

A letter to Members

Dear Members

I am delighted to begin my second report for 2006 with news that my earlier predictions of a dearth of things Wagnerian in Australia over the next few years may well prove to be wrong.

Melba Foundation Limited, which, according to CEO, Maria Vandamme, stepped in at the last minute to record the Ring Cycle in Adelaide in November and December 2004, wrote to patrons in April to announce a schedule for the release on CD of each part of the Neidhardt Ring, and then of the whole set. *Die Walküre* was released on 7 June 2006, *Das Rheingold* will be released in October 2006, *Siegfried* in February 2007 and *Götterdämmerung* and the Ring Cycle set in October 2007. [For some information about the new SACD format and the release of *Die Walküre*, see below.]

As I said in my annual report for 2005 delivered at our AGM in May this year, Opera Australia is rumoured to be planning productions of two Wagner operas, one in 2007 and a second in 2008, and there are also rumours that the State Opera of South Australia is planning to stage *Meistersinger* in 2008 and to restage the *Neidhardt Ring* in 2010. Having Cassandra-like predicted a depressing lack of future Wagner performances, I will devour humble pie with relish if this proves not to be the case.

Functions

On 2 April, we held our second function of 2006, at which Alan Whelan gave an illustrated talk on the life and works of Siegfried Wagner. The overwhelming impression for me that remains from Alan's talk is, perhaps unexpectedly, one of the intense lyricism in parts of Siegfried Wagner's music, such as his 1915 Concerto for Violin and Orchestra.

My curiosity and enthusiasm roused, I bought *Sonnenflammen*, his opera Opus 8 set at the time of the fall of Byzantium to the crusaders, which was the only complete opera recording I could find locally. The story ends with the body of the flawed hero Fridolin being consumed by the flames that are destroying the city, while the women of the story escape. For those who are looking for them, parts of this plot have some similarities to plots used by his father, but the most immediate difference between the two story-tellers is that Siegfried Wagner's story is (please excuse the awful pun) Byzantine, difficult and confusing in its myriad directions, and perhaps in search of a good editor.

Within the music, however, there are such unexpected periods of lyricism that I find myself looking for more. Through the Internet, it's not hard to find. There is an International Siegfried Wagner Society at www.siegfried-wagner.org, which has an English-language page. Unfortunately, unless you are a fluent German speaker, your enquiries take you into the amusing, but unreliable, world created by the auto-translation facilities offered by Internet search engines such as Google

One story which I could confirm was that Werner Andreas Albert, who was president of the International Siegfried Wagner Society for many years and conducts a number of orchestras in performances of Siegfried Wagner's works which are available in Europe on CD, was in Brisbane on 5 May 2006 and conducted the Queensland Orchestra in a concert which began with the overture to Siegfried Wagner's opera *Der Friedensengel* (the Peace Angel), Op 10, which was published in 1914. This concert was broadcast by ABC Classic FM.

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FOR YOUR DIARY

<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 Theatre, Perth WA. Featuring West Australian Opera Chorus and West Australian Symphony Orchestra This Opera Australia production is presented by arrangement with that company	5.30pm 4, 8, 11 November 2006

COMING EVENTS

2006		
July 16	Nigel Butterley's second talk: on the music of Franz Liszt. Dinner with Bernd Benthak (TBC – see President's letter)	Goethe Institut 2:00PM
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 Thielemann	Goethe Institut 2:00PM
October 15	TBA	Goethe Institut 2:00PM
November 26	Alan Whelan: an illustrated talk on <i>Rienzi</i> .	Goethe Institut 2:00PM
December 10	End of year function – <i>Please bring a plate</i>	Goethe Institut 2:00PM
Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)		

COMMITTEE 2005-2006

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A letter to Members - continued

Our third function for 2006 was our annual celebration of Richard Wagner's birthday, held on the closest Sunday to the actual date, which this year was Sunday 21 May. Our Vorabend was the showing of the third part of Tony Palmer's 10-hour epic, "Wagner", which was followed by our Annual General Meeting, a recital by Jessica Pratt and two of our 2005 German Language Scholarship students, Amy Radford and Harriett Marshall, accompanied by Kate Golla, the 2005 Bayreuth Scholar, who also gave a short talk about her month in Germany last year, and finally by our birthday celebration. My thanks to the singers and to Kate Golla, for making this another wonderful afternoon. The staged venom with which Jessica Pratt launched into the Queen of the Night's second great showpiece, "Der Holle Rache", left me breathless.

The Annual General Meeting decided, after much discussion which was thankfully focused at the end by Professor Hans Freeman, to amend the rules for allocation of Bayreuth tickets so that members who have not previously been to Bayreuth with tickets provided through the Society will be given preference. Sets of tickets will henceforward be allocated by ballot to applicants in the following order: (i) to applicants who have been members of the Society for two years or more and who have not previously or in the past five years received tickets to Bayreuth through the Society, (ii) to other applicants who have been members of the Society for two years or more, and (iii) to all other applicants.

I would like to welcome two new members to our Management Committee, Gaby Bremner-Moore and Alan Whelan,

who were nominated from the floor of the AGM. They join the existing committee office-bearers and members, who were all reappointed for a further year.

Other Wagner performances

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's performance of "The Ring – An Orchestral Adventure" under the baton of Edo de Waart in early April was an unexpected pleasure. I had been put off by the faux marketing of a "highlights" performance, under a poster of the Valkyries as Mardi Gras icons Dykes On Bikes, but it was nothing of the kind. Instead, it was a single connected whole made up in the main of music from the *Ring* Cycle written by Wagner without voices – the prelude to Rheingold, the descent into Nibelheim, the entrance of the gods into Walhalla, the ride of the Valkyries, Forest Murmurs, Siegfried's Rhine journey, and so on. Musically it was a delight, with very few moments where the absence of a vocal line intruded into the flow of the music. For me it brought back memories of the four years, ending with *Götterdämmerung* in 2000, when de Waart and the SSO gave outstanding concert performances of each of the *Ring* works.

I almost hesitate to heap more praise on the two "semi-staged" performances of *Parsifal* in Wellington in mid-March, since the reviews of the performance have already used all the superlatives I know. With an all New Zealand cast, including Sir Donald McIntyre in the role of Gurnemanz and English-born Margaret Medlyn as Kundry, these performances were part of the 2006 New Zealand International Arts Festival, in conjunction with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. Our Society made a donation of A\$2,500 in support of these performances.

Instead of telling you how good the singers were, I'll make some observations about negative aspects of the ticketing process and the physical location of chorus and soloists relative to the audience and the Michael Fowler Centre. Tickets were first allocated to Wellington subscribers for the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra's 2006 subscription season (which is how friends and I got our tickets) and were only later made available to the public. This meant that some eager overseas travellers had to book travel and accommodation without having tickets for the performances. The staging took place on a raised platform behind the orchestra, with the orchestra moved forward to the very front of the stage. This proved to be a disaster for many viewers in the Fowler Centre, where the front-row seats in the stalls are already slightly below the level of the concert stage. Although these seats were priced as premium seating, they had no view of the raised stage behind the orchestra or of the singers on that stage, and many overseas visitors I spoke to from our own Wagner Society and from the Adelaide Society were bitterly disappointed with their seating. Luckily, the management of the theatre and the staff of the NZSO were able to re-seat many of them, but as a general rule a festival performance will not attract friendly comments from overseas visitors if they only get seating left-over after the locals have taken the best available in the house, or from anyone who pays premium prices for opera seats without a view of the singers.

My second observation relates to the physical location of the male chorus with the Fowler centre. This chorus was split, with 17 tenors high up in the back rows of a block of audience seating on one side of the orchestra, and 17 basses similarly high up on the opposite side of the hall. The female chorus was also in audience seating behind the orchestra, but it faced out into the auditorium. The stage was not large, and only the principal singers, pages and Klingsor's six *Zauber Mädchen* appeared on it, a few at a time. The acoustics of the auditorium appeared to favour singers and musicians on or near the stage, and did not favour the male choirs located high up in audience seating, who sang across the hall to each other rather than out into the auditorium. As a result, the Grail Knights, whose vocal menace is usually a driving force in the Good Friday services, sounded weak and distant from where I was sitting. Similarly, Klingsor sang from high at the back of the auditorium behind the orchestra and stage, behind and between two screens onto which the text was projected. These screens seemed to me to block some of the sound, so that Martin Snell's deep rolling bass voice sounded oddly thin. The quality of the singers was so overwhelming that it was annoying that the performances were marred by these positional decisions.

Visit by Bernd Benthak

Bernd Benthak, the director of the Wellington *Parsifal* and of other operas including works by Wagner, will be visiting Australia later this month. He will be in Adelaide around 20 June as guest of honour at the 20th anniversary celebrations of the Richard Wagner Society of South Australia. Bernd was not a foundation member of that Society, but he provided the catalyst for its formation, as he was directing the *Flying Dutchman* in Adelaide in 1986 when members of the audience decided to see if there was enough interest to form a Society.

Mr Benthak's visit is being partly-sponsored by our Society as a contribution towards the celebration of South Australia's anniversary, and on his return to New Zealand, Bernd will be stopping off in Sydney for a few days, when we hope to organise an informal dinner with him. Details of this will be sent to members by email, since at this stage we don't know the exact dates of his travel.

Paul Curran

A recent Sunday morning waddle past the eateries lining Macleay Street, Potts Point, in search of sustenance, was

pleasantly but briefly interrupted by a chance encounter with Colin Jones and Paul Curran. Paul has made an outstanding career for himself as a stage director in Europe and North America, and was back in Sydney between projects. Paul's website, www.paulcurran.info contains some astounding images from his past productions, and if you have the time it's well worth a look, especially at the pictures from his La Scala *Tannhäuser*.

Donations and membership renewals

Finally, some words of apology. I have been beset by problems with technology, requiring a new PC following the untimely demise of my former model with the consequent loss of a considerable amount of data. My new PC failed after a number of weeks and I had to start the process of rebuilding my data a second time. Then there were the unappreciated attentions of a select group of worms and viruses, which were inconvenient but not fatal. And lastly the discovery that a number of macros which I used to generate letters to renewing members and to produce receipts for tax-deductible donations would not run on my new PC no matter how nicely I fiddled with them.

The upshot of this tedious tale is that no letters or receipts have been posted since March, and for this unacceptably long delay I apologise. I will be posting individually hand-crafted receipts for donations and letters acknowledging your membership renewals over the next few weeks, so that everyone should have received a reply by the end of the current tax year, 30 June. If you don't receive anything by then, please phone me so that I can re-generate the document you require.

Our Newsletter editor advises me that the September issue will contain a number of reviews of the Copenhagen Ring Cycle as well as *Parsifal*. Many thanks to the contributors. All contributions are welcome!
Best wishes to you all, Roger Cruickshank, Monday 13 June 2006

NEW MEMBERS

The following person joined the Society: Igor Ferdman [949].

DONATIONS

The Society welcomes all donations and they can be addressed to the Treasurer, Wagner Society in NSW Inc at the GPO address above. Such donations help us to carry out our objectives of promoting the performance of Wagner's works. Donations are tax-deductible and receipts will be issued. Donations were gratefully received from the following members between March and the end of May 2006: Janet and Hugh Wayland, Britta and Harry Littman, Ingrid Garofali, Walter Norris, Anthony Jones, Sir Nicholas and Lady Shehadie, Paddy Trumbull, David and Sabina Full, Carole Bailey, Vanessa King, Barbara and Ian Brady, Peter Cumines, Moya Crane, William Felbel, Susan Kelly, Renaissance Tours and Bituminous Products Pty Limited.

"VALKYRIES RIDE IN TO SURROUND SOUND"

Such was the title for a Sydney Morning Herald review by Joyce Morgan, on 26 May 2006, of the first release in the Melba label's recording of an historical recording – both of the first fully Australian Ring Cycle and the world's first surround-sound Ring Cycle

According to the SMH report, "For Melba Recordings producer Maria Vandamme and her three-person team, it is the culmination of a dream. 'We are over the moon,' she says". "We thought it was too important an event not to record," she says. "We did it to create a legacy for future Australians and to promote these artists in their careers." *Die Walkure*, distributed by Fuse, was released on June 7. [As of 14 June, the Fuse website www.fusemusic.com.au/titlespace did not appear to have the recording listed. Ed]

ADELAIDE RING IN SACD

Now that the Adelaide Ring is being released in SACD, members may like to consider whether it is a good time to upgrade their hifi equipment so that the Valkyries can truly ride through your lounge room given that a new and very reasonable player, the DVPNS92 has just been released by Sony Australia. As well as providing state of the art upsampling to near high definition level for your LCD/plasma or DLP TVs, it also provides superb stereo and multi channel reproduction from Super Audio CDs. All this for \$399!!

Every SACD released these days (and including the Ring) IS "hybrid". That means that each disc carries three separate programs – the normal CD layer, a stereo layer compatible with a normal stereo system and a multichannel layer of up to 5 channels, which you can play, if you wish, through your home theatre system. Once set up, you just play the discs like normal CDs and, of course, because of the CD layer, you can use the same disc in the car or on any other player.

There are about 3,000 titles available and a good source for these to check the titles is www.SA-CD.net.com. This year promises some classic opera recordings (as well as the Adelaide Ring) like Caballe's *Tosca*. If you haven't heard SACD, you're in for a treat. The sound has all the richness and lushness that CDs miss and multichannel takes "you" to the recording venue. The Sony machine surprised me: it's well made at a very reasonable price (some SACD players alone cost up to \$15,000). So if it's time to update your CD or DVD player, look no further!! John Hunter (who has no

connection whatsoever with Sony).

Wagner Society 25th Anniversary Essay Competition Winner – Nathan Parry, University of Melbourne

This is the second and concluding part of the essay that was awarded a prize the inaugural Anniversary Essay competition in 2005. The conclusion will be printed in the June 2006 Newsletter.

Having moved to Paris from Lucerne in September 1859, Wagner had hoped to have *Tannhäuser* performed, and this became a reality largely due to Princess Pauline Metternich (1836 – 1921), wife of the Austrian ambassador, Prince Richard von Metternich-Winneburg. She was the daughter of a Hungarian entrepreneur, and the granddaughter of Metternich the Austrian statesman. Wagner dedicated his *In das Album der Fürstin M.* (1861) to her. The albumleaf shows grace and charm, but does not contain the depth or complexity of its companion piece, the *Albumblatt* in A-flat major (*Ankunft bei den schwarzen Schwänen*). Composed in the same year, this latter work was created while Wagner was staying at the Prussian embassy in Paris, where he had a room overlooking the Seine. He had been offered accommodation by his friend Count Pourtalès, the Prussian ambassador in Paris. In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck (July 12, 1861), he described the view: 'I have in front of me a garden with beautiful tall trees and a pool with two black swans.'¹⁷ He felt a 'profound sense of well-being in the midst of a condition of complete abandonment and detachment from everything usually considered as necessary prerequisites for permanent existence.' In such an environment, the *Ankunft bei den schwarzen Schwänen* (*Arrival at the House of the Black Swans*), was completed (July 29, 1861), written as a compliment to his hostess Anna Pourtalès (1827 – 92). Like the Wesendonck Sonata, this *Albumblatt* in A flat contains similarities to portions of Wagner's music dramas. The atmosphere recalls *Tristan und Isolde*, particularly the Prelude to Act Three. Furthermore, it is in fact Elisabeth's Hall of Song Aria 'Sei mir gegrusst' from *Tannhäuser* that manifests in the major key in this piano piece.

The E-flat major *Albumblatt* of 1875 is dedicated to Betty Schott (1821 – 75), wife of the music publisher Franz Schott. Wagner had been intensely grateful for the friendship he had maintained with her husband in Karlsruhe in the early 1860s. This Albumleaf possesses a harmonic and rhythmic freedom that somewhat reflects Wagner's later style, incorporating passion and elegant melodies. Even though free chromaticism (that was to appear in *Parsifal* later on) is not evident, there is a surplus of rhythmic variety, including triplets and dotted figures stated against crotchets and quavers. Nevertheless, Cosima claims (in her diary on August 30, 1877) that he regarded the work as 'artificial.'¹⁸

Breig describes the later works of Wagner as 'brief piano pieces of a private nature,' largely seeming like improvisatory works, and in this manner may be regarded as works of some interest.¹⁹ In the Hungerford sleeve notes, Friedelind Wagner writes:

It appears – in [the] later works – as if Wagner never quite felt at ease when writing for the piano, as if he were confined in a musical straight-jacket: no matter how hard he may (or may not) have tried – he always hears, feels, thinks and writes orchestrally, which gives these original compositions for the piano the air of piano "arrangements".²⁰

Bellman describes the bulk of these mature albumleaves as 'vocal in conception and written with the reasonably fluent amateur pianist in mind.'²¹

¹⁷ Millington, *Wagner Compendium*, 1992, 320.

¹⁸ Cosima Wagner, *Diaries, Volume I*, 1980, 980.

¹⁹ Werner Breig, 'The Musical Works'. Ed. Ulrich Müller, Peter Wapnewski and John Dethridge. *Wagner Handbook* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 453.

²⁰ Friedelind Wagner, 'Introduction,' *Sleeve Notes: Richard Wagner The Complete Piano Works*. Bruce Hungerford, *Pianist*, 1961.

²¹ Bellman, *Wagner Pianiste?*, 1995, 54.

In conclusion then, it appears that Beethoven had a great influence on Wagner's piano works, especially those written during the composer's time with Theodor Weinlig. The later works, however, show a greater experimental approach in terms of harmony, and the influences of other composers are also evident. Furthermore, these more mature works are single-movement pieces and therefore more akin to the piano works of other Romantic composers. Despite not being in the league of his great music dramas, Wagner's piano music, as Friedelind writes, 'allows us access to some (relatively) private thoughts by a man obsessed by his public role, influence, and importance. These thoughts are best heard when they come from the listener's own fingers and are thus enjoyed as originally intended.'²²

The Hungerford recording is a private limited edition and not commercially available. A copy of the recording is held in the Music Library at the University of Melbourne.

²² Friedelind Wagner, 'Introduction', 1961.

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Discography

Wagner, Richard. *The Complete Piano Works*. Bruce Hungerford (pianoforte).
Bayreuth Festival Master Classes, LO 8P 5179 – LO 8P 5182, 1960.

Work	Key	WWV	Date of Composition	Publishing Details	Other Information
Sonata	D min	2	Summer 1829	lost	
Sonata	F min	5	Autumn 1829	lost	
Sonata for 4 hands	B-flat maj	16	Early 1831	lost	Orchestrated by composer.
*Sonata	B-flat maj	21	Autumn 1831	Breitkopf and Härtel (Leipzig), Easter 1832.	Dedicated to Theodor Weinlig.
*Fantasia	F-sharp min	22	Autumn 1831	C F Kahnt Nachfolger (Leipzig), 1905.	
Polonaise	D maj	23A	End 1831 - early 1832	Breitkopf and Härtel (Leipzig), 1973.	
*Grosse Sonate	A maj	26	Early 1832	4-hand version: 1832. Musikverlag Hans Gerig (Cologne), Dec 1960.	
Albumblatt (Song without Words)	E maj	64	Dec 1840	1911 (Vienna).	Written for Ernst Benedikt Kietz.
Polka	G maj	84	End May 1853		
*Eine Sonate für das Album M[atilde] W[esendonck]	A-flat maj	85	June 1853	Verlag B. Schott's Söhne (Mainz), 1877.	
Züricher - Vielliebchen Walzer	E-flat maj	88	End May 1854	1901 - 02 (Berlin).	Dedicated to Marie Luckmeyer.
Theme	A-flat maj	93	Probably 1853; revised 1881.		
*In das Album der Fürstin M[etternich]	C maj	94	June 18, 1861	Verlag E. W. Fritzsche (Leipzig), 1871.	
*Ankunft bei den schwarzen Schwänen	A-flat maj	95	July 29, 1861	Verlag E. W. Fritzsche (Leipzig), 1897.	Written for Countess Pourtales.
*Albumblatt	E-flat maj	108	Jan - Feb 1875	Verlag B. Schott's Söhne 1876 (Mainz).	Dedicated to Betty Schott.

Richard Wagner's works for piano. Those recorded by Bruce Hungerford are marked with asterisks.

BIRGIT NILSSON 18 MAY 1918 – 25 DECEMBER 2005: A TRIBUTE (Part 2)

Max Grubb has specially written for the Newsletter an extensive appraisal and appreciation of the voice, career and character of one of the greatest singers ever to have walked the opera stage. The second part, dealing with Birgit Nilsson's Recorded Legacy, regaling us with many of the Nilsson Anecdotes – Nilsson was famous for her sense of humour as well as her voice. Part 3, dealing with Nilsson's sense of humour and a select bibliography, will appear in the next issue

Obituaries appearing in newspapers following her death have concentrated on the chronological aspects of her career. The following article will examine her role as the foremost 'hochdramatische' soprano of the twentieth century; the tour of Australia in September and October 1973; significance and contribution to the development of the recording of classical music; her recorded legacy both aural and visual; and will conclude with some anecdotes about her. Many of the claims made might seem to be overstated, particularly in the first section, and as such, I would hope stimulate discussion about the career of this remarkable singer.

Birgit Nilsson: Her Recorded Legacy.

Birgit Nilsson, as with her Australian counterpart Joan Sutherland, shared a similar trajectory in recording their repertoire. Both became international stars in 1959 following their respective debuts, Sutherland as Lucia at Covent Garden in February and Nilsson as Isolde at the Metropolitan Opera in December. Both singers emerged at a time when their predecessors no longer dominated the operatic stage, Flagstad had retired and opera and concert appearances by Maria Callas were becoming rarities.

The Introduction of Stereophonic Sound and 'Sonicstage.'

With the introduction of the LP for domestic use in 1951, it became feasible for the major recording companies to record complete operas. Columbia, Decca and RCA began to record the mainstream Italian and Mozart operas using opera singers they had under contract. Until 1956 these recordings were done in monaural sound. By 1956 however Columbia (EMI) and especially Decca had begun to record in stereophonic sound and the first stereo LPs came on to the domestic market in 1958. The Decca Record Company signed Nilsson and Sutherland to exclusive contracts in 1959 and proceeded over the next decade to record their major roles whilst they performed these same roles in the world's leading opera houses.

Decca had introduced a recording process called 'sonicstage' in 1957 whereby a rectangular stage surrounded by microphones was set up and within which singers would move as in a stage performance of the opera. What this meant was that opera recordings were recorded using state of the art sound and that they had vividness and realism which was now available in the home. Decca wished to use this process to record the 'Ring' and the operas by Richard Strauss believing that this would bring out the musical detail of the orchestration and dramatic qualities of the narrative. (Culshaw, *Ring Resounding*, (1967) and *Putting the Record Straight* (1981). This process in a somewhat experimental and primitive form was first used in the recordings of *Die Walküre* Acts 1 (Decca 425 963-2) and 3 (Decca 425 986-2) in 1957. Nilsson's recordings of *Tristan* (1960), *Salome* (1961) and the 'Ring' (1962-1965) pioneered the evolution of this technique. Humphrey Burton's documentary made for the BBC, *The Golden Ring* (Decca 071 153-9) of the final recording sessions of *Götterdämmerung* in 1965 shows the use of this process and contains the best visual record of Nilsson singing Wagner when she was at the peak of her career. So important was Nilsson to the recording of the 'Ring' that in 1958 Decca delayed the project so that they could secure her services because she was regarded as more marketable than the other leading 'hochdramatic' soprano of the day, Astrid Varnay (Culshaw, 1967, p.82)

In the 1950's the star power of singers such as Callas, di Stefano and Gobbi for Columbia, Tebaldi, del Monaco and Bastianini for Decca, and Milanov, Bjorling, Merrill and Warren were major contributors to the artistic and commercial success of recording complete opera. A second generation of opera singers of the LP era emerged after 1959 in tandem with stereophonic recording. The quality and size of voice, and the powerful high notes of singers such as Nilsson and Sutherland, and the excitement of stereophonic sound, encouraged many consumers, including myself to purchase their latest recordings. Growing up in Australia in the 1960's this was the only way to experience the operas of Wagner and Strauss as these were rarely performed by the Elizabethan Opera Company (1956-1966) and Australian Opera (post 1967). As such, one's musical education was based on LP recordings. For my eighteenth birthday and for passing the matriculation exams and gaining entry to university, my parents (at my behest) gave me the complete recording of *Siegfried*. Thus began my first encounter with the voice of Birgit Nilsson, and I would eagerly await each new installment of the "Ring" and new recordings by Nilsson of *Isolde*, *A Masked Ball*, *Macbeth*, *Elektra*, *Tosca*, *Turandot*, *Aida* and even *Don Giovanni*.

Live Telecasts.

During the late 1950's and 1960's, the Ed Sullivan Show and the Bell Telephone Hour regularly presented the major singers of opera reprising excerpts from roles they had sung on the stage. Nilsson's appearances on these shows is well documented and now available on DVD, *Great Moments in Opera* from the Ed Sullivan Show (Kultur D2528) and *Great Stars of Opera: Telecasts from The Bell Telephone Hour 1959-1966*, Vols.1 (VAI4201), 2 (VAI4232) and 3 (VAI4280). They capture her at the peak of her career in excerpts from the many roles she sang at the Metropolitan

Opera and also include her singing rarities, such as “Come Unto Him’ from *The Messiah* and “Inflammatu” from Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* (VAI 4280).

From the mid 1970’s, major opera companies began to have live telecasts of staged opera. The star power of major singers such as Nilsson, Domingo, Sutherland and Pavarotti was used to attract new audiences to opera. Early telecasts were irregular. Some of these included the following: *Tristan and Isolde* with Nilsson and Jon Vickers from the Orange Festival (1973)(Kultur D2230); Nilsson’s debut in the role of the Dyers Wife in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* at the Stockholm Opera (1975); the Australian Opera telecast Joan Sutherland in *Lakmé* (1976), *Lucrezia Borgia* (1977) and *Norma* (1978); the Metropolitan Opera with Domingo and Cotrubas in *Rigoletto* (1977) and *La Bohème* (1977) with Pavarotti and Renato Scotti; Covent Garden with Domingo and Katia Ricciarelli in *A Masked Ball* (1978) and *Luisa Miller* (1979). Regular scheduling of live opera by public broadcasters began in earnest in the early 1980’s.

When the Metropolitan Opera began to telecast live opera on a regular basis the first project was Strauss’s *Elektra* with Nilsson. James Levine’s biographer commented: “Historically, there is nothing in this group more important than the first project, Strauss’s *Elektra* with Birgit Nilsson from February 1980. This is one of the great documents in the history of opera in this century....This is a landmark release that caused us to reconsider the entire idea of operatic recording” (Marsh, 1998, pp.258). Thus began the era of regular telecasts from the Met.

The Major Recordings.

No other ‘hochdramatische’ soprano was as fortunate as Nilsson to have made complete recordings of her major roles in the studio, whilst at the same time appearing on the stages of the world’s leading opera houses in the same roles.

Her major recordings were made between 1960 and 1969. During this period she made what are regarded as definitive recordings of *Salome* (1961), Brunnhilde in the Ring (Solti 1962-1965, and Böhm 1967), *Turandot* (1965), *Isolde* (1966), and *Elektra* (1967). Many of her roles were recorded twice and on many occasions the later recordings were an improvement on her earlier work. For example, *Tristan and Isolde* (1960 and 1966), *Turandot* (1959 and 1965), and the Ring (1962-1965) and (1967). Others, such as, Donna Anna (1961 and 1967) were less successful. Some of the most incisive comments regarding her recordings are to be found in Steane, *The Grand Tradition* (1974). Christa Ludwig comments: “But recordings couldn’t do justice to her timbre, because her voice was so big that recording tape was incapable of capturing it accurately” (Ludwig, 1999, p.199).

The Early Years (1957 – 1964)

Her early recitals of 1958 and 1959 (Testament SBT 1200 and 1201), excerpts from *Tristan* (Decca 452 896-2) and complete recordings of *Girl of the Golden West* (EMI CMS 7 63970 2), *Turandot* (RCA RD 85932(2)), the complete *Tristan* (Decca 430 234-2) and *Die Walküre* (Decca 470 443-2) show a voice of icy crystalline quality. The 1962 recital, *Nilsson Sings Verdi* (Decca 475 6413), shows this quality, particularly Abigale’s aria from *Nabucco*, ‘Pace. Pace mio dio’ from Forza and ‘O don fatale’ from *Don Carlos* with piercing top notes. Her 1963 recital of German Arias (Decca 467 912-2 containing excerpts from this recital) shows a voice developing more body, warmth and expression. This development is apparent in *Siegfried* (Decca 455 568-2) and the final scenes contain her best singing for this period, particularly the high C at the end. Culshaw observed that Solti was very pleased on hearing the playback: “Solti came out with one of his classic bits of garbled English. ‘It’s animalig!’ he said. *It’s a perfect screaming!*’ ‘He meant it had the right, earthy, animal quality...’”(Culshaw, 1967, p.161).

The Middle Years (1964 – 1968)

These could be categorised as her ‘glory’ years when her best recordings were made. These include *Macbeth* (1964), *Fidelio* (1964), *Götterdämmerung* (1964 and 1965), *Turandot* (1965) and *Die Walküre* (1965), *Tristan and Isolde* (1966) and the live ‘Ring’ (1967). Her most productive year for studio recordings was 1967 when she recorded Tosca, Donna Anna, Aida and Elektra.

Her complete recording of *Macbeth* in 1964 (Decca 433 039-2) shows the voice having more warmth and ‘thicker’ in production than the three arias she recorded from this opera in 1962. Similarly, her recordings of *Turandot* (1965) (EMI CMS 7 69327-2) and *Die Walküre* (1965) (Decca 455 561-2) show the voice more prominent and having a visceral impact which the 1959 and 1961 recordings lacked. Nowhere is this more in evidence than Brunnhilde’s battle cry at the beginning of Act 2 of *Die Walküre* and the riddle scene in Act 2 of *Turandot*.

Arguably her best recordings of this period are *Tristan and Isolde* (DGG 419 889-2), a theatrical ‘tour de force’ on stage and *Elektra* (Decca 417 345-2). Elektra demonstrate superb characterization, powerful top notes which overwhelm the listener, particularly in the confrontation scene with Klytämnestra, and sensitive use of pianissimo in the recognition scene with Oreste.

The live recordings from Bayreuth of *Tristan* (1966) and the Ring (1967) show the voice with great power, accuracy and expression, but without the ‘edge’ it appears to have had when she recorded these roles for Decca in the recording studio earlier in the decade.

Nilsson's only recital disc made during this phase of her career was *Land of the Midnight Sun* (1965) (Decca 473 794-2) featuring songs by Grieg, Sibelius and Rangstrom. The voice cuts through the orchestra and tends to overpower the songs of Grieg and Sibelius, particularly Hostkvall (which has a stunning top B and C), however, the voice has more empathy with the darker quality of the Rangstrom songs, particularly Skoldmon (Valkyrie).

The Later Years (1969 – 1977)

By 1969 Nilsson had recorded all the major roles in her operatic repertoire and her recording career began to slow down. She recorded the role of Agathe in *Der Freischütz* and those of Elizabeth and Venus in *Tannhäuser* in 1969. The former was undertaken too late in her career and it is rather stodgy. The recording of *Tannhäuser* (DGG 471 708-2) is very successful and is arguably the best recording vocally of the opera due to strong casting in the major roles, with Windgassen in the title role, Fischer-Dieskau as Wolfram, Theo Adam as the Landgrave. Her 1970 recording of *Oberon* (DGG 419 038 –2) is very good, although the coloratura in 'Dunkel ist es schon und spat' in the finale to Act 1 is somewhat laboured.

During this period she recorded two recital discs for Phillips of repertoire that one does not normally associate her with. In Birgit Nilsson sings Wagner conducted by Colin Davis (1972), the excerpt from *The Flying Dutchman* (Phillips 454 312-2) compares unfavourably with her 1958 recording, whilst arias from *Rienzi* and *Die Feen* (not included in this compilation) and the Wesendonck Lieder are welcome additions to her recorded repertoire. A later recital disc (1974) conducted by Leif Segerstam includes Sieglinde's aria 'Du bist du Lenz ' and the Kundry Parsifal Scene from Act 2 of *Parsifal* (Phillips 454 312-2) is also welcome additions, particularly the latter. It is useful to compare Nilsson's recording made at the age of 56 with recordings by Flagstad (RCA GD 87915, Track 3) recorded in 1940 when Flagstad was 45 and at the peak of her career, and Flagstad's live recording from Covent Garden (LCD 144-1) in 1951 when she was 56. Nilsson's tone is bright and forward, however, the lower placement of Flagstad's voice in both recordings sits more comfortably with the role and gives greater pleasure.

Her last major recording was that of the Dyers Wife in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, conducted by Karl Böhm at the Vienna Staatsoper in 1977, with a cast including; Leonie Rysanek as the Empress, James King as the Emperor, Walter Berry as Barak and Ruth Hesse as the Nurse (DGG 415 472-2). The recording was made in September and whilst it shows Nilsson in great form, the middle voice appears to lack the support it once had. I was fortunate to see two performances of this opera at the Richard Strauss Festival in Vienna in January 1977 and recall that the January performances found her in better voice.

The last major recordings in the public domain are from the Metropolitan Opera, *Elektra* (1980) (PC-11520D) and the Centennial Gala of 1982 (PC-94-046-D). *Elektra* finds her in good form although with diminished prowess; her stage presence formidable, the high notes are all there, but the middle register is missing and there is a tendency to sing flat and emit 'mooring' sounds. The same observation can be made of her rendition of 'Isolde's Narration and Curse' which she sang at the Centennial Gala. Having attended a performance of *Elektra* and performances of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* at the Vienna Festival in June 1979, the vocal decline since 1977 was marked, and even more so in the Met performances. [To be completed in the next issue of the Newsletter] [Max Grubb]

Born 193 years ago in May 1813, Wagner once reminisced in verse about his birth:

In der schönen Monat Mai
Kroch Richard Wagner aus dem Ei.
Es wünschten viele die ihn lieben
Er wäre besser d'rin geblieben.

(In the beautiful month of May
Crept Richard Wagner from the egg.
It's the [birthday] wishes of many who love him
That it were better had he remained within.)

President's Report for the Society's 25th year, from 1 January to 31 December 2005, delivered to the Annual General Meeting on 21 May 2006

Dear Members

I am pleased to present the President's Report for the 25th year of the Wagner Society in New South Wales Incorporated.

Functions

The Society's 2005 functions held here in the Goethe-Institut included:

- In February, a "post-mortem" on the Neidhardt Ring staged in Adelaide in November-December 2004,
- In March, a talk entitled "Women and Loss in the Ring" by Justice Jane Mathews, with a recital by Jessica Pratt accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley, and an interview with Jessica conducted by Antony Ernst,
- In April, a talk entitled "Symbols in Parsifal" by Alan Whelan,
- In May, our AGM, with a recital and a special 25th birthday party,
- In July, a talk entitled "Wagner and Film" by Dr Roger Hillman,
- In August, a special event organized by Miriam Gordon-Stewart which was a fitting celebration in our anniversary year, an interview with Deborah Polaski conducted by Miriam Gordon-Stewart,
- In September, a panel discussion on productions in Bayreuth in 2005,
- In October, a talk on Liszt and Wagner by composer Nigel Butterly,
- In November, a talk entitled "Perception and Reception of Wagner in the Nazi Period" by Alan Whelan, and
- In December, our end-of-year party.

Anniversary

Our 25th anniversary was celebrated with a party in May, a special meeting in August with Deborah Polaski, and with a special celebration colour issue of our Newsletter, tracing the Society's history. By a stroke of good fortune, Miriam Gordon-Stewart was hosting an Australian holiday for her friend Deborah Polaski, and as a "thank you" to the Society for providing her with financial assistance over a number of years to further her studies in Europe, Miriam arranged for Ms Polaski to speak at a special function organized in her honour, which was a very special event for those who were able to attend.

Finances

The Honorary Treasurer's Report will show that at the end of 2005 our financial position was sound and that we were able to provide over \$13,000 in sponsorships and donations during 2005.

Thanks

We continue our good relations with the German Consulate, the Consul General, and with the Goethe-Institut, and we thank their officers and staff for their continued help and support. We are also pleased to continue to provide financial assistance each year to the Bayreuth Scholar, who is selected by Opera Foundation Australia, and to students from the Conservatorium of Music by way of German Language scholarships here at the Goethe Institut.

There are many people in the Society I wish to thank, and foremost among them special thanks go to the members of your Committee who worked so hard on your behalf throughout 2004 - our Vice President, Julian Block, our Honorary Secretary Mary Haswell, our Honorary Treasurer Michael Moore, and to our committee members Dennis Mather and Terence Watson. I'd particularly like to give Terence special thanks, for the wonderful colour issues of the Newsletter produced in 2005, including one celebrating the Neidhardt Ring in Adelaide in November and December, 2004.

More thanks are due to Elle Rasink, who has catered our afternoon teas; to John Studdert, our web master; to our faithfully Ravens, Camron Dyer and Richard Mason; and to Alasdair Beck, our Public Officer. I'd also like to thank those members, especially Marie Hiscock, who come early and lend a hand with the food or the name tags.

Future

2006 has already seen a Parsifal in Wellington, and there will be a *Tristan und Isolde* in Perth in November. Opera Australia is rumoured to be planning productions of two Wagner operas, in 2007 and 2008, and there are also rumours that the State Opera of South Australia is planning a Meistersinger in 2008 and a restaging of the Neidhardt Ring in 2010.

Finally

Lastly I would like to thank you, our members, especially those of you who come along and support our functions and other activities, including by coming to this AGM. Your continuing interest and encouragement as members of the Society is the reason we are here today. Thank you all.

The Wagner Society in New South Wales
Incorporated
Balance Sheet
as at 31 December 2005

\$ (2004)		\$ (2005)	\$ (2005)
	Current Assets		
	CASH		
\$20,756	Cash at bank	\$25,047	
\$191	Public Donation Account	\$445	
	INVENTORY		
\$145	Publications, Stationery	\$235	
\$5,136	Publications: "The Once and Future Ring"	\$4,959	
\$26,228	Total Assets		\$30,686
	Current Liabilities		
-\$16,636	Bayreuth Tickets	-	
		\$17,274	
-\$3,730	Prepaid membership	-\$3,005	
-\$2,815	Debtors	-\$2,815	
-\$23,181	Total Liabilities		-\$23,094
\$3,047	Net Assets		\$7,592
	Analysis of Net Assets		
\$6,361	Previous year surplus retained	\$3,047	
-\$3,314	Plus current year surplus (deficiency)	\$4,545	
\$3,047	Total Surplus		\$7,592

The Wagner Society in New South Wales Incorporated
 Revenue and Expenditure Statement
 12 Months to 31 December 2005

\$ (2004)	Receive d \$ (2005)	Paid Out (\$ 2005)	Net (\$ 2005)
\$11,221	\$11,220		
MEMBERSHIP REVENUE			
LESS Administration Costs			
-\$3,942		-\$6,077	
-\$280		-\$385	
		-\$1,400	
		-\$682	
-\$508			
-\$243		-\$248	
-\$139		-\$126	
\$6,109	\$11,220	-\$8,918	\$2,302
\$4,683	\$5,650		
		-\$3,524	
		-\$2,475	
		-\$2,144	
-\$5,985		-\$8,143	
\$800	\$8,393		
\$1,755	\$1,800		
-\$5,592		-\$366	
\$69	\$69		
-\$4,270	\$15,912	-\$8,509	\$7,402
\$9,475	\$8,191		
-\$14,628		-\$13,351	
-\$5,153	\$8,191	-\$13,351	-\$5,159
-\$3,314	\$35,323	-\$30,778	\$4,545
-\$5,833			
-\$1,886		-\$2,467	
-\$1,909		-\$2,862	
		-\$2,500	
-\$3,000			
-\$2,000		-\$5,521	
-\$14,628		-\$13,351	

MEMBERSHIP LIST AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2005

The list below lists members alphabetically by first name, identifies the Patron, Honorary Life Members and Public Officer, and also members with membership numbers up to 100.

Adrian Collette, Alan Hauserman and Janet Nash, Alan Salter, Alastair Martin and Julian Lockyer, Alexander Cater and Rosemary Cater-Smith, Alexander Cozzolino, Amanda and George Rosenberg, Andrew Goy, Angela Kayser, Ann Casimir, Ann Weeden, Anna Ziegler, Anna-Lisa Klettenberg, Anne Jones, Annemarie Swebbs, Annie Marshall, Anthony Jones, Armand Bartos, Audrey and John Palmer, Aviva and Alec Cohen, Barbara and Andrew Dowe, Barbara and Ian Brady, Barbara and Nicholas Dorsch, Barbara and Peter Nicholson, Barbara de Rome, Barbara McNulty OBE (Honorary Life Member), Bill Brooks and Alasdair Beck (Public Officer), Bob Foster, Brenda and Brian Donovan, Brett Johnson, Brian Ducker, Brian Freestone and Charles Brady, Britta and Harry Littman, Bruce Boman, Bruce Love, Carl Andrew, Carole and Jim Leigh, Carole Bailey, Catherine Davies, Cecilia Segura, Charles MacKerras (Patron), Charles Manning, Charles Terrasson, Charlotte and Hartmut Derichs, Cherry Jackaman, Christopher Coffey, Clare Hennessy (membership number 19), Clive Evatt, Clyde Dominish, Colin Mackerras, Colin Baskerville, Colin Jones and Paul Curran, Colin Piper, Colleen and Michael Chesterman, Cynthia Hughes, Daryl Colquhoun, David and Sabina Full, David Brown, David Delany and Alister Wong, David McCarthy, David Mutton, David Triggs, Deanne Whittleston and Anthony Gregg, Dennis Gray, Dennis Mather and John Studdert, Derek Harrison and Marcus Susanto, Desmond Murphy, Despina Kallinikos, Diana Heath, Diana McBain, Diana Wang and Peter George, Diana-Rose Orr, Douglas Barry, Douglas Jamieson (membership number 90), Douglas Sturkey, Edith and Hans Freeman, Elizabeth Fletcher, Elizabeth Gordon-Werner, Elizabeth Jacka, Elizabeth Long, Elizabeth Moser, Elle Rasink, Eloise Evans, Elsie and James Moore, Erika Jumikis, Esteban Insausti, Esther Janssen, Frances Butcher, Gabriella Bremner-Moore and Michael Moore, Garry Richards, Gary Wilson, Gertraud and Richard Cohen, Gillian and Brian Jones, Gillian and Kenneth (Tim) McDonald, Glen Barnwell, Greg Watters, Gretchen Dechert, Gunter Slamer, Hannah and Willi Spiller, Harry Donaldson, Heather and Peter Roland, Heinz Ebert, Helen and Bill Naylor, Helen and Kevin Grant, Helen and Peter Hall, Helen Dunlop, Horst Hoffmann (Honorary Life Member), Hugh Hallard, Ian Dicker, Ian Hutchison, Ian Maxwell, Ingrid Garofali, Iphygenia Kallinikos, Ira Kowalski, Irene and Wolfgang Merretz, Isolde Tornya, James Henningham, Jan Bowen, Jane and Barry Walters, Jane Mathews, Janet and Hugh Wayland (membership number 10), Janette Bates, Jean Louis Stuurop (membership number 75), Jeffrey Smart and Ermes de Zan, Jennifer and Maxwell Herford, Jennifer Condon, Jennifer Ferns (membership number 34), Jennifer Manton, Jessica Block, Jessie Anderson, Joan and Maxwell Connery, Joan Griffin, Joan MacKenzie, Joe Kelleher, John Byrne, John Casey, John Gregory-Roberts, John Iredale, John McGrath, John Pearce, John Small, John Snelling, John Vallentine, Jorge Rodrigues, Joseph Ferfaglia (Honorary Life Member) and Judy Ferfaglia (membership number 45), Judi Mitchell, Judith Jacks, Judith Mulveney, Julie and Terry Clarke, Julie Carroll, Julie King and D Woodley-Page (membership number 7), Juliet Richters and Alan Whelan, June Donsworth, Kenneth Reed (membership number 41), Leona Geeves (membership number 87), Ley Webster (membership number 64), Lorenza dei Medici, Lorna Martin, Lorraine Royds, Lourdes St George, Lydia and Irvine Hunter, Lynette Longfoot, Maire Glacken, Margaret and Bill Suthers (membership number 14), Margaret Budge, Margaret Hennessy (membership number 19A), Margaret Whitlam, Margareta Baxter, Margery and Geoffrey Nicoll, Margot Buttrose, Marian and Rodney Purvis, Marie Hiscock, Marie Leech, Marie McCann, Marlene Baumgartner, Mary and Graeme Fogelberg, Mary Haswell, Mary Jo and Lloyd Capps, Mary Meppem, Mary Wallach, Maurice Cashmere, Maxwell Grubb, Melinda Hayton, Meredith Stokes, Michael Day and Philip Cornwell, Michael Ewans (Honorary Life Member), Michael Millard, Michael Smyth, Michele and Onofrio Ferrara, Miriam Harris, Mitzi Saunders, Monica and Aliro Olave, Moya Crane, Murray Fraser, Nance Grant, Nancy Fleming, Naomi Kaldor, Neville Mercer, Neville Pollard, Nizza Siano, Noelene Brasche, Norma Barne, Paddy Trumbull, Pam and Ian McGaw, Paola Garofali, Pat and Frank Harvey, Patricia and Roy Hodson, Patricia Baillie, Patricia Bellamy and Carolyn Bloch, Patricia Moore, Paul Alger, Paul Gresham, Paul Lehmann, Pauline Holgerson, Pauline Thompson, Penelope Seidler, Peter Bassett, Peter Cumines, Peter Jenkins, Peter Thompson, Philip Bacon, Phillip Bennett, Rae and Russ Cottle, Renate and Herman Junker, Richard Buckdale and Murray Johnstone, Richard Button, Richard Gastineau-Hills (membership number 68), Richard King (Honorary Life Member), Richard Mason and Camron Dyer, Richard Steele, Richard Stone and John Thomson, Robert Graham, Robert Lloyd, Robert McHugh, Robert Spillane, Robert Thurling, Roger Cruickshank, Rosemary and Julian Block, Ross Steele, Ross Whitelaw, Ruth Bridges (membership number 65), Ruth Shane, Sam Sheffer, Sandra Beesley, Sandy and Phil Dudgeon, Sharon Zelei, Shirley Robertson, Simon Hatcher, Sir Nicholas and Lady Shehadie, Siss Hartnett and Britt Hartnett, Stephen Carroll, Stephen Freiberg and Donald Campbell, Sue Gillies, Susan and James Buchanan, Susan and John Sutton, Susan Condon, Susan Conrade, Susan Kelly (membership number 4), Susan Upton, Susette and Martin Dickson, Suzanne Williams, Sybil Baer, Sylvia and Karl Koller (membership number 52), Terence Watson, Terry and Greg Chesher, Theo Hudson, Tim Green, Tony Bonin, Tony McDonald, Vanessa King, Vic and Katie French, Vince Stefano, Walter Norris, Warwick Fyfe, Wendy and Andrew Hamlin, William Felbel, William Gillespie OAM, and Winifred Hinds.

Wagner Performances in Asia

Wagner has been performed in Asia for some time. I have, for example, a poor copy on DVD of a 1997 performance of *Lohengrin* broadcast from Tokyo with Ginzer, Bonnema and Sotin that had at least a good proportion of the chorus who seemed to be Asian in support of a fully imported set of leads and conductor and orchestra.. There is also a DVD of *Der fliegende Holländer* in Japan with Deborah Voigt and Bernd Weikl dating from 1998

However, in the last few years, some home-grown performances seem to be emerging in parallel to the continued importing of overseas productions. As reported in an earlier Newsletter, Beijing recently experienced a fully imported production of *The Ring Cycle*. We are lucky to have a report on this performance from Dr Andrew Byrne, who made the trip in October 2005 (see below). In addition, and very excitingly, Thai director, Somtow Sucharitkul, has completed the *Rheingold* stage of a proposed full Ring Cycle (further comments below).

This growth of imports and new productions in the Asian region is interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Bangkok and Beijing are significantly closer for Australian Wagnerites than the traditional performance halls of Europe and the USA. Asian productions will also allow all Wagnerians to experience different perspectives on Wagner's works, similar to the experience many Australian and international Wagnerians had with the slightly Oz-flavoured Neidhardt Ring in Adelaide in 2004. Experiencing the works in other environments may also generate insights into how universal Wagner's works are (or are not!).

In researching this article, I came across one blogger in the Asian region, who describes his blogs as Baked by Richard TPD (the pun, I take to refer to the peking duck, not that Richard is "baked" – half or fully). Richard, I also assume to be a western name, although it does not preclude the bearer being Asian – or any other nationality. He writes, candidly, "Every year, as May 22nd approaches, I give the day some special thought. It is a mystical day for me, the birthday of the composer who, more than any other person living or dead, inspired me and shaped me into the person I am today (for better or worse)" – and many of us probably share his feelings about Wagner's impact on us.

This comment by Richard is also probably familiar: "There are few if any other classical composers or artists to have entire cultural movements bearing their names. The word "Wagnerian" is applied to theater, music, paintings, literature, poetry, philosophy and even behaviour. Most major cities have Wagner Societies, groups of unashamed fanatics who meet monthly to hear lectures on their hero and exchange opinions. Infinite numbers of books have been written about him, and every year there are more and more. And fanatics like me snap them up with an unquenchable curiosity. No, there is truly nothing else quite like it." You could read the full blog at

www.pekingduck.org/archives/000072.php, and share your views with him as well.

A number of newspapers, not including any Australian ones as far as I can ascertain, carried the news of the first fully indigenous Wagnerian performance in South East Asia when *Das Rheingold* was premiered in Bangkok on Sunday, 5 February 2006. However, we are privileged to have the following first hand report from a Wagner aficionado of whom most Australian Wagnerians will have first hand knowledge from his lectures during both of the Adelaide Ring Cycles and Adelaide's *Parsifal* and the books he wrote to accompany the performances, Peter Bassett.

***Das Rheingold* in Bangkok**

Bangkok Opera is, in the words of its dynamic Intendant Somtow Sucharitkul, 'a bit of a maverick company, long on vision and perennially grappling with problems of funding and the establishment in Thailand'. Nevertheless, it is a fully-fledged opera company, designing and mounting all its own productions and imbuing them with a distinctive Thai style.

Since its founding by Somtow five years ago, Bangkok Opera has staged *Aida*, *Don Giovanni*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *Turn of the Screw*, *Turandot*, *The Magic Flute*, and two operas on Thai subjects by Cambridge-educated Somtow himself: *Madana* and *Mae Naak*. The 2005-06 season comprises *Mae Naak*, *The Magic Flute*, *Così fan tutte* - and *Das Rheingold* which heralds a five-year project to stage *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for the first time in South-east Asia. A full cycle is scheduled for 2010.

Das Rheingold was given its Bangkok premiere on 5th February in the modern and well-equipped Thailand Cultural Centre. A second performance followed on 6th February. Somtow was both conductor and stage director. The sets were by San Pho-On, costumes by Surat Jongda and lighting by Supatra Kruekrongsuk. The Siam Philharmonic was augmented by musicians from the Vietnam National Opera and Ballet and the Tamnak Prathom Harp Centre, and by Hans Pizka, Principal Horn of the Bavarian State Orchestra (which also lent Wagner Tubas). There were eighty musicians in the pit and a full complement of anvils off stage.

For the most part, the costumes were in the Thai Court tradition familiar from paintings and dramatizations of the great Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, the story of Rama, incarnation of the god Vishnu, preserver of the universe. Any allusion to the *Ramayana* has particular resonance for Thais. For the past two hundred years nine Thai kings have been named Rama, and for four hundred years the capital of Thailand was Ayutthaya (Ayodhya), Rama's kingdom in the epic. It is

certainly possible to draw comparisons between the myths on which Wagner based his narrative and the *Ramayana*. Such comparisons may be superficial but they exemplify a growing international trend of drawing on non-European (or at least non-Germanic) imagery to highlight the universality of Wagner's drama.

The central ideas underpinning the Bangkok production were derived from a Buddhist view of Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold. From a Buddhist (non-judgmental) perspective, this action, which sets the entire *Ring* in motion, is not in itself *evil*. Somtow was determined to avoid the usual moral judgments, flowing as they do from Judaeo-Christian notions of original sin and the need for cleansing or redemption. He observes that Alberich's act changes the world from a timeless and non-human state to a cosmos that exists in time and in which it is possible for humans to exist, because mutability exists - death exists. Alberich doesn't necessarily make the *wrong* choice; but the consequence of his choice is that the world actually gets to start moving.

It is our preoccupation with '*attachment*', either base attachment (greed, lust, envy etc) or noble attachment (love, self-sacrifice etc) that perpetuates the cycle of action-and-consequence that we call 'existence'. It is only by letting go of *attachment* that the ring can ultimately be returned to the primordial state and the cycle cease to be. This of course is what happens at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

These notions were alluded to on stage by the ever-present symbol of an enormous Buddhist mandala, dominating the scene and slowly fracturing during the course of *Das Rheingold*. In *Die Walküre* next year, the shattered mandala will become the human world itself on which the action takes place.

On stage, Alberich (English bass-baritone Colin Morris) offered the first of many surprises, arousing as much sympathy as distaste for his behaviour. At one moment priggish, at another comical and child-like, he showed us a character who was clearly out of his depth even in a world of his own making. With a light, flexible voice, small frame and nimble manner, Morris offered a fascinating variation on the usual diet of unrelieved alienation and vindictiveness.

In contrast, Danish bass-baritone Lars Waage as Wotan displayed a commanding presence and powerful voice, cutting a lordly figure in his Thai court regalia. Clearly, he was a god not to be trifled with. American mezzo-soprano Barbara Smith Jones was a suitably 'put-upon' Fricka. It remains to be seen whether she will be able to rise to the great confrontation in Act Two of *Die Walküre*.

In many ways, *Rheingold* is Loge's opera, and American tenor Marc Deaton proved a reliable exponent of the role's tricky rhythms and other vocal demands. However, he struck me as being a little under-rehearsed, never daring to take his eyes off the conductor, even when addressing characters elsewhere on the stage.

Particular mention should be made of American bass John Ames, whose rich and resonant voice made his *Rheingold* Fafner a memorable performance. He would make a terrific Hunding in *Die Walküre*

Rheingold has an episodic structure, complicated stage action and frequent transformations, all needing to run like clockwork. This was not always the case on opening night, and the work generally could have done with more rehearsals. Given the challenge of assembling principals from eleven different countries and an orchestra from several more, lengthy rehearsals would not have been easy to schedule. There were several instrumental and vocal glitches (including a missed entry on '*Zur Burg führt die Brücke*' by Froh, Norwegian, Sigve Vidnes) and a staging mishap precipitated by a partisan burst of applause for German soprano Julia Oesch as Erda. Thinking that her scene must be over, stage hands lowered her prematurely beneath the stage – only to raise her again for her final bars. I understand these wrinkles had been ironed out by the second performance.

A faultless first night performance of any production of *Das Rheingold* is a rare phenomenon – as Wagner himself could attest. ‘I want to die’ he said after the first Bayreuth performance! Somtow has every reason to live!

Incidentally, Oesch made a striking Erda, her four arms conjuring visions of Shiva, god of time and ‘the great destroyer’ – a suitable context for Erda’s warning of the twilight of the gods.

Contrasting with the elaborate traditional costumes were the ultra-modern outfits of Freia (Israeli soprano Ronit Widmann-Levy as a mini-skirted sex goddess) and tourist Loge (the outsider) in shorts, sneakers, Hawaiian shirt and straw hat. By the final scene, even Donner (the fine Thai bass-baritone Saran Suebsantiwongse) and Froh had discarded their traditional robes for ‘hip’ western gear; and the despairing Rhinedaughters had been reduced to coloured-haired, provocatively attired ‘floozy’ on a street float.

The scenery was simple but effective, reminiscent of the settings for traditional Thai outdoor entertainments. Framework pavilions and moveable staircases were guided into place by dancers who moved expressively about the stage during the orchestral interludes. The use of dancers in this way was an inspired piece of stagecraft.

The Nibelung treasure assembled to ransom Freia turned out to be nothing more than a pile of modern consumer goods. Attachment to consumerism had become absolute in this brave new world and, in the final tableau, Valhalla was revealed as a modern Asian metropolis, rising from the background to loom over all and sundry.

Bangkok Opera’s *Das Rheingold* was an impressive achievement for such a young company, bringing fresh insights and new perspectives to a seemingly inexhaustible work. I am looking forward to *Die Walküre* in 2007 and, in due course, to the first complete South-east Asian *Ring*.
[Peter Bassett]

As some further comment on this production, in the Taipei Times, the director, Somtow Sucharitkul, is quoted as “draw[ing] parallels between launching *Das Rheingold* in Asia with its premiere in Germany 1869: the audience and performers for the most part are unfamiliar with the music. ‘It’s like turning the clock back 150 years. That’s why it could be very exciting, despite the imperfections.’” I’m sure that Elke Neidhardt and her team in Adelaide had similar reservations, despite the (longer but still somewhat shaky and erratic) tradition of Wagner performances in Australia.

According to the Bangkok Opera company website (www.bangkokopera.com/news.html#firstseason): “February 5 will see the beginning of a five-year project to present Wagner’s entire *Ring Cycle* in Bangkok by 2010. Years in the making, Somtow’s interpretation presents a new Asian perspective on the opera rooted in Buddhist and Hindu mythology. Tickets for *Das Rheingold* are already being snapped up by Wagner fans as far away as the U.S., Germany, and Australia, and the Bangkok Opera hopes to open a new era of opera tourism in Thailand with this production.” This means that Bangkok will have a complete, indigenously produced *Ring Cycle* before Sydney manages it.

The Thai Times (on the day following the premiere) reported: “More than 120 years after his death, German composer Richard Wagner makes his operatic debut in Southeast Asia with a performance of *Das Rheingold* that portrays a divine Eastern kingdom humbled by greed and Western culture.” “With its themes of power and political corruption, the opera could have been crafted for modern-day Asia, says...Somtow”. “‘It’s all about how the gods become corrupted, so it fits,’ he said during a dress rehearsal a few days ahead of the show’s opening night.” “‘Maybe we’ll end up getting arrested or sued for libel,’ he quips, alluding to the frequent fate of government critics in this region.”

This certainly throws up an immediate difference between productions in Europe, North America (but possibly not South America) and Australia where, however outré, politically critical, sexually explicit or downright boring, no one is likely to be thrown into prison, although Australia’s newly rewritten sedition laws are causing some pause for reflection among our more satirically inclined artists.

The New York Times' review of the performance provided some interesting information on the director, Somtow, including the facts that he was educated in the UK, is the great-nephew of Queen Indrasaksachi, the wife of Thailand's King Rama VI (who reigned from 1910 to 1925), and, as well as composing music, conducting orchestras and mounting opera productions (including designs), writes novels paints and makes films.

Unlike Adelaide, where the pit is reasonably large, but very much like the Opera Theatre pit in the Sydney Opera House, the pit in the Bangkok, is also very small, posing a challenge for the rest of the Cycle, when it occurs. In case you were interested in attending, you can find details of the location of The Somtow Center for the Performing Arts, which includes a well-equipped 1,300-seat auditorium, at 28 Sukhumvit Villa, Sukhumvit Soi 36 on their website at www.somtow.net/NewHome.html.

In addition, in November 2003, Thailand inaugurated its Wagner Society, the first in South East Asia, with no less than Herr Wolfgang Wagner, leading a delegation to attend the opening ceremony. Information about the Thailand branch of the Wagner Society can be obtained by telephoning the Bangkok Opera offices, 0 2661 4689.

According to the Bangkok Opera's website, the next instalment, *Die Walküre*, will have two performances, on 24 and 27 July 2007 (Price: 500 to 5000 baht) with Janny Zomer, Charles Hens, Barbara Smith-Jones and again directed by Somtow Sucharitkul. Perhaps you would like to add this to your Wagnerian diary! You may still be able to read the full reviews at either the Taipei Times, www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2006/02/06/2003291794 or the Seattle Times, www.seattletimes.com or the New York Times www.nytimes.com/ih/2006/04/18/arts/18wagn.html?pagewanted=print.

As an interesting and instructive footnote, The American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand, which according to its website (www.amchamthailand.org/acct/asp/edetails.asp?SponsorID=14&MMID=1144), "act[s] as media-sponsors or activities partners in order to promote American education, culture and speakers" (where this puts Wagner and his Ring Cycle I'm not sure!) arranged with the Bangkok Opera for AMCHAM members to receive a 20% discount on tickets to *Das Rheingold*. Would that some overseas organisation would come to the aid of the State Opera of South Australia in reviving its weltberümt production of The Ring Cycle as our local businesses and chambers seem not to be at all interested.

The Ring Cycle in Beijing

The *Ring* cycle has only been performed once before in Asia when it was staged in Japan and no Wagner operas have been produced in Beijing. The magazine, Beijing This Month (1 October 2005), gives some background to this historic Ring Cycle (www.btmbeijing.com/contents/en/btm/2005-10/music/musicfeast). Unlike Thailand's effort, this Cycle was imported from the Nuremberg Opera. The report quotes the artistic director of the Beijing Music Festival (BMF) (in its eighth year): "This is a historic moment for Asia". "Chinese people only know about Germany through its high-end products such as Mercedes Benz, Lufthansa and Siemens, but they don't know about the country's cultural background and history." "The Chinese intelligentsia, not just musicians, know about Wagner, but have never seen his operas live on stage. Apart from planning details such as the 240-strong performing and production personnel, one of the most challenging steps is coordinating staging technicalities with the Poly Theatre, a multi-purpose 1,230-seat theatre that is the hub of the BMF."

Andrew Byrne, from Sydney, wrote lengthy email reports to friends about the Beijing performances, however, we do not have space to reproduce the complete reports that are full of interesting comments and observations. I have taken points that I think will be of interest to our readers and I hope that they do not misrepresent Dr Byrne's opinions or responses.

Philippe Auguin: Conductor Staatstheater Nürnberg. Main singers in multiple operas: Woglinde - Sipiwe McKenzie, Wellgunde - Frances Pappas, Flosshilde Tara Venditti, Wotan - Jürgen Linn, Alberich - Johann Werner Prein, Fricka/Waltraute/Erda - Andrea Baker, Mime - Richard Kindley, Fafner - Bernd Hofmann, Brünnhilde - Irène Theorin, Siegfried - Gerhard Siegel. Other singers: **Das Rheingold:** Donner - Jouni Kokora, Froh - Jon Runar, Loge - Arnold Bezuyen, Fasolt - Heinz-Klaus Ecker. *Die Walküre:* Sieglinde - Cheryl Studer, Hunding - Heinz-Klaus Ecker, Helmwige - Anne Lünenbürger, Gerhilde - Carole FitzPatrick, Ortlinde - Sipiwe McKenzie, Siegrune - Gabriele May, Rossweisse - Teresa Erbe, Grimgerde - Angelika Straube, Schwertleite - Tara Venditti. *Siegfried:* Woodbird - Evgenia Grekova. *Götterdämmerung:* Norns - Gabriele May, Andrea Baker, Carole FitzPatrick, Gunther - voice: Jürgen Linn; acting/mime: Johann Wener Prein, Hagen - Heinz-Klaus Ecker, Gutrunne - Carole FitzPatrick.

Beijing Rheingold - honor satisfied. Weird but wonderful. Sunday, 23 October 2005

The opera opened with a dark bluish scrim imitating the depths of the Rhine. The three Rhine maidens appeared from the rear of the stage with unfussed unison choreography evoking the water....The gold was represented by a large, gilded letter "A" front stage centre, next to 4 large folio books (presumed to represent the four operas). Before the

action moved to 'dry land' the curtain was lowered and clouds projected as the glorious linking music unfolds. Next we are confronted with an empty stage left side while on the right, the bow of an ocean liner, perforated by a door at sea level and a porthole sustaining some sea-birds. It was as if a ship was beached onto the Rhine shoreline.

The final scene had a 'rainbow bridge' as a strip of wide, coloured fabric stretched loosely and diagonally across the stage.... There were a number of things in the production which seemed incomprehensible - one being umbrellas raised and then wrecked as if in hurricane Rita.

Andrea Baker was excellent as Fricka. She then played Fricka AND Waltraute in *Walküre* as well as the Erda in Siegfried and a Norn in the last opera. Does this deserve the Ludwig prize? Jürgen Linn's Wotan was also strong and sonorous - yet was made out to be a flawed character from the start.... Loge, played by Arnold Bezuyen, was fine vocally being presented in 'la cage aux folles' costume. One commentator said that he represented the 'story teller' of the piece which seemed to make sense. Other supporting roles were also well cast.

Das Rheingold was enjoyable from start to finish despite a lack of English subtitles - the Chinese translations, however, were a boon to locals. The Poly Theatre is rather narrow with three decks and just under 1500 seats in all. The all-German orchestra under Mr Auguin was excellent, despite one ghastly extended flat note from the brass section.

Stephen Lawless seems to have tried to 'internationalize' the Ring, taking characters from all corners of the world. Wotan was dressed as a Japanese noble. Some were in European formal attire, grass skirts, etc. A group discussion and a Google search after the show turned up some interesting theories. One was the Nuremberg World Chronicle, an early account of human history from 1493. Another was the Bosch painting 'Ship of fools', which may explain the opening terrestrial scene in which Fricka and Wotan disembark from a ship. My own feeling was that Noah's ark was another contender. Lawless has drawn attention to his own ideas but I am not sure if his production helps or hinders Wagner's Ring. It is certainly something different and worthy of discussion.

***Die Walküre* Wednesday, 26 Oct 2005**

This performance was little short of exemplary. We were presented with a balanced group of fine singers in a consistent and coherent production accompanied by a high quality orchestra led by a man who knew what he was doing.

The performance also contained one of the great stage (near) disasters when Wotan's spear burst into flames 5 minutes early, unbeknownst to him as he carried it horizontally! It appears that he was simply handed the wrong spear, only realising half way across the stage as his rump was centimetres from the flames. It occurred well before the Loge-calling spear ignition thumps used to ignite the Valkyries' rock towards the end of the opera.

The production continued in the same manner as *Rheingold* with the 'thread of life', a thick red rope, continued to connect, adorn and even detain characters. It reached its height, criss-crossing the entire stage from a central origin point in the second act of *Walküre*. Wotan is becoming mired in his own web, changing his mind on protection of Siegmund after representations from Fricka. While she sings, a mute Siegmund walks slowly across the front of the stage. This was a recurring 'theme', starting out with him struggling across the stage in the introductory 'storm' scene and repeated finally after his death (to no particular purpose in my book). One wonders whether Wagner would approve of such 'in your face' demonstrations of what is going on, rather than his own specific instructions on performance, so that you have to work it out for yourself.

Hunding's lair was a bright split level one-bedroom house with a tree out the back and which is also visible above. Sieglinde was tethered by a rope until the very end of the act when she flees with Siegmund and the 'bond' with Hunding is finally broken. Strangely, when our hero asks for 'ein quelle' (water) he is given a saucer which he bends down to lap up! This canine-like imbibing is repeated on several occasions through the opera for no reason I could see. There is also a lot of singing lying on the floor (or bed). Winterstürme and 'Du bis der Lenz ..' were moving indeed ... with the bare tree suddenly coming into leaf by means of some remarkable stagecraft. The act ended ecstatically in the light, with our incestuous lovers fleeing together.

Act II looked to be an impression of modern building façades intersecting with a central ramp sporting several telescopes (presumably to seek out wayward Valkyries skyward). Engraved on the proscenium arches were the German words for future and past with the letters "A" and "U" accentuated (presumably to remind those of us who studied chemistry of Au from the periodic table of elements or 'aurium', the Latin for gold).

The *Walküre* rock was a three level pyramid constructed of rough alabaster palisade, the same material as the curved walls of the initial set for *Rheingold*. It looked rather like the inside of a spent quarry. The ride of the Valkyries was brilliantly executed with eight fine female voices.... The final sleeping scene was most moving with Wotan farewelling his daughter for the last time on a white/cream bed on centre stage with red flickering cyclorama behind the curved full width alabaster palisade between.

Cheryl Studer was an imposing singer as Sieglinde. She has a magnificent voice and a keen dramatic sense. Ms Theorin as Brünnhilde was also excellent and one gleaned a degree of competition ... which never goes astray in eliciting Olympic records for the theatre. Theorin has a large, accurate and 'authentic' Wagnerian voice with staying power. One hopes that she is around for a long time. Jürgen Linn as Wotan also has a fine voice....Andrea Baker is a major asset to this company, singing numerous roles throughout this Ring. She has a wide range and excellent presence on stage.

I counted over 90 players in the orchestra - their names were omitted from the program I was given. They created a marvellous sound in this moderately sized hall with favourable acoustics. We felt privileged to be in attendance at this exclusive Ring presentation.

***Siegfried* – Saturday, 29 October 2005**

This performance was a powerful and worthy successor to a dramatic and high quality *Walküre*. Stephen Lawless continues his thought provoking interpretation with various twists and turns in what was basically still undeniably Wagner's epic.

Rather than being set in the woods, Lawless placed Mime's dwelling in the hold of a large ocean-going ship (?the 'ship of fools' of Hieronymus Bosch), which we viewed through a colourful leafy-green scrim, evoking a jungle. The broken Nothung was kept in the ship's safe, which also doubled as a forge and anvil. After all the insults, pestering, threats and demands from Siegfried, Mime finally opens it to reveal the ancient metal fragments.

Fafner's lair was superimposed onto the first scene with a large inverted and gilded letter 'U' at centre stage from which the dragon appears and dies. The red rope theme continued with looped portions visible across the stage. Also, Siegfried carried a small length as talisman found deposited with the sword. Alberich is guarding the path to Fafner's lair by occupying a pair of garbage tins from which he emerges in his interactions with Wotan, Mime and then Siegfried. Alberich even throws bits of miscellaneous rubbish at Wotan from his trash-can domicile following his 'helpful' advice. Alberich is given a horribly hairy torso and thus looks grotesque.

Thanks to his Tarnhelm, our builder/dragon has now become a flame-throwing body attached to a large, gilt, walking 'A-frame' below the inverted arched letter 'U'. This Woodbird was lowered from a swing made of the ubiquitous red rope, and was a little heavier of voice than we are used to. She had the necessary high notes but some vibrato and lacking the 'ping' of Battle and others, seen or unseen.

Wotan continued his degeneration in this act; even his spear seemed to have shrunk. His confrontation with our hero took place with the participants alternately before and behind the leafy scrim. The spear was sundered in dramatic fashion with a flash and a puff of smoke. Linn's voice remained firm and solid.

By this stage our other stayer, Siegfried, was showing slight signs of the distance, but only singing occasional less-than-perfect notes and in no way distracting from the unfolding drama leading us inevitably back to the Valkyries' rock, as per the high-pitched ornithological instructions.

The final confrontation between Wotan and his conscience (aka Erda, played this time by Ms Baker) showed the lows plumbed by the gods to this point. There were parabolas of red rope hanging all over the place (none formed a noose). Erda was tethered to her earth by red rope. I was told that her costume with exaggerated breasts and pendulous pregnant abdomen was confronting for some of the conservative Chinese audience.

Brünnhilde had been left on a large white 'bed' with matching marbled bedhead. She remained beneath a bundle of white sheets, only to be awoken by a kiss from Siegfried. This love scene was spectacular. Ms Theorin has a magnificent voice, commanding stage presence and the staying power necessary for the role. Her final ecstatic declarations with the tenor were triumphant, ending on a high C natural. Another marvelous performance to write home about!

The Ring in Peking. Twilight of the gods. Wotan sings in all Ring operas (!)

Götterdämmerung Tuesday, 1 November 2005

This final ring opera was a fitting finale to a magnificent operatic journey down the Rhine in the unlikely setting of Beijing. By now the audience feels locked into the inevitable and essentially ludicrous epic tale...yet all are ready to be transported musically and dramatically to the end of the world by means of the unfolding of unlikely events...but this is opera! As Bugs Bunny says in the famous Ring cartoon of 1957: [chomps on carrot] "What's opera, Doc? Did you really expect a happy ending?"

One cannot simply relate the story and then expect non-Wagnerians to accept that the Ring is on a higher plane than 'ordinary' romantic opera. It has a murder, a magic potion, an antidote, a 'beam-me-up-Scotty' across the Rhine (cf. the magic Tarnhelm), anvil song, love duet, conspiratorial duet, fraternal love swearing, an auto-da-fe suicide, rousing

chorus, etc. However, it IS longer than 'ordinary' operas (like about 12 hours longer). The orchestration is almost unique.

We actually heard Wotan sing in this *Götterdämmerung*! Our indisposed Gunter was replaced by two people: Mr Prien (also playing Alberich) mimed to Jürgen Linn's voice from the side of the stage....The effect was a little odd, but their coordination was almost perfect. Again Ms Theorin shone as Brünnhilde. The voice is large and accurate. Her stage movements and gestures are carefully calculated. She has staying power and I hope to hear much more from her. The Beijing *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried, Alan Woodrow [singing Tristan in Perth in November 2006 with Susan Bullock – Ed] was also splendid, taking over from Gerhard Seigel who did the previous opera's hero. He sang long, high and loud with precision and feeling, only to be struck down by Hagen at the appointed time with Brünnhilde's name on his dying lips. There may have been up to six local recruits out of over 30 chorus members.

The Prologue sees the Norns spinning the golden rope of fate (coloured red in this production, of course) while discussing the degradations happening around them. After the rope snaps and every negative sentiment canvassed, we meet the happy couple praising each other and the world around them for their new-found joy. It is optimistic and uplifting musically and dramatically, which invariably go together in Wagner's works as he wrote both vocal line and musical score. However, as this is opera, we know such moods can turn sour quickly, needing new characters, new plots and new settings.

Meantime, Hagen, Guttrune and Gunther are setting up the matches and mis-matches leading to early widowhood for the brides. An amnesic potions, lies, damn lies and an assumed identity lead to the rest of the story, details of which can be read in any opera primer (or even better, Anna Russell's introduction).

In Act II, we meet Alberich and his son Hagen in the shadows on the Rhine banks below the Gibichung's meeting hall. Alberich's haunting opening is also his exit line: "Schlafst du, Hagen mein Sohn?" He instills into Hagen the further deeds needing to be done...and the means of carrying them out. Hagen then uses a call to war/wedding to summon Gibichungs in a magnificent chorus ... in almost Verdian style. There are responses, declamations and evocations (Hey-ho). Wagner took over 14 hours to get to it while many other operas of the period actually start in this way (eg. *Rigoletto*; *Otello*). And this Ring chorus is worth waiting for. There is not much room for interpretation in the double marriage scene, contrived and ridiculous though it is. This production sees the chorus lined up as if taking a banquet, perspex shields at the ready.

These events are all dealt with sensitively by Lawless in his Nuremberg production. None is conventional yet none is completely outlandish. Like all clever productions, I was left with the feeling that I had not taken it all in and would thus need a return visit to know. All mixed/modern settings had a colour, space and/or character symmetry, giving each a specific beauty.... Immensely beautiful music deserves equally beautiful settings.

....The end of the world (and Valhalla) was accomplished in the most remarkable manner. The final scene saw our ocean liner (with ravens in porthole) from *Rheingold* moored on the right third of the stage. Near the end, a group of would-be travellers, luggage in hand, hasten across the stage to the ship only to find the gangways up and their path barred. Only Guttrune had succeeded in getting aboard, as facilitated by Brünnhilde (is Guttrune the only 'innocent' mortal in the entire opera?). While the final strains play from the orchestra, relentless strings and magnificent key modulation included, the ship slowly launches itself back out of its dock, leaving an empty seascape and inundated world. 'Believers' take this as redemption, sceptics like me as total ruin. Either way it is pretty moving!

[Dr Andrew Byrne]

***Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, April 2006**

These productions were part of the Staatsoper Festtage 2006, Daniel Barenboim's Berlin Easter Festival. The Festival ran from 8 April to 16 April and included three performances of a new *Tristan*, two of *Parsifal* first seen at the 2005 Festtage, an orchestral concert (Schönberg, Mendelssohn, Mahler) with Barenboim conducting the Staatskapelle Berlin (the opera orchestra) in the Philharmonie concert hall, plus Barenboim himself giving two piano recitals in the Philharmonie, playing no less than the complete Bach, The Well Tempered Clavier books 1 and 2. A monumental intensive work effort by Barenboim. Karajan in his Salzburg Easter Festivals did not have to give recitals himself. [NB: Dr Leigh's review of *Parsifal* will be printed in the September 2006 Newsletter – Ed.]

Tristan und Isolde -Wednesday 12th April.

The dreaded man in evening dress appeared before the prelude to announce that Katarina Dalayman, who had sung on the opening night to somewhat mixed reviews, was sick and would be replaced by Deborah Polaski, who had not had much rehearsal time. No loss here, we thought, until the actual stage movements required became apparent later. Also Michelle de Young (Brangäne) had a sore throat, but would battle on anyway, plus the Steurmann would be sung by an understudy (Hanno Müller-Brachmann). Certainly no loss here. He had sung Amfortas in *Parsifal*

The production by theatre director Stefan Bachmann was dominated firstly by the setting, created by the world famous

Swiss architecture firm of Herzog and de Meuron (Beijing 2008 Olympic stadium, Tate Modern Gallery London, Goetz Collection Munich, de Young Museum San Francisco, and the startling yet to come Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, a concert hall on top of an old warehouse in the new HafenCity development). The central feature is a thin rubber membrane across the whole back wall of the set, which is on a restricted stage, about half of the total stage height being used. All three acts take place in this structure. The clever thing, apart from the fabulous lighting effects, is a computer controlled hydraulic system which provides for finely controlled pressure changes behind the membrane, allowing all sorts of images to be created by indentations and protuberances.

The other dominating feature was an extra character, called Tristan II in the cast list and dubbed Tristan's soul by commentators. This was a silent role, played by Dominick Stein, a much smaller man than Peter Seiffert who sang a magnificent Tristan. This character did everything Tristan did, suffered, loved and died and appeared at key points in Tristan's experiences in the music drama.

Act 1

The membrane was curved in a concave manner in relation to the audience to suggest a ship's sail. We are essentially in a Night world, so it is red. Tristan and Isolde each make their first entrance walking backwards in from the side. Kurwenal (the gangly Roman Trekel) stumbles and staggers round like a dog or ape (Caliban in *The Tempest* came to mind). Isolde is dressed like an innocent, better-off 17th-century peasant girl (Agathe in *Der Freischütz* was suggested by one critic). Tristan has a heavy cloak. The potion was blood and Tristan and Isolde got it all over their mouths and Tristan II all over his clothes.

The rocking of the boat was suggested by synchronised movements of all cast members, but unfortunately Polaski got out of synch at times. I thought the curved sail sometimes alluded to the curved couch of Act 2. Mark appeared behind the membrane in shadow form at the end. All singing excellent (de Young's throat did not seem to be too bad) and orchestra in fine form. The sailors were only dimly seen behind the membrane. All the passion however was in the music, and Barenboim seemed to realize this, compensating for the frigidity on stage by a rather over-passionate wild reading. You would not know it was a love story at all from watching the stage.

Act 2

With the harsh Day motif we have pale green, blue and harsh white as the dominant colour. The Tagesgespräch dialogue is conducted with Tristan and Isolde just standing side by side against nothing but flat bright blue. As the lovers sink down, the set becomes red for Night and convenient little hollows appear for the lovers to lie in. At this point Tristan II becomes 3's a crowd. When sprung *in flagrante* by Melot and Mark, Tristan is tied up by white straps. Mark walks behind, obviously tolerating Tristan's unfaithfulness. Melot runs Tristan through from the opposite side of the stage. Tristan II is not injured at this point. The goblet is visible on stage throughout. To have singers like René Pape as Mark and Reiner Goldberg as Melot is an absolute luxury. Pape in particular was very moving in a scene I generally find very slow.

Act 3

For this act you needed sun glasses. Stark white on white dominated 95% of it. The shepherd had angel wings. It was all about Tristan's delirious visions. The characters in his vision drifted across the stage and sometimes appeared as indentations in the membrane (Mark). Again Tristan II enters at the key moment, as the bandages are ripped off the wound. Blood spatters all over Tristan II. The goblet is on stage throughout. At the end no one actually really dies, and the apparent casualties finally help each other up. The Liebestod is sung to a colour of white chocolate, with some commentators suggesting birth trauma. After all Tristan does sing at the end of the anguish of the womb.

The interpretation follows both Ponelle at Bayreuth and Syberberg in his *Parsifal* film of 1982. Isolde does not die; she is the last vision of the dying Tristan. The double Parsifal of Syberberg represents the new Parsifal made wise through pity at seeing Amfortas' wound. The double Tristan is linked to the fact that we cannot observe our own final death from a bleeding wound, only our soul or another (Isolde) can.

In fact the whole is really only a dream of Tristan, like the [Götz] Friedrich Senta dream interpretation of *The Flying Dutchman* seen at Bayreuth in the 1980s. Wagner has often been said to have anticipated Freud and the analysis of Wagner's own dreams in the Gregor-Dellin biography is fascinating. The program book has an interesting design, an actual gaping wound in a heart (the paper cut apart) in white on white. Inside it contains several "these images may offend you" photos of dead bodies. In summary, quite an experience, but probably too dominated by the staging and too much death symbolism rather than love symbolism.

In 2007 the Staatsoper Festtage will include no Wagner, indeed no opera. Instead the Staatskapelle Orchestra will play all the Mahler symphonies (1-9), plus the *Das Lied von der Erde* and the other major song cycles with orchestra, conducting shared between Barenboim and Pierre Boulez (1-12 April 2007). Great for Mahler fans. [Jim Leigh]

Tristan and Isolde – the Film!

To fill in time in Wellington one wet afternoon between *Parsifal* performances, I joined about six other people to watch the recent film of *Tristan and Isolde* –definitely not a film of Wagner’s opera! As I heralded the making and arrival of the film in previous issues of the Newsletter, I felt that I had to see it.

All in all I agree with the comments by Manohla Dargis in his review for The New York Times of 13 January 2006: He began by noting how basic love story plots are rehashed, sometimes well, sometimes indifferently (I would say mostly badly): “Not all great love stories are the same; they just sometimes seem that way in Hollywood, and that isn't necessarily a bad thing. In the new [film] they find "a place for us" (see "West Side Story"), discover that "parting is such sweet sorrow" ("Romeo and Juliet") and learn, to their peril, that "men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way" ("When Harry Met Sally").”

Dargis was complimentary about Sir Ridley Scott’s involvement that “may help explain the film's fine production values as well as the pervasive air of seriousness, both of which work to its advantage. ..."Tristan & Isolde" has nothing new to say about either love or filmmaking, but that, too, isn't necessarily a bad thing.” I found the film both beautiful to look at and disturbingly realistic in its invocation of the brutality of war and mediaeval life.

With his tongue a little in his cheek, Dargis notes some basic plot information that Wagner only refers to in character’s reminiscences: “Tristan...has washed up on the emerald isle, wounded and in a state of extremely photogenic distress. Isolde, the daughter of the tyrannical Irish king, Donnchadh (the vigorous scene-chewer David Patrick O'Hara), has carted the wounded warrior into the cave, where she warms his body with hers [and the Brangäne character whom she orders her to join her in clasping Tristan’s naked body!], instructs and heals his wounds with medicinal herbs. Tristan returns home to his lord and surrogate father, Marke (a very effective Rufus Sewell), who is trying to join together the fractious English tribes against the Irish. In a scheme to wrest even more power, Isolde’s super-mean father decides to auction her off to the best English warrior.... Tristan wins Isolde's hand, but not for himself. Isolde marries Marke and scurries around the palace with Tristan, throwing caution and perhaps even the fate of a unified nation to the wind.” From this summary, any Wagnerian can tell that there are many differences from Wagner’s work, which starts about halfway through the film’s account of the story.

What Dargis does not tell us is how effective, at least for me, was the recreation of something approaching a “real” or “basic” version of the Tristan and Isolde story out of which one could easily see later poetic, “minstrelish” embellishments, including Wagner’s growing like lush vegetation from the root story. Kevin Reynolds, aided by the production designer, Mark Geraghty, created for me a convincing account of what it might have been like to be star-crossed lovers in the middle of a brutal power struggle between the kings of Ireland and Cornwall for control of the (British) isles. The sets of crumbling castles being rebuilt after sacking or of castles at the height of their master’s powers were impressive. The costuming was rich in the court and ragged in the villages. Fight scenes, both in battle and on the jousting ground, were convincingly bloody and physical.

The acting, however, was something of a mixed bag. The mostly British cast, including a very impressive Rufus Sewell as Marke, gave the film more substance than it would otherwise have possessed if all the characters had been played by actors of the “calibre” of the extraordinarily handsome James Franco as Tristan. If he had never had to open his mouth, Franco might have gotten away with it, but, sadly, he did open his mouth but only to gargle and mumble his lines in ways worthy of Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*! This inadequacy was underlined anytime he had to communicate with Sewell or even his lovely Isolde, played and spoken with delight and skill by (I suspect another Brit) Sophia Myles. Franco was matched, almost in looks and mumbling, by Henry Cavill’s Melot, Tristan’s friend from boyhood until he betrays Tristan for power.

All in all a film to watch on big screen video. Oh, and keep an ear out for Isolde post-coitally reading to Tristan what I think are John Donne sonnets– about 500 years early! [Ed.]

An American Ring Cycle? – The National Opera in Washington DC

The re-imagining of The Ring Cycle by Somtow in the Thai *Das Rheingold*, as described by Peter Bassett above, and, to some extent in the Neidhardt Ring in Adelaide, is in line with the general approach to presenting Wagner operas these days, or, as a reviewer, Anthony Tommasini, put it for a review of the Cycle by the National Opera in Washington DC (New York Times, 28 March 2006): “If you put on a production of Wagner's monumental "Ring" cycle, you'd better have a novel concept. That's accepted wisdom in the opera world. We have had industrial age "Rings," an environmentally green "Ring," and several cosmic "Rings" with mystical lighting and abstract scenery.”

Tommasini describes how “For months, the director Francesca Zambello's staging had been touted as a provocatively American "Ring" steeped in American mythology and iconography. There are many fresh and impressive elements to the company's colorful, abstract and well cast "Rheingold." But its success is only partly attributable to overtly American imagery.”

Tommasini comments that “Zambello, working with the set designer Michael Yeargan and the costume designer Anita

Yavich, portrays Wagner's Alberich [the “powerful singing of the baritone Gordon Hawkins as Alberich...nearly stole the show all evening”) the dwarf who dwells among the lower race of Nibelungs, as a hulking forty-niner [gold prospector Ed.], with thick boots and suspenders, panning for gold; the Rhine Maidens are a trio of sassy gals in fleecy dresses who cavort on a mining sluice, a wonderful wood contraption with chutes and ladders.”

Tommasini also reports that: “The giants Fasolt and Fafner (the bass-baritones John Marcus Bindel and Jeffrey Wells), having just finished building Wotan's castle Valhalla, first appear sitting on a steel beam as it is lowered from an unseen crane. They are blue-collar laborers in matching overalls with elongated legs and huge clodhopper feet....Wotan and the gods are portrayed as entitled 1920's characters out of "The Great Gatsby," arrayed in white summer suits and dresses. Loge, the god of fire, is a wily lawyer in a tailored overcoat (the tenor Robin Leggate)....With his goatee and fedora, the sturdy bass-baritone Robert Hale makes an unusually lanky and disdainful Wotan.”

However, Tommasini notes that the “Americanization concept turns political when the all-knowing earth goddess Erda (the tremulous-voiced mezzo-soprano Elena Zarembo) appears with her ominous warning for Wotan. She is costumed as a Native American princess, and looks as if she had wandered in from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.”

Finally, Tommasini notes that: “The lingering image of this production comes in the deep, dank and sulfurous mine where Alberich brutally drives his slaves to hew rock and forge gold. The workers are played by a roster of some 50 mostly minority children, large and small, with tattered clothing and sooty faces. Evoking the history of slavery in America is the idea, but the image of child labor, which remains an international outrage, is what came through for me.”

It sounds as if The Ring Cycle, pre-eminently among Wagner's music-dramas, in the USA or Thailand or Australia, is capable of taking on local colourings and references as it continues to cement its role as one of the great artistic looking-glasses in which any culture may inspect itself. If you would like to plan to attend future performances, including the full cycle which seems also to be slated for 2010 you can visit their website: www.dc-opera.org. [Ed.]

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