, Das Rheingold, 7 October 2006, Die Walküre (with Placido Domingo), 9 October 2006, Siegfried and 11 October 2006, Götterdämmerung. You can see details at the website: http://www.ocpac.org/countdown/mar_ring.html as well as the other offerings during this celebration for the opening of the new hall in Orange County – the Renee and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall (the website includes visuals of the glamorous new hall). There will also be two performances of Boris Godunov on 13–15 October. In between there will be two orchestral concerts, including Igor Stravinsky: Symphony in Three Movements and Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7, Op. 60 "Leningrad" and finishing up with Kirov Ballet offering Romeo and Juliet: 17–19 October and Swan Lake: 20–22 October. Prices for the Ring Cycle range from US\$308 to US\$6,300 and tickets are available, although not yet for the rest of the Mariinsky festival.

According to the Mariinsky's website (www.mariinsky.ru/en): "The history of Richard Wagner's operas in Russia is closely linked above all with the Mariinsky Theatre, where Wagner first became known to Russians not only as a composer but also as a conductor. In the 1860's and 1870's, the Mariinsky Opera Company introduced the public to the composer's early reformative works and, at the turn of the century, staged Wagner's grandiose tetralogy Der Ring des Nibelungen in full."



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(most website addresses used in this Newsletter will be on the Wagner Society's website in the relevant article)

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