

# The Wagner Society



IN NEW SOUTH WALES INC.

Newsletter No. 105, September 2006

## In Memoriam

**Dame Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, the German-born soprano whose interpretations of Strauss and Mozart made her one of the most dazzling artists of her time, died on Thursday, 3 August 2006, at her home in Austria. She was 90. See further detail on page 4.**

## President's Report

### Dear Members

I am delighted to begin my third report for 2006 by confirming that, as most of you already know, at least half the rumour that Opera Australia is planning productions of two Wagner operas, one in 2007 and a second in 2008, is correct. OA will be re-staging the Neidhardt *Tannhäuser* in October and November 2007. Bernadette Cullen is scheduled to sing the role of *Venus*, Glenn Winslade *Tannhäuser*, Janice Watson *Elizabeth*, Daniel Sumegi *Hermann* and Warwick Fyfe *Wolfram*. We'll have to wait until the 2008 AO programme to find out whether the other half of the rumour is also correct.

Elke Neidhardt's production had its share of criticism when it was first staged. Venusberg's Bacchanal was all smoke and laser lights with male sexual fantasy stereotypes emerging from the smoke under the wide eyes of a bemused Horst Hoffman - a French maid, a vamp in fishnet stockings, a schoolgirl, a dominatrix etc. The vocal demands of the title role seemed to me to sit well with Horst Hoffman's voice, and it was the finest and most relaxed singing I ever heard from him. The meadow scene featured a giant metal cow on a revolving dais of green plastic butcher's grass. The shepherd boy played his pipes while sitting under the cow, a family of burghers with dachshunds walked across the

stage, trumpets like menacing blunderbusses emerged from under the curtains at the sides of stage to sound fanfares – and not, as some may have wished, to blow the whole production away. We will organise a seminar in conjunction with the production and provide details of date, venue and speakers next year.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's 2007 programme includes three December performances of the *Siegfried Idyll*.

### Functions

On Sunday 16 July, we held our fourth function of 2006. Terence Watson chaired a thoughtful discussion on the subject of anti-Semitism in Wagner's music, after first showing a video to stimulate our ideas. It was fascinating to hear forthright views from range of members on a subject that is often deemed "unsuitable" for discussion in an open forum. A number of interesting perspectives were discussed and observations made, and subjects were as diverse as the 30 Years War, the anti-Semitism of Luther

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### NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

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Copenhagen Ring - Jan Bowen P7

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The New Bayreuth Ring 2006 - Jim Leigh P10

2007 Bayreuth Application Form P18

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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 Theater, Perth WA. Featuring West Australian Opera Chorus and West Australian Symphony Orchestra. This Opera Australia production is presented by arrangement with that company. Bookings at BOCS (08) 9484 1144. See below for information on a Seminar on Sunday, 5 November (after the first performance).	5.30pm 4, 8, 11 November 2006
<b>2007</b>		
<i>Tannhäuser</i>	Opera Australia, Sydney NSW. Revival of Elke Neidhardt's production	8, 11, 16, 20, 23, 27, 30 October & 2 November 2007
<i>Siegfried Idyll</i>	Sydney Symphony Orchestra with Gelmetti and Frank Peter Zimmermann in Berg Violin Concerto and Schubert Great C major symphony	5, 6, 7, 8, December 2007

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

DATE	EVENTS - 2006	LOCATION
September 17	Report back by members who attend the Bayreuth Festival in 2006 - on the new Ring production, the first Bayreuth Ring conducted by Christian Thielemann	Goethe Institut - 2.00pm
October 15	Alan Whelan: an illustrated talk on <i>Rienzi</i>	Goethe Institut - 2.00pm
November 26	Nigel Butterley's second talk: Faust, Mephistopheles – and composers!	Goethe Institut - 2.00pm
December 10	End of year function - <b><i>Please bring a plate</i></b>	Goethe Institut - 2.00pm
<b>Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)</b>		

## Committee **2005 - 2006**

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## President's Report continued

and Marx, and the level of anti-Semitism in different historical periods.

### Future functions

As well as this month's function on Sunday 17 September, at which those who attended the Bayreuth festival will discuss the experience, the rest of the programme for 2006 has been finalised and is printed in this Newsletter.

### Other Wagner performances

On Sunday 18 June, I was delighted to attend a concert as a guest-of-honour of the Woollahra Philharmonic Orchestra, which included interludes from the *Ring*. The concert, titled tongue-in-cheek *Colossal Cosmic Classics*, was given by the combined forces of the Woollahra Philharmonic Orchestra and Orchestra Nova of Newcastle in the cold and cavernous acoustic of the Mary Immaculate Church in Waverley, and included Holst's *Planets*, which from the audience reception was the highlight of the afternoon. It was preceded by three interludes from the *Ring*, including a magical *Forest Murmurs*.

Bleeding chunks of Wagner taken out of context and robbed of their vocal lines don't always work as stand-alone orchestral pieces, but this selected worked very well.

I must admit, somewhat sheepishly, that until their invitation came I had not heard of the Woollahra Philharmonic, but having become acquainted I hope to enjoy many more of their performances. Their programme and venues are varied, and you can find more details at [www.wpo.org.au](http://www.wpo.org.au).

### Bayreuth Scholar for 2006

This year's Bayreuth Scholar is Michal Imielski, a NIDA graduate who wants to direct opera. After spending a month in Germany as winner of this scholarship, Michal will spend a further two months alongside Barry Kosky, and will tell us about his travels at our May meeting in 2007.

The [www.shh.com.au](http://www.shh.com.au) website has some biographical details for Michal. He was born in Poland and moved to Australia when he was 14. He attended the Conservatorium of Music in Czestochowa from 1989-1996, studying classical guitar, piano, double bass and musicology. At the time the biography was posted of the website, Michal had completed a Bachelor of Media and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University majoring in writing and was "undergoing" a Masters degree in Theatre and Performance Studies.

He has composed music for short films, theatre and various projects, and acted in short films made for Tropfest and other film festivals. He has also been a professional magician for five years and has done a lot of work with puppetry and black light theatre.

### Reports of the new Ring in Bayreuth

Winter can be a very problematic time here in the Antipodes. Like the unnamed bambino in *Madama Butterfly*, if you're going overseas for one of the many *Ring* cycles on offer in the Northern Podes – Bayreuth, Toronto, Orange County, and Dresden all having their fair share of visitors from Down Under – or for another opera festival, then your name is Gioia; but if you're wintering at home (which this year I am) then your name is Dolore.

With the Internet, however, it has become possible for the legions of Sadness to keep vicarious tabs on the hordes of the Joyous. One such lucky adventurer, our Webmaster John Studdert, has been dropping joyous postcards from Bayreuth onto the Society's website ([http://www.wagner-nsw.org.au/reviews/0006\\_post.html](http://www.wagner-nsw.org.au/reviews/0006_post.html)) which have been tantalising, and more than usually polite.

Many of the reviews from Bayreuth this year, especially of the *Ring*, could have learned from John's good manners and discretion. Bloomberg's Shirley Apthorp, under the headline "Bayreuth's Mediocre 'Ring' Reflects Festival's Stagnation" was one of many nay-sayers. Ms Apthorp began by contrasting the reaction of German chancellor Angela Merkel to last year's festival, where "the press focused on the sweat marks around her armpits" to her reaction to the Thielemann-Dorst *Ring*, which the blue-clad Ms Merkle saw in its second cycle and left "apparently dry." Ms Apthorp said that "80-year-old dramatist Tankred Dorst" was "dull as ditchwater", while conductor Christian Thielemann, the "great white hope for the future of hardcore German repertoire" was "hailed as a savior." Ms Apthorp continued:

"The tragedy is that the festival, founded by Richard Wagner in 1876 to break new artistic ground, has stagnated. It ought, by rights, to remain what it has been in the past, a place where ideas are born and standards are set for Wagner interpretation worldwide. Instead, it has become a bastion of convention and a temple of mediocrity.

"Token gestures of modernism in past seasons -- Christoph Schlingensief's incoherently provocative "*Parsifal*," Christoph Marthaler's quirky "*Tristan und Isolde*" -- are rendered inconsequential by the stultifying weight of this dreary new "*Ring*"."

"Dorst's problem is not lack of ideas. He has plenty. It is their execution that fails. Dorst has never staged an opera before, and his inexperience tells. Singers move awkwardly, left to find their own way in matters of characterization. More often than not they end up standing rigid in the footlights, staring at the conductor. This is not conservatism. It is ineptitude."

Hardly anyone seems to have had a good word to say for Herr Dorst, and criticism has appeared in unexpected places. Sven Friedrich, Director of the Richard Wagner National Archive in Bayreuth, in an interview on the work of the Archive said when asked of Dorst's production "I



## President's Report continued

think his idea is interesting -- that the gods are among us and live in a sort of parallel universe, which is not able to be seen by normal people. But he is unable to transform the idea into a staging. He is not able to deal with the singers and to put them on the stage and to move them on the stage and to create a psychological tension between the singers. Because he is not a director."

Perversely, these negative reviews make me keen to see the production in a few years, perhaps in 2008 or 2009, after Herr Dorst has made a few changes to make his staging better reflect his ideas. The initial controversy surrounding Christoph Schlingensief's *Parsifal* in 2004 similarly made it a "must see", and in some ways it's disappointing to read reports that Herr Schlingensief seems to have listened to his critics and further reduced the images cluttering his stage.

### Bayreuth 2007

Members have already put their names down for tickets to Bayreuth in 2007, and our application form hasn't been released yet. Following our AGM this year, the rules for ticket allocation have changed. Any member can apply for a set of tickets, but those sets we receive will be balloted first among applicants who have been members of the Society for two or more years and have not had tickets to Bayreuth through the Society in the past five years, then among those who have received tickets, and finally (if any sets remain) among applicants who have been members for fewer than two years.

The new work in 2007 will be a *Meistersinger* produced by Wolfgang Wagner's daughter Katharina, who seems in her father's eyes at least the forerunner among the Wagner great-grandchildren for the role of Festival Director. On the prospect of staging *Meistersinger*, Reuters quotes the blond Ms Wagner: "Of course, I know the stage and the opera house much better than most others", she said. "But my name also evokes anticipation and rejection that few others would have to face". "If the criticism addresses my work, then that's good and important to take into account", she said. "But if they start calling me 'Barbie-doll', it's obvious it's about me and not my work -- and that has nothing to do with reviewing art per se".

The good news is that Herr Schlingensief's *Parsifal* will continue next year and will not end its run of boos early. It is the *Holländer* that has left the stage at Bayreuth to make way for Katharina Wagner's *Meistersinger*.

The dates for next year's third Ring cycle are: Monday 20 August 2007, *Rheingold*; Tuesday 21, *Walküre*; Thursday 23, *Siegfried*; and Saturday 25, *Götterdämmerung*. However, until we have checked with the Wagner Society of New York, which provides English-language lectures before one performance of each work around the time of the third Ring cycle, we won't know the dates for all the performances for which we will book. Best wishes to you all.

**Roger Cruickshank Monday 4 September 2006**

## In Memoriam

Dame Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, the German-born soprano whose interpretations of Strauss and Mozart made her one of the most dazzling artists of her time, died on Thursday, 3 August 2006, at her home in Austria. She was 90. Her first opera role was in 1928, as Eurydice in a school production of *Orfeo ed Euridice* in Magdeburg. Her first appearance on record in 1937 was as a member of the chorus of a *Zauberflöte* in Berlin conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. His technical assistant was Walter Legge. By the next year her first ambition was achieved. She was engaged by the Deutsche Oper and made her debut in 1938 as a Second Flower Maiden (First Group) in Act II of in *Parsifal*. During that first season she sang quantities of supporting roles in both opera and operetta, mixing Wagner with Lortzing. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, London heard her as Pamina (*Zauberflöte*), Eva (*Die Meistersinger*), Violetta (*La Traviata*) and Susanna (*The Marriage of Figaro*). In opera she was probably at her peak in the early 1950s, when she was an outstanding Eva in the Bayreuth *Meistersinger* and created the role of Anne Trulove when Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* was heard for the first time in Venice. Schwarzkopf's last full performance in an opera house was in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Monnaie in Brussels just after Christmas 1967. She chose the same theatre for her official farewell to opera on New Year's Eve 1971, *Rosenkavalier* again, but just the first act. A recording of Schwarzkopf singing one of the Rhine Daughters in *Das Rheingold* under Herbert von Karajan conducting the Bayreuth Festival Chorus & Orchestra and including Wolfgang Windgassen (tenor) is still available on Urania No. 22.206).

[Editor]

## New Members

The following person joined the Society: Libby Manuel [950], Humphrey Charles and Pauline Alexander [951], David Maloney [952] and Elizabeth and Barry Dale [953].

## Donations

The Society welcomes all donations and they can be addressed to the Treasurer, Wagner Society in NSW Inc, at the Society's GPO Box address shown on the back page of this Newsletter. Such donations help us to carry out our objective "to promote the music of Richard Wagner and to encourage a wider appreciation of the significance of his achievements". Donations are tax-deductible and receipts will be issued. Donations were gratefully received from the following members and supporters between June and the end of August 2006: Paul Santilan, Terence Watson and Bituminous Products Pty Limited.



# Birgit Nilsson 18 May 1918 – 25 December 2005: A Tribute (Part 3)

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, concludes the essay on a lighter note.

## Nilsson Anecdotes.

Many anecdotes have been cited within the obituaries published following her death. I am sure that in the fullness of time many more will surface. Here are some that I have been able to source.

## Nilsson and her fees.

Herbert Breslin who managed Nilsson's concert engagements following her debut offered the following comments "Now, Madam Nilsson was not ignorant of the value of a dollar. ...After her sensational Met debut, she felt that her own value had increased considerably. One of her most famous quotes later in her career, after someone asked why she was appearing in the American hinterland was "The money is just as green in Iowa as it is in New York". (Breslin, 2004, p.52)

Her forays with Herbert von Karajan have been quoted many times. Rudolf Bing summed it up "The fact is that she and von Karajan do not like each other: the chemistry is wrong". (Bing, 1972, p.259)

During a piano rehearsal for *Tristan and Isolde* in Vienna, her necklace broke. Bending down to help her retrieve them, Karajan asked if they were "stage jewelry, or are they real pearls bought from your phenomenal Scala fees?" She replied "Oh no, these are cheap and very ordinary pearls bought from your Vienna fees". (Wagner, 1961, p.30)

During a rehearsal of *Götterdämmerung*, Karajan teased her by saying that she should sing from the heart "where you have your cashbox." She replied, "Why then we have something in common, Mr Von Karajan."

Schuyler Chapin, General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera 1972-1975, recalls a conversation with von Karajan: "Karajan told me that Nilsson was only interested in money. 'You open her mouth and pour in money and then everything is fine.' He said." (Chapin, 1995, p.12)

Her dealings with Rudolf Bing, General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera 1951-1972, evoked similar stories. When asked if she was difficult to deal with, he replied: "Not at all, you put enough money in and a glorious voice comes out". According to a story told around

the Met. When preparing her tax return, Nilsson was asked by her accountant if she had any dependants. She replied: "Yes, Rudolf Bing." (Wechsberg, 1972, p.189)

## Birgit Nilsson and High Notes.

Another quote from Breslin: "I remember Birgit Nilsson standing in the wings of the Metropolitan Opera one night when Monserrat Caballe was singing. Somebody spotted her and said, 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to hear Madame Aballe,' Birgit said.

'Madame Aballe? You mean Madame Caballe.'

'No,' Birgit said sweetly, 'Madame Aballe. She has lost her C.' (Breslin, p.133)

Robert Rushmore recalls a New Yorker profile of her where she claimed that she could "sing the second act Queen of the Night aria with its repeated Fs above high C" but only after her voice had been warmed up for several hours. When the conductor, Karl Böhm, impugned her claim, she bad him come to her dressing room after conducting a performance of *Götterdämmerung* in which she was the Brünnhilde. Böhm complied and Nilsson knocked off the aria just as she said she could." (Rushmore, 1971, p.40) (Christiansen, 1984, p.212) After her lieder recital in Melbourne, I met her and asked about this. Her reply was "ya! t'was after Tristan."

## Her sense of humour.

Nilsson was a no nonsense diva, down to earth, with a good sense of humour and self-deprecation. Following her debut in *Tristan and Isolde* at the Met, Nilsson exited from the building and was asked by the bass Jerome Hines if she would like to be dropped at her hotel. She replied "No, thank you," she called quite happily, "I'll take a taxi". "With that, the Met's newest diva gracefully placed two fingers to her lips and, with a whistle as heroic as any high C she ever delivered on the stage, hailed the nearest cab". (Hines, 1983, p.193)

Again stories of her forays with Von Karajan are legendary. She often called him "Herbie" and, on one occasion, annoyed by her refusal to give him the deference he thought was his due, he retaliated by sneering that she could play Scarpia without needing to apply makeup. It is said that he retorted by asking him to coach her in the role seeing that he was so familiar with the role in question.

On another occasion she protested at the gloomy lighting he designed for his production of the Ring at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1968-1969 season. In particular she objected to what appeared to be more light on the conductor than on the stage. One of the stories told about this states that she attended the dress rehearsal wearing a miners helmet. However, Schuyler Chapin, General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, 1972-75, recalls it from a different perspective. "Just before the premiere performance, a friend presented her with a miners helmet, complete with battery operated headlight. After the final curtain she donned the helmet, turned on the headlight, and rushed to Karajan's dressing





room. "With this on my head, I'll be able to find my way onstage during the next performance" was her remark to him. He was not amused." (Chapin, 1995, pp.12)

Nilsson said of Bing: "he is one of those rare people who can take a joke as well as make one." At the gala evening to mark his farewell as General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, Bing asked her to sing the final scene from *Salome*, and "for inspiration, he would give me his head on a silver platter...I told him that it was quiet unnecessary, I could use my imagination. Our little exchange was reported in the press, and, just in time for my entrance, a piece of sculpture representing Bing's head was delivered on a silver tray. The giver or givers were anonymous." (Nilsson, 1981, p.60)

When trying to negotiate contracts to ensure the return of star singers to the rostrum, Bing commented: "I made a ritual of getting thankfully on my knees on the annual occasion of Birgit Nilsson's return to the house. (After I was knighted in 1971, she commented, 'You do that so much better since you practised it for the Queen')." (Bing, 1972, p.190)

When negotiating her operatic and concert schedules, she did so directly, quickly, without aides and a great deal of fuss. Chapin recalls negotiations with her for the 1972-1973 season. "I rather expected her to arrive with a battery of aides and was surprised when she walked in alone, carrying what can only be described as an old fashioned Gladstone bag. She was wearing an elegant but subdued fur coat and over her head—a bright scarf covered by a plastic rain hat.... When our talk turned to precise dates, she opened the Gladstone and pulled out a handful of black covered notebooks, laying them on the table in front of her with administrative precision. 'I have everything I need right here,' she commented. 'In opera I keep my own schedules and make my own bookings...This way I take direct responsibility for my opera commitments all over the world' 'My managers worry about concerts...I give the managers certain time periods for orchestral concerts and recitals and they book them'." (Chapin, 1995, p.14)

Christa Ludwig sang Brangäne in the legendary performances of *Tristan and Isolde* at Bayreuth in 1966 and 1967. She recalls that when somebody asked Nilsson what the requisite qualities were for singing the role of Isolde she replied, "The most important thing you need for Isolde is comfortable shoes." (Ludwig, 1999, p.166)

### Her Relationship With Tenors.

These appear to have been fairly harmonious. However, when singing *Turandot*, she frequently had battles with Franco Corelli to see who could hold on to the high notes longest in the second act duet. During the Met tour in Boston, Franco Corelli ran out of breath whilst Nilsson was still sustaining the note. Bing recalls that Corelli walked off the stage. He (Bing) went backstage and heard Corelli and his wife screaming. "I calmed them down as much as I could, and suggested to Corelli that in the love scene in the next act that he get even with Miss Nilsson by biting her ear. That cheered him up a great deal; in fact he liked the idea so much that he told Miss Nilsson about it, which

gave him all the satisfaction of actually biting her without actually doing it, thank God". (Bing, 1972, pp.136) Corelli's biographer also confirms this version of events (Boagno, 1996, p.89)

Given Bing's comments, the story that Corelli actually bit her appears somewhat exaggerated. The idea that Nilsson telephoned to cancel her next performance with the explanation "Have been bitten by a mad dog. I have rabies" would be consistent with her sense of humour, although Bing makes no mention of the telegram in his book. This tale demonstrates how operatic anecdotes take on a life of their own and become legendary.

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- Copyright: W M Grubb, February 2006



## The **Copenhagen** Ring - Jan Bowen

*As a witty and provocative overview of the Copenhagen Ring, Jan Bowen's comments below complement both Jim Leigh's review in the last newsletter and the comprehensive assessment by Peter Bassett that follows. The question of traditional versus modern/postmodern/avant garde etc will continue to stimulate discussion for a long time to come. [Editor]*

The naked man swimming in a fish tank, depicting the underwater home of the Rhine daughters, was certainly a novel twist. As one of the audience [yes, female!] was heard to remark, "Why didn't *he* get a curtain call?"

This was, it must be said, a *Ring* with a difference. Produced to mark the successful completion of Operaen, the new opera house in Copenhagen, Danish director Kasper Bach Holten took it well away from sylvan glades and bearskins and turned it into a chronicle of the twentieth century, with each opera set in a different decade of that tumultuous era.

Kicking off with a 1920s Mafioso setting for *Das Rheingold* and finishing, in *Gotterdammerung*, with a sort of Wagner comes to Hollywood fly past and Siegfried's arrival in a convertible, this Ring was nothing if not a test of the work's contemporary relevance.

The brutality was often shocking. Following the truly cruel taunting by the Rhine daughters, Alberich's debasement in a torture chamber culminating, finally, in having his arm severed by Wotan to get the ring [an arm bracelet in this version], highlighted, in a way that is rarely achieved, both the reality and the significance of the curse. This man had been humiliated emotionally and physically and he spat out his anger in what is arguably the most crucial moment of the entire Ring Cycle with venom that left no doubt that Wotan and his gods were doomed.

And the death of the old order was never clearer. When the Wanderer arrived at her apartment with champagne and roses in the hope of rekindling his relationship with the mother of so many of his children, Erda, there she was attended by a nurse, in a hospital-style elevated bed, aged and clearly in the closing phase of her [and his?] life. And the Wanderer/Wotan was unmistakably unable to cope with his decline, increasingly relying on a quick drink to blur what he knew would be Siegfried's inevitable assumption of supremacy.

Not quite so successful was the appearance at the end of a pregnant Brünnhilde, rushing off stage to give birth and reappearing with a screaming infant. OK, OK, the 'new life' symbolism is obvious but it is kitsch, I didn't like it when the small boy wandered on stage at the end of Adelaide One and I liked it even less here. The immolation scene doesn't need any embellishment and in Copenhagen, such as it was, it took place in a library!

Some of the other twists were pretty questionable too. Wotan killing Loge [*Das*

*Rheingold*], Sieglinde, rather than Siegmund, dislodging the sword from the tree - a statement of 20th century feminism? - and perhaps worst of all, Hagen killing his father, Alberich [*Gotterdammerung*]. Interpreting Wagner is one thing, rewriting is arrogant subversion.

Still, most of us had no difficulty in identifying the tangle of cords leading Siegfried underground to Mime surrounded by banks of computers as 20th century dragons we have all battled with.

Stig Foh Anderson as Siegfried was the undoubted star. Vocally accomplished, he managed to blend callow youth and putative hero with a dramatic sense with a subtlety that must put him on the stairway to a stellar world career. In general, the singing was extremely strong, with another standout in Irene Theorin as Brünnhilde and an excellent Wotan from James Johnson.

For me the main difficulty was with the orchestra. The playing was adequate but a too narrow orchestra pit meant that the brass was placed up one end; the sound was too concentrated to start with and was made even more deafening by the overhanging wooden galleries. On occasion, one wondered if the strings were still there.

All in all it wasn't perfect but I thought it compared well with other Rings, especially vocally. We might find avant-garde, cutting edge productions difficult but they provide endless opportunity for analysis and comparison. Confronting they may be but they are also intellectually challenging - and that's what keeps this marvellous chronicle of humankind everlastingly fascinating.

## The **Copenhagen** Ring - Peter Bassett

The new Copenhagen Opera House combines a light and elegant exterior with a superbly crafted and functional interior. It was designed by Danish architect Henning Larsen and, like its Sydney counterpart, sits at the edge of a harbour. If Utzon's roof evokes wind-filled spinnakers, Larsen's resembles a huge wing about to soar aloft, carrying with it the building's five-storey glass façade. Denmark's latest Opera House, a gift to the nation from shipping magnate Maersk Mc-Kinney Møller, forms part of a grand ensemble that includes, on the opposite bank, the Amalienborg Palace and, beyond that, the neo-baroque Marmorkirken with its massive dome.

Inside the foyer, a wall of honey-coloured maple veneer swells like a giant gourd to enclose a horseshoe shaped auditorium of polished timbers. The auditorium has room for some 1,500 patrons and an orchestra of 110.

The all-important main stage is actually part of a cluster of six stages whose floors are made up of modules on special wheel-mounted trucks. The individual modules are computer controlled and can move silently from one stage to the other, allowing the complete replacement of sets in less than five minutes. Lifts and revolves add to



the technical wizardry, which is used to spectacular effect in the current production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* - the first Danish Ring since 1912. Performances of four cycles took place in April-May, and I led tours to the second and third cycles. The Stage Director of this new production is thirty-three year old Kasper Bech Holten, the Conductor is Michael Schønwandt, the Designers are Marie í Dali, Steffen Aarfing and Jesper Kongshaug, and the Dramaturg is Henrik Engelbrecht.

The flexibility of the theatre's technical systems was well demonstrated in the first Act of Siegfried, which offered one, then two and finally three floors of Mime's 1960s-style house. There was a workshop in the basement, a kitchen at the middle level and the teenage Siegfried's bedroom at the top, all linked by a spiral staircase. This physical layout emphasized the psychological distance between boy and guardian, and the Wanderer's ambivalent role between them. Siegfried's forging and Mime's cooking took place in visual as well as musical counterpoint, and the whole Act, so often played as vaudeville, was revealed as the lively and many-layered masterpiece it undoubtedly is. In this, the director, designers and singers served Wagner very well and, to my mind, *Siegfried* was the most successful of the four Copenhagen stagings.

The director wanted the main focus of this production to be on Brünnhilde, and the audience was encouraged to see the events of the *Ring* through her eyes. She made her first appearance during the prelude of *Das Rheingold*, emerging from the gloom of an attic to light a candle and rummage through the archives of her dysfunctional family. 'How did it all happen?' she seemed to be saying. 'Why did it go so horribly wrong?' Over the ensuing four nights she - and we - saw exactly why it all went wrong. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde returned to the attic (now also housing the bodies of the two dominant men in her life, Siegfried and Wotan) to set fire to the past and begin life anew, with a child - Siegfried's child - born at the very moment the flames took hold. We heard the soaring violins glorifying Brünnhilde (to use Wagner's phrase) but they were now accompanied by another sound - the cries of a newborn baby. So, Wagner's orchestral ending was given its 'text' after all.

The beginning and end of this *Ring* production exemplified much of Kasper Holten's approach: his willingness - when it suited him - to take the stage action into areas that paid scant regard even to the music, and his intention of making the whole cycle conform to a single overriding concept through the device of a personal flashback. He offered no apology for this; indeed he thumbed his nose at those who abhorred the notion of *Regietheater*, in which the director gets to stage his or her Ring as distinct from Wagner's. The vehicle for his mockery of conservative opinion was the Norns' scene.

The curtain remained obstinately down after the opening bars of *Götterdämmerung*, but the three Norns rose from their seats in different parts of the auditorium where they had been disguised as members of the audience.

The object of their 'cosmic tittle-tattle' this time was not so much Alberich's ring as *Wagner's Ring* and the horrors being inflicted on it by directors such as Kasper Bech Holten! There was much wagging of fingers and rolling of eyes between the 1st and 2nd Norns as they discovered ever more confronting pictures in their programme books and, moving to the stage, tried to peep behind the curtain at the atrocities to come. The 3rd Norn could offer only an uncertain vision of the future, so she was ostracized by the others. A placard was brandished bearing the crossed-out word '*Regietheater*', and as the 2nd Norn hastened to return 'to Mother' she waved a book bearing the photo and name of 'Cosima' - a notorious conservative when it came to staging her husband's works. Some audience members laughed; others considered it an unforgivable travesty.

Each of the four operas was set in a different period, an idea taken from Patrice Chéreau's centenary Ring at Bayreuth. The story moved from the 1920s for *Rheingold* to our own time for *Götterdämmerung*, complete with mobile phones, motor-cars and topical political references. When Siegfried toasted Brünnhilde before drinking the mind-bending draught, he addressed her directly on his mobile phone! When Brünnhilde was confronted with the terrifying vision of a stranger coming through the flames, her first instinct was to rush to the telephone for help. The audience tittered.

For the vassals' scene, Gunther wore the uniform of a Balkans general and his men were cast as thugs and war criminals. Guttrune was a beautiful, self-indulgent rich girl and, for a moment, there was a hint of something more than sibling affection in her relationship with Gunther (paralleling the Volsung twins) but the idea was not developed. Fafner was a top-hatted property developer in a wheel chair, from which he staggered in rage to club his brother to death. As the fearsome 'dragon', he turned out to be a frail old man, poisoning the natural environment and living in an underground control room from which he addressed the world via loudspeakers (the Wizard of Oz?). The Linden tree was now a poisoned relic that had toppled into Fafner's quarry, and it was in that bleak quarry that Siegfried listened to the forest murmurs with ne'er a rustling leaf in sight. However, there was a real Woodbird - a white dove - which flew about and perched on cue in an amazing (if distracting) way. In Holten's interpretation, this bird was Brünnhilde's messenger - a white counterpart to the black ravens of Wotan. In an unnecessary piece of activity near the end of *Die Walküre* when, according to the orchestra, Brünnhilde was being wrapped in sleep, she busied herself in sending the bird out into the world.

Like Chéreau, Holten paid great attention to the acting, which was of a high standard throughout. However, in Holten's concept there was also a strong element of cruelty and violence, as gangsters competed for power and riches. It was a case of Chéreau meets *The Godfather!*





In *Das Rheingold*, the 'gold' that so excited the three flappers at their 1920s swimming pool bar, turned out to be an amphibious naked young man, frolicking like some pet in a glass-sided fish tank. The spurned Alberich, beside himself with rage, smashed a bottle and then, with its jagged edge, cut out the young man's heart, brandishing this triumphantly aloft as the water in the tank swirled with blood.

Sex, violence and booze were recurring elements in Holten's *Ring*. When characters had little else to do, they invariably reached for a bottle, or a revolver, rifle, pistol, submachine gun and, occasionally, a sword, spear or iron bar. In order to seize the ring (actually, it was a long helix-shaped bracelet rather than a ring), Wotan, with Loge's assistance, chained up the Nibelung in a white-walled torture chamber and hacked off his forearm with a surgical instrument, thus mimicking Alberich's own cutting out of the Rhinegold's heart. As Alberich howled and sobbed, the severed limb swung against the wall, splashing blood everywhere. The none-to-subtle message was that Wotan and Alberich were both brutal thugs, each as bad as the other. The depiction of Wotan in these terms is not uncommon in modern productions, but it hardly does justice to the noble (if flawed and self-tortured) nature of the god, conveyed so eloquently in the score. For Wagner, Wotan was the 'sum of the intelligence of the present' – which is to say, he is us, with all our flaws and inconsistencies, our capacity for love and our inclination to egoism. To reduce him to a self-seeking criminal is to deprive him of a much more complex and interesting place in the drama.

As the gods began their triumphal entry into Valhalla, the plaintive song of the Rhinedaughters floated up on cue, except that this time their voices came not from the Rhine gorge below but from Loge's record player. Loge was a slippery, chain-smoking journalist in this production, ironically always looking for a light! He 'had the goods' on Wotan and unwisely boasted of the fact. Anxious to cover his tracks, Holten's Wotan decided that Loge knew too much and so he plunged his spear into his heart (three operas too early if one believes the Norns) and that was the end of him! Except it wasn't, because he still had to be summoned at the end of *Die Walküre* and dispatched to Valhalla at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

More unscripted violence followed when bottle-swigging Valkyries, black-winged and wearing bloodstained ball gowns, set about abusing the corpses of dead heroes, stripping them of valuables and roughly tossing their bodies on piles. So much for Brünnhilde's assurance to Siegmund that Wishmaidens would wait upon him in Valhalla! In the final scene, Wotan's wistful memories of his daughter's bright pair of eyes were accompanied by her screams of agony as he tore the wings from her body. We had heard those screams before - with the mutilation of Alberich.

In this production, Hagen made his initial appearance in *Siegfried* - for those able to identify the pallid and sullen youth seen lurking with Alberich

outside Fafner's lair. At the end of the nocturnal encounter in *Götterdämmerung* (here incongruously set in a basement, bathed in the harsh glare of fluorescent tubes) Hagen plunged a knife into his father's chest whilst the old man, with his dying breath, urged him to remain true. The picture of the psychopath was complete when, in the vassals' scene, Hagen summarily 'executed' captured prisoners with pistol shots to the back of the head, and threw women (Muslim?) captives to the balaclava-wearing soldiers.

The director saved his most provocative surprises for the ends of Acts. Thus, Sieglinde, not Siegmund pulled *Nothung* from the tree; Hunding took Wotan's injunction to 'Go!' literally and just walked off stage, laughing at the dead Siegmund and spitting on his corpse; Siegfried, using *Nothung*, split not the anvil but Mime's television set; Guido Paevatalu (Gunther) himself appeared and sang as Siegfried-as-Gunther in Act One of *Götterdämmerung* and, of course, at the end of it all, Brünnhilde survived and gave birth – though mercifully, not on stage. Nevertheless, there were moments of real theatrical potency, such as in the confrontation between Fricka and Wotan, the final encounter between the Wanderer and Erda as they faced mutual powerlessness (in Erda's nursing home), and the love scene on a wintry rooftop as Siegfried thawed Brünnhilde's heart and, together, they imagined the end of the gods and laughed at death.

The singing was consistently good, with the notable exception of a miscast – or more correctly – misdirected Hagen. The director's preference for a reptilian, creepy characterization rather than a powerful, dominating one left a gaping hole in the dramatic fabric. All too often, Hagen was lost amongst the crowd of vassals and had little visible hold over his half-brother and sister. Compounding the problem, the singer in question (Peter Klaveness) was more baritone than bass and produced a brittle sound hardly calculated to inspire fear and loathing. When Hagen is upstaged by Gunther, *Götterdämmerung* has problems.

James Johnson, the Wotan/Wanderer in all but the third cycle *Rheingold* was outstanding, both vocally and as an actor. He was a dominant presence and one of the best Wotans I've seen. The Brünnhilde for the third cycle was Swedish soprano Iréne Theorin, and she was very good indeed. The Brünnhilde for the second cycle was Tina Kiberg, who was excellent but not as powerful as Theorin. Stig Fogh Andersen was a most convincing Siegfried (he also sang Siegmund because Poul Elming was indisposed for both cycles). Andersen still looks the part even though he is in his mid-fifties, and I would guess he has another five or six years in him still as Siegfried. He made it comfortably to the end of *Siegfried*, which is no mean feat. Stephen Milling (Fasolt and Hunding) was superb, physically and vocally. It was a pity he wasn't cast as Hagen. The Alberich of Sten Byriel, Fricka of Randi Stene and Mime of Bengt-Ola Morgny also stood out.

The combination of an open orchestra pit and the auditorium's polished timber surfaces resulted in a very



bright acoustic in which the brass and timpani were at times overwhelming. Wagner certainly knew what he was doing when he prescribed a covered pit for the Ring. However, in the absence of anything approaching the Bayreuth model, the only practical alternative might be the use of temporary extensions to stage aprons in order to dampen the louder instruments and achieve a more balanced sound.

The intervals were just 30 minutes long, which meant that the smoked salmon, pickled herrings and terrine of venison had to be consumed with unseemly haste. Obviously 30 minutes was more than sufficient for scenery changes in this house but one can only hope that the Danes were showing off and that this will not become the norm for Wagner performances in high-tech opera houses. Tamper with productions if you must, but interval dining is sacred!

My abiding impression of the Copenhagen *Ring* is of a production full of surprises (some more defensible than others) but one that was always engaging, well performed and brilliantly staged – in a theatre that is surely second to none.

*Members may be interested to know that Peter Bassett is about to have another book published, Richard Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, to be available before the performance of the music drama in Perth in November 2006. As well as his usual informative commentary, Peter is offering a new, accurate translation of the libretto, including the stage directions. Details of how you can order a copy are on page 19 of this Newsletter.*

## *Parsifal* - **Sunday 9 April** **Deutsche Staatsoper** **Berlin, April 2006** - Dr James Leigh

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.

The production was by the well known film director Bernd Eichinger (Downfall, Elementarleichen, Fantastic Four plus much else). The theme was relativity theory or time-space equivalence, taking as its point of departure

Gurnemanz' lines in the first transformation scene "here time and space become one". Set design Jens Kilian, video effects fettFilm (Torge Möller), lighting Franz Peter David. Much use was made of film and here perhaps one felt the influence of Schlingensiefel. Unlike in that notorious production [the current Bayreuth *Parsifal*–Ed], however, the effects were not allowed to distract from the performance but rather added to it. It was still Wagner's *Parsifal*. Even before the prelude started, the audience saw a black and white still photo of Adam and Eve (Genesis). But did time start with the creation or the big bang?

### **Act 1.**

The prelude was accompanied by images of an ever closer approaching planet (not the earth) with various moons and I thought there was a suggestion of a Grail falling to earth. It was rather like the slow motion sequences in [the film] *2001 a Space Odyssey*. The forest scenes were fairly conventional. Kundry's arrival was accompanied by a movie film suggestion of giant white galloping horses. The swan is initially convincing film but the also has the usual embarrassing bird-flu victim.

The first transformation scene was accompanied by images of the march of time, from the Pyramids, via Babylon, to World War II destruction, but the effect was somewhat diminished by the appearance of the hall of the Grail right at the start of the transformation music. The bell effects were weak.

Titirel was not in a tomb, but on a hill backstage with images of the Acropolis behind him. The Grail temple, front stage, already had collapsed columns. The knights were in Egyptian or Greek costume. The Grail communion ceremony consisted of Amfortas taking what looked like his heart out of his tunic, placing it on a large wooden butcher's chopping block, and the knights filing by, each chopping at bit off and eating it for rejuvenation (compare with Munch's painting *das Herz*). All singers were excellent, especially René Pape as Gurnemanz and Hanno Müller-Brachmann as Amfortas. Kundry was sung and acted well by Michaela Schuster. *Parsifal* was Burkhard Fritz. Barenboim conducted at average pace (act 1- 1 hour 55 minutes). However, I thought he deliberately extended the rests, creating what seemed like very long pauses. He also gave Barbirolli-like groans in the prelude, clearly audible from row 7. The orchestra was fabulous and almost invisible. There was initially no applause, then a bit and finally total. In Germany, the tradition of silence after Act 1 seems to be waning, even at Easter performances of *Parsifal* (the same happened in Hamburg a week later on Easter Monday).

### **Act 2.**

Klingsor's tower was represented by just a red backdrop with Klingsor and spear at one side of the stage. The time-traveller Kundry was accompanied by



devil images on film. The flower maidens wore Valkyrie style breastplates and sang very strongly. Kundry's Herzeleide narration was accompanied by movie film images of wombs, vaginas, mine pit heads and much murky lapping water. The "seduction/rejection" scene involved some minor strip tease. Kundry's past lives and her mocking of Christ were illustrated by scenes of Christ carrying his cross. The magic garden suggested in structure at least the Bayreuth 1882 original, based on the Palazzo Rufolo in Ravello. The spear throw and catch at the end was conventional, and the garden went up in flames. The wicked Klingsor was well sung by Christof Fischesser. Fritz and Schuster sustained their long central scene convincingly.

### Act 3

Act 3 opened on a large Depression-era US city in winter (suspiciously like Manhattan or Chicago). Gurnemanz sat on a park bench in the foreground. Ordinary people walked about, some wheeling babies in prams. A fire hydrant represented the spring. Much was made of the second transformation scene. A rush of movie images of world catastrophes, floods, tornadoes, bombings was followed by a trip through a time-space wormhole to finally reach a 2006 football ground with bowver boy neo-Nazi types, armed with heavy boots, steel bars and chains, representing the disintegrating knight fraternity occupying the stands. The wound healing, the redemption of Kundry, and the redemption of the Grail were accompanied by images of the new planet rising in the background. Finally, Kundry comes to sit next to Parsifal at the back of the football stand.

I believe that the new planet is meant to represent the Grail. No other Grail symbol appears at any stage throughout the work. I think what the producer was trying to get at was the time independence of *Parsifal*. Nineteenth century concepts of redemption can no longer have meaning for those who have been through the ghastly 20th-century. Nor can a Schopenhauerian denial of sexuality as the way to live be valid. The program notes refer to the 20th-century conflict of English materialism and German idealism and suggest that *Parsifal* and indeed the Ring and *Tristan*, (both strongly related to *Parsifal*) need to be freshly interpreted as time flows by. Wagner's music is well recognized to be timeless, but it is only now that Wagner's theoretical prose work is being seriously studied, and its universal relevance is often being surprisingly demonstrated. In particular, the late work *Religion and Art* (1880) anticipated the replacement of religion, when it had become corrupted, by art. This was a feature of the 20th-century, which is now being reversed.

Wagner, as well as anticipating Freud in *Tristan* and the Ring could even be seen to have anticipated Einstein in *Parsifal*. Overall, a very moving performance, dominated by Pape but well sung and beautifully played, with the visual imagery often resonating strongly.

## Nike Wagner wants cuts in Bayreuth

In keeping with our practice of keeping an eye on the behind-the-scenes activities at Bayreuth, we can report that Nike Wagner has made another contribution to the ongoing internecine warfare on the Green Hill by setting a hare running over making cuts the public funding the Bayreuther Festspiele receives from German governments.

According to the Deutsche Welle website article: "The Bayreuth Festival currently receives 1.7 million euros each from the federal government, the state of Bavaria and the city of Bayreuth." Nike Wagner's deliberately provocative proposal is that the Festival management should simply "hike" the ticket prices because the Festival "is sold out years in advance and can work risk-free, [and] continues to receive millions in public funds." The governments should then make the money propping up Bayreuth "available to needier cultural institutions, festivals and cities". The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung is also reported as commenting: "...she should know that raising the ticket prices at the Bayreuth Festival would be against the will of her great-grandfather Richard." In another report quoted by the Deutsche Welle article: "The German news magazine *Focus* estimated that prices would need to be raised by 70 percent to compensate for public funds to the seen-and-be-seen event. The current maximum ticket price...is 208 euros..., but the waiting list to get one of them can run up to 10 years. The German Culture Council wrote that last year 370,000 orders were made for around 54,000 tickets, so there's no danger of empty seats." Deutsche Welle also notes that: the "...German Culture Minister Bernd Neumann announced...that the federal government's financial contribution to the event would remain unchanged." That is good news for Australian Wagnerians who have to pay full price summer airline tickets prices (now with an additional avgas surcharge) to even get to Germany!

It is interesting to note the widely varying estimates of people on the waiting list for Bayreuth tickets. The editor remembers hearing figures of a million people in the late 1990s, greatly augmented by people from the newly free East Germany. However, it may be that Bayreuth's appeal is waning, not only because, as Shirley Apthorp suggests (see below), production values at Bayreuth are declining, but also because there is a rapidly expanding range of productions to choose from around the world. Bayreuth is no longer premier or even prime?

The Deutsche Welle article ended with an interesting question: "Why should a festival that could more than support itself receive public money?" The editor would be pleased to receive members' responses for publication in a later newsletter. The full article may still be available at <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2110572,00.html>.



## BAYREUTH 2006 – THE DORST RING

After the drama of Lars Von Trier's withdrawal as director of this year's Ring at Bayreuth, what has Tankred Dorst achieved? A very mixed reception has greeted the dramatist/producer's first operatic foray. However, who is Herr Dorst?

The online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tankred\\_Dorst](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tankred_Dorst)), not necessarily the most authoritative source, but an amalgam of different views has this to say, among other things: "Tankred Dorst, born on 12 December 1925 in Sonneberg/Thuringia, is a German playwright and storyteller. Conscripted into the German army as a pupil at the age of 17, he was soon captured and incarcerated as a prisoner of war. Tankred Dorst currently lives and works in Munich. His farces, parables, one-act-plays and adaptations are inspired by the theatre of the absurd and the works of Ionesco, Giraudoux and Beckett. His monumental drama *"Merlin oder das wüste Land"*, which was premiered in 1981 in Düsseldorf has been compared to *"Goethe's Faust"*. Together with composer Wilhelm Killmayer he founded the marionette theatre *"Das kleine Spiel"*, for which he wrote his first plays". Among his works are some that share broad links with Wagner, either through their general interest in legends and myths, and others more specifically with Wagnerian subjects: *Die Legende vom armen Heinrich* (1997), *Merlin oder das wüste Land* (1981), and *Parziva* (1987)." Interestingly, Wikipedia also notes that Tankred Dorst held / holds "visiting professorships at universities in Germany, Australia and New Zealand," although a web search failed to find any mention of him in the vicinity.

Picking up a link with Dorst's previous work, Julia Spinola of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (<http://www.signandsight.com/intodaysfeuilletons/875.html>) "likes the sets of Philipp Schlössmann and the stage direction of Tankred Dorst: 'Just as the expelled heathen gods return to the ruins of history in Dorst's 'Merlin or the desert country', so the gods of 'Rheingold' now inhabit our forgotten urban wastelands. Suddenly, the atmospheres of such places seem to congeal into the form of oddly dented phantasy figures that creep out of the cracks and fissures in our civilization, which we thought was seamlessly sealed.'"

However, not everyone was so positive. In her article, *Bayreuth's Mediocre 'Ring' Reflects Festival's Stagnation*, Shirley Apthorp in the online newspaper, Bloomberg News, notes: "The international press had already issued its verdict on 80-year-old dramatist Tankred Dorst... Dorst, it was widely agreed, was dull as ditchwater while Thielemann was hailed as a savior".

In contrast, Apthorp laments of the 2006 Bayreuth Ring: "The tragedy is that the festival, founded by Richard Wagner in 1876 to break new artistic ground,

has stagnated. It ought...to remain what it has been..., a place where ideas are born and standards are set for Wagner interpretation worldwide. Instead, it has become a bastion of convention and a temple of mediocrity." According to Apthorp, "The Gods, so Dorst aims to show us, are still among us, doomed to live out their endless cycle of conflict and destruction. We just can't see them. Accordingly, he places the action in shabby contemporary locations...a graffiti-scarred pedestrian overpass, a power plant, an abandoned quarry. Dorst, chosen in part for his skill in wizardry, fails us most when he should work magic. There is no rainbow bridge, Siegfried fights a dragon we never see, and the final immolation is a few puffs of stage smoke".

From the editor's point of view, Apthorp's most damning criticism is about the lack of characterisation by Dorst: "Worse, we are never told who these people are or why they act as they do, and we are never given any reason to care. There is no chemistry, no character development, no motivation and no tension". Apthorp also damns with faint praise, Thielemann's conducting: "On the podium, Thielemann draws consistently lush sounds from the orchestra, pays meticulous attention to detail, and never, never drowns out his singers. Yet what he does could not be called sensitive accompaniment, since in the process of being precise he loses all natural impulsiveness...one craves the occasional outburst of passion, a sense of excitement or a glimpse of something dangerous.... Thielemann provides none of these things. What he does is intelligent, meticulous, sometimes even revelatory, but it is never thrilling". The full review is at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601088&sid=aWbdO7hpRjGs&refer=home>.

In something of a similar vein, in his 1 August 2006 article, *"New 'Ring' production gets mixed response,"* Mike Silverman of Associated Press, comments that "Fire and flood purify the earth and give hope for humanity in the final moments of Richard Wagner's "Ring" cycle, but the new production...may prove beyond redemption". According to Silverman, the audience cheered the cast and Thielemann at the end of the Ring, but there were boos mixed with applause for Dorst. Silverman sums up his reaction: "in this case the split reaction seemed to reflect frustration over the wild unevenness of the production.... There are magical moments during the four evenings, but just as many muddled images and ideas that haven't been developed enough to work as theater. Most damagingly, the central theme 'hat the gods and other characters re-enact their mythic story in the midst of present-day people who remain oblivious to their travails' remains a theoretical concept with no emotional payoff".

To give a flavour of the production, *Götterdämmerung* at least, Silverman writes: "Dorst sets the Gibichung kingdom in a 1920's-style Italian palazzo, with the courtiers a mixture of decadent partygoers and fascist thugs. This makes a striking contrast to the world of natural innocence represented by Siegfried....





The men in white tie and tails and women in fancy evening dress snicker at his naiveté and uncouth ways as he is ensnared in the Gibichungs' wiles. But this creative stroke is followed by a head-scratching choice at the opening of Act III, set in a valley overlooking the Rhine. Suddenly we're back on the concrete highway overpass (or whatever it is) that was the setting for the gods in "Das Rheingold." One addition: The stone bench in the center has opened up and become a storm drain so the Rhinemaidens can make their appearance".

Unlike Apthorp, Silverman responded positively to Thielemann's conducting: "Once again, it was Thielemann's conducting, with its mixture of dramatic power and chamber music-like clarity, that most distinguished the night and for which this "Ring" will be best remembered. Despite a few bobbles, the orchestra played its heart out...". Silverman had mixed reactions to the singers in *Götterdämmerung*, singling out as "by far the best" Hans-Peter Koenig, "whose enormous dark bass voice was ideal for the morose Hagen", expressing reservations about the tenor, Stephen Gould, who "sounded better than he had two nights earlier as Siegfried, but the highest notes still eluded him," but finding that the Brünnhilde, soprano Linda Watson, "rose splendidly to the demands of the Immolation Scene". You may be able to read the full review at <http://www.canadaeast.com/cp/entertainment/article.php?articleID=27837>.

In another review, New York Times, 2 August 2006, "A 'Ring' at Bayreuth, as Beauty Shines Through Newness", (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/02/arts/music/02ring.html?ex=1156219200&en=8d0e8808a4d7d813&ei=5070>) Anthony Tommasini, considers, "Judging from the audience response and the initial buzz in the opera world, his debut will be heatedly debated for months. I found his work fresh, provocative and mostly effective.... The real hero of the Bayreuth "Ring" is not Siegfried or Brünnhilde, but the conductor Christian Thielemann. Whether the Bayreuth Festival can still claim to be the world's premier Wagner house has long been an open question. But whatever one's take on the production, Mr. Thielemann drew a probing, radiant and exhilarating musical performance from this orchestra of dedicated instrumentalists...as well as from the robust festival chorus and an involving, if vocally uneven, cast".

For those whose Wagner's music is the fundamental aspect of his music dramas, Tommasini makes the following interesting observation: "...Mr. Thielemann... is a conductor with a contemporary sensibility who also wants playing to be incisive and up to date. This is a difficult balancing act. But he pulled it off in the "Ring." His tempo for the stormy opening music of Act 1 in "Die Walküre" was on the slow side. The tension came from the clarity he brought to the strangely overlapping lines and riffs. By revealing the complexity of this driving, frightful episode, he made the music seem interesting as well as hypnotic".

[Editor]

## And **What** About The Conductor?

**We can gain a little insight into the conductor's view of Wagner and the Ring from "An interview with Christian Thielemann on conducting Wagner and the upcoming Bayreuth Festspiele" by Christine Lemke-Matwey that appeared originally in German in Die Zeit on June 29, 2006 (Translated by Ian Pepper for [www.signtandsound.com](http://www.signtandsound.com)).**

Among other questions, Lemke-Matwey asked Thielemann "What have been your greatest moments of personal fulfilment with the 'Ring'?" to which Thielemann answered: "Even if it sounds like a platitude: I look forward during all four operas to the funeral march in "Götterdämmerung"! "Nibelheim" is also lovely, and the finale of "Rheingold." The athleticism at the beginning of "Siegfried" is horrifically difficult to beat. Or in "The Valkyrie," Wotan and Brünnhilde, when father repudiates daughter, those are great moments: the blackest melancholy in the most magnificent E major!" Lemke-Matwey continued: "How have conditions at Bayreuth altered your view of the work as a whole?" Thielemann responded: Colossally! It's like cinema, where rehearsing can become very intense. When you work on "Siegfried" in the morning, and perhaps the first half of "Rheingold" in the afternoon, you really notice where Wagner was consistent in his elaboration of motifs, and where he wasn't. The system, as it happens, is not as watertight as you might expect.

To another question: *What has Wagner taught you?*, Thielemann answered: "He has energized and exhausted me. I am grateful to him for states of rapture, and for the insight I desperately need to escape from this addictive trap. Wagner can become toxic. You really have to give yourself up to the music. But what happens afterwards? That's why I've decided to decline all "Tristans" for the time being. I can't endure the piece any more, it just wears me out... And in the end, you think it's a question of life and death. That can't be the case for a conductor. I can't constantly be throwing myself out the window, as fascinating as that might be. You have to be able to live with art, otherwise it's not art. That's why it's never appealed to me to transgress genuine limits through drugs or other excesses. I don't need to know everything.

Christine Lemke-Matwey in Der Tagesspiegel (2 August 2006 summarised at [www.signandsight.com/intodaysfeuilletons/881.html](http://www.signandsight.com/intodaysfeuilletons/881.html): "Wagner's Ring cycle comes to a close in Bayreuth") throws her hat into the Ring on the side of Thielemann: "This 'Ring' will once more bear the name of a conductor. Just as we speak of the Kupfer Ring, the Kirchner Ring and the Flimm Ring (leaving unmentioned conductors Daniel Barenboim, James Levine and Giuseppe Sinopoli), people still speak today of the Rings conducted by Leon Furtwängler and



Joseph Keilberth. With a hot heart and an astute head, Christian Thielemann has now taken his place on this podium, freeing Wagner from the aesthetic musical prison of the 20th century. Carl Maria von Weber, Felix Mendelssohn and Richard Strauss form a guard of honour. We're going to have to change our romantic listening habits. And we're going to start talking about the music once more. There are worse things that could happen to the world of Wagner."

## But Now For A First Hand Report

# The New Bayreuth

## Ring 2006 -

Jim Leigh

The new Ring at Bayreuth is a bit of a mixed bag. Let it first be said that the musical direction and execution was the best I've heard anywhere ever (16 Rings including three previous Bayreuth Rings). Christian Thielemann managed to do the almost impossible and provide both clarity and power while achieving cumulative effect with near faultless playing. It is true that the further back you are, the better the overall sound picture. The tempo was fairly measured (R 2hr 35 min, W 3hr 55 min S 4hr 5 min G 4hr 35 min) We saw the second cycle (August 11,12, 14, 16) from the front row of Loge Links, where incidentally the seats are padded quite well and there is ample legroom, plus you get to chat to the other inhabitants. When asked where she was staying, the lady next to me replied "in my castle" and the person behind said she had come every year for the past thirty years! The German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her husband attended the whole cycle, with what seemed to me fairly minimum security

As well as the excellent orchestral playing, the singing too was of a very high standard, with only Endrick Wottrich (Siegfried) deficient. He seemed to sing with a lisp and, although some big moments were good, the overall effect was irritating. The three main parts were well sung, particularly Falk Struckmann's strong and clear Wotan and Linda Watson's powerful and smooth Brünnhilde. Stephen Gould (Siegfried) looked the part, acted well, except for poor timing with the hammer, and had plenty of power and finesse, but found the high notes difficult. Among the others, I thought Gerhard Siegel's Mime was outstanding and Kwangchul Youn's Fasolt and Hunding very strong. Irène Theorin in the smallish parts of Helmwig and 3rd Norn showed why she was the Copenhagen and Beijing Brünnhilde- completely upstaging her colleagues in volume, perhaps too much so. She probably thought she deserved a bigger part. Adrienne Pieczonka was a full voiced yet sensitive Sieglinde and received a lot of applause.

As to the production: the 80 year old German Theatre Director Tankred Dorst was asked at fairly short notice in late 2004 to direct his first ever opera (merely the Ring) and has said in interviews that he was not able to do

everything he wanted and hinted that 2007 may see significant expansions and improvements.

The production overall was quite good, but all the big classic scenes seemed to be a bit underdone, leaving one a little unsatisfied with the scenic effects. For example:

- (1) The Gods did not enter Valhalla. They had earlier gone into the cellar well before the processional musical climax;
- (2) The curtain dropped on all transitions in *Rheingold*, Siegfried's ascent to the rock in *Siegfried*, and the Rhine Journey, Hagen's Watch and the Funeral March in *Götterdämmerung*;
- (3) The magic fire scene and all scenes around the rock (quite substantial itself) were very ordinary, glowing patches of gold in a dinky circle;
- (4) The Ride of the Valkyries was as in 1876, helmets and spears lined up, no movement, a few wounded soldiers who got up and walked around;
- (5) The immolation scene could have been better and the set looked like it could have been collapsed easily, but didn't.

To balance this there were some very good effects in other scenes. To give some examples:

- (1) The opening scene of *Rheingold* was very effective with light effects seeming to make flowing bubbly waves below and subtle projection effects simulating naked swimmers above. A nice idea, which allowed for radiant singing, was to have the Rhinemaidens (Woglinde: Fionnuala McCarthy, Wellgunde: Ulrike Helzel; Flosshilde: Marina Prudenskaja) static side by side centre stage, while Alberich (Andrew Shore) acted out his sexual and masturbatory fantasies with auxiliary near naked ladies who appeared at random within the waves.
- (2) Nibelheim was a modern day power station, but the wall of it cracked open, or seemed to, to reveal the deep recesses of a gold mine.
- (3) At the first mention of a sword, a shaft of light in the shape of a sword was projected right across the stage. (the actual sword in tree was in a fallen telegraph pole). The door of Hunding's hut flew open to reveal a giant moon taking up the whole backstage.
- (4) Act 2 of *Die Walküre* was at least set on a rocky place, as per Wagner's directions, instead of the modern trend to place it inside Valhalla. Looming statues of the heroes of history formed a dark background. An accessory Wotan, dressed as the Wanderer, gave a presage of the future at "Das Ende" by breaking his spear at this point (for more on accessory characters see below). Wotan's rock rotates and shows his face then sinks away.
- (5) *Siegfried* Act 1 was set in a run down Chemistry Lecture Theatre, with a blackboard, projector, scientific equipment, periodic table, skeletons, plus all Siegfried's childhood things. Siegfried uses magic to smelt sword fragments,



bursts of fire accompanying his gestures. The he breaks up all his childhood things. Rather than the anvil being shattered (there was no anvil), Siegfried's reforged Nothung was used to split down the middle a globe of the world that Mime had been earlier gloatingly cuddling.

- (6) *Siegfried* Act 2: The dragon scene was quite effective and there was a wind machine, as asked for by Wagner. Set under an Autobahn under construction, with cut down trees and concrete poles as the forest, Fafner loomed mysteriously in the background, at times dimly glimpsed. Then, when summoned by the Horn Call, in a surprise coup de théâtre, the whole stage split apart to reveal a fiery cleft into which Siegfried descended.
- (7) *Siegfried* Act 3: Erda's reappearance was almost like a Telly Tubbie out of a hole against a total dark blue background.
- (8) The Norns sat on a pile of skulls under a celestial sphere showing the stars and zodiac signs.
- (9) The Gibichungs were portrayed as decadents of the 1930s, with blatant male and female homosexual behaviour and primitive satanic rituals. The Vassal chorus scene was very effective. Gunther wears a crown and Hagen has his own army of brownshirts.
- (10) In a scene that aroused comment, Siegfried, disguised as Gunther, approached Brünnhilde in the company of the real Gunther. After the seduction, Siegfried was explicitly shown as handing over Brünnhilde to Gunther, which makes a lot of the dialogue in Act 2 rather meaningless.

An overriding motif in this production was the contrast of myth and reality. The Ring is relevant to real political life today and could take place today, but the mythology of love and power is timeless. Dorst emphasized this by extensive use of accessory characters in modern dress who came on regularly to act out little replays of the significance of the enormous mythological (Nordic/German dark age) archetypal events that happen to the gods, Nibelungs and men.

Some examples were *Rheingold*:

- Scene 1: Accessory Rhinemaidens (see above);
- Scene 2: Man with camera walks across gods' balcony;
- Scene 3: Technician strolls through power station and takes measurements;
- Scene 4: At the end, a group of children come out and act a little game of killing each other and picking up ring and/or sword. Graffiti on wall says 'die so stark im Bestehen sich wä' – a line of Loge's: "who fancy themselves to be so important".
- *Walküre* Act 1: a group of men in modern dress come in at the beginning and approach Sieglinde;
- Hunding has six henchmen in archetypal dark age helmets who come in and sit down at back (not really the same temporal idea as this is not unusual in productions these days);

- Act 2: Fricka brought on by two men with ram hats on. Children with bicycles come on with Siegmund and Sieglinde in flight. Accessory Wotan referred to above;
- Act 3: rock has graffiti text "Wir lieben leben und lieben den Tot" (we love to live and love death) on it. Dead heroes, in World War 1 clothes, got up and walked off.
- *Siegfried* Act 2: Children and men were on the autobahn and also came on after Fafner was killed.
- *Götterdämmerung* Act 1: in addition to Gibichungs referred to above, there are images of a woman in modern dress doing eye exercises and much play of a young boy being painted in gold paint and fitted with a devil head. The front of the stage is lined with pairs of shoes (as with Imelda Marcos). A seemingly dead or dying body with blood dripping from it lies in an armchair, ignored by everyone;
- Act 2: there are images of Wotan, Donner and Fricka, as required by Wagner, but also one of Froh. A man with a cuckold's head accompanies Gunther. The vassals are at a party drinking from little horns;
- Act 3 Scene 1: Rhinemaidens are in a storm water drain. Children come on and play hopscotch on a chalk image of a fallen giant.

In the final scene, the Gibichung Hall (hotel) is on fire and guests flee in panic. New guests arrive with bags; a small boy picks up Gunther's crown. The cycle starts again with the new world (hopefully) based on love rather than power. At the final curtain call after the end of *Götterdämmerung*, all these extras assembled on stage and there must have been about 50 of them, in addition to the vassal chorus and Gibichung women.

Some found the production rather predictable, and gossip indicated that Dorst and Thielemann did not get on, each doing his own thing. Signs of Dorst's opera inexperience appeared in some noisy scene changes behind the sublimely played big interludes and the sloppily choreographed crowd scenes. It was also said, however, that he just gave broad orders for the execution of his ideas, leaving the details to assistants. He deserves some latitude in view of the short notice and perhaps a fairer assessment of this production will be possible in 2007.

However, to me, what matters most in Wagner is the music and this was perfection.

Around the festival, an important new exhibition of stage settings and designs for the Ring from 1876 to the Flimm/Wonder 2000 production was on show in the Margrave's Opera House. The newly discovered colour versions of the original Josef Hoffman designs were an eye opener. A lot of the old models from the Wahnfried basement have also been newly rebuilt. The theme was the reflection of the changing world socio-economics and politics over the last 140 years in staging philosophies.

In addition to the famous Stefan Mickisch introductions on the piano one also could go to Detlev Eisinger who



gives a similar presentation (at exactly the same times) with a much clearer German accent and a more thorough, straighter analysis, illustrated just as well on the piano with different extended transcriptions. Both have new CDs out. Second cycle only patrons can also go to introductory lectures, with piano, in French, by Professor Phillipe Olivier from Strasbourg University (again at exactly the same time). Third cycle only has English introductions (as well as the two German ones) by Dr Jeffrey Swann (New York Wagner Society).

Another significant offering this year is the two CD set of the motifs with spoken sequential outline 'Wagner's Ring Motifs'. First published in German in 2004, this is now available in English with Jon Tomlinson the speaker. The extracts are from a Czech Prague performance and cover about 70% of the motifs and include some preludes and interludes. This is much more useful for beginners than the old 1966 more scholarly Deryk Cooke introduction.

**Bryn Terfel will be singing with the UBS Verbier Festival Orchestra on 28 November 2006**, with Conductor Claus Peter Flor. In a program of Mozart, Wagner & Prokofiev (Romeo & Juliet Suite in the second half), Mr Terfel will be singing two Mozart Concert Arias and "To the Evening Star" (Tannhauser) and "The wind is up..." from the Dutchman, with the Overture to the Dutchman. Early tickets now for Opera Australia subscribers, and open to the public on 30 September 2006. More information at [www.sydneypoperahouse.com/sections/whats\\_on/boxoffice/event\\_details.asp?EventID=1934&sm=1&ss=1](http://www.sydneypoperahouse.com/sections/whats_on/boxoffice/event_details.asp?EventID=1934&sm=1&ss=1)

## Now, for something completely different!

### 'LOVE/DEATH: The Tristan Project'

The editor enjoys watching Bill Viola's video art in which, for example, on a huge video screen a person walks through a blazing fire, or under a waterfall, or dives into and out of a swimming pool, all slowed down to the nth degree, giving the images a hypnotic effect. Viola has recently, apparently, tackled a video response to *Tristan und Isolde*. In an article in The Telegraph (UK), Martin Gayford reported on his interview with Bill Viola. The image accompanying this article is quite impressive, showing Isolde from behind as she stands, arms outstretched, in front of a huge fire (one could be forgiven for thinking it was actually an image for Brünnhilde's Immolation, but artists are entitled to poetic licence).

Gayford reports that Viola's first encounter with *Tristan und Isolde* was "an unpleasant surprise". "I was just in shock," says the renowned video artist when we meet amid the banks of flickering equipment of a Hollywood editing suite. "There were people just shrieking at the tops of their voices and bombastic music. It felt like one huge tsunami of ego. I thought, 'My God, what did I get myself into?'"

Gayford's account of Viola's later response suggests that we may have another Wagnerian in our midst: "Fortunately, after that first adverse reaction, Viola became more and more fascinated by Wagner's masterpiece". "The more I learned about it, the more I got interested," he says. "I realised that Wagner was trying to make a total work in which everything was contingent on everything else, just as it is in reality. For him, musical instruments were the embodiments of the forces of nature - the non-human world in which passion is raw, surging, seething and uncontrolled - whether it's the sea, a storm or a feeling you have inside you."

Although the image sounds as if it may be as or more appropriate for Brünnhilde's Immolation in *Götterdämmerung* Gayford's thumbnail sketch gives a hint of the video's potential power: "One staggering sequence required a woman to stand in front of a 50ft wall of flame and throw herself forward into a huge tank of absolutely still water. The camera was pointed at the surface of the water. At first you see a mirror-smooth reflection of the fire and the woman - then fiery swirls appear as the ripples of her splash spread outwards. Finally there is calm as flames and waves die down." Gayford notes that the video has been presented in Paris and Los Angeles and opened in London in June 2006. Perhaps it will come to Sydney for our Members to see? A still from the video accompanies the article that may still be seen at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2006/06/17/baviola17.xml&sSheet=/arts/2006/06/17/ixartleft.html>.

[Editor]





# **Tristan und Isolde** Seminar – Perth, **Sunday 5 November 2006.**

The Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia is convening a seminar on the music drama on the day after the first performance. In response to a huge demand for places, the Society has extended the application date to 26 October 2006. Information and a copy of the form can be requested by email to the Society's secretary, Sarah Livingstone, santen@iinet.net.au, or call (08) 9457 1809, or mobile 0410 555 439, or to Judy Flower, at jmflower@iinet.net.au, or call (08) 9386 6393 or Fax (08) 9389 6660. The cost is \$40 for any Wagner Society member (or \$45 for non-members) plus \$35 for lunch. The seminar runs from 0900 (registration) to 1630, followed by drinks. Speakers include Peter Bassett, Richard Mills (on "The musical language – conducting Tristan und Isolde") and Professor Heath Lees ("Tristan und Isolde and the re-birth of melody"). See below for the application and payment forms. The venue is now the Alexander Theatre, Alexander Library Building, Francis Street, Perth (just behind the Central Perth railway station and next to the art gallery).

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At the AGM on 21 May 2006, Members agreed to change the process for balloting the sets of tickets the Society receive from the Bayreuth Festival Office. Preference will now be given to Members of two or more years standing who have not, within the past five years, received tickets to Bayreuth through the Society. Otherwise, the process for applications for sets of tickets for the Festival in 2007 has not changed, and is:

1. any member of the Society may apply for 1 set of tickets in her or his own name and must forward a cheque for \$2,500 with their application form.
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3. application forms and cheques must reach the Society (at its GPO Box address) by Saturday, 30 September 2006;
4. in December, the Society expects to receive advice of the number of sets of tickets that have been allocated. If the Society receives all the tickets that were applied for, then a ballot will be held to allocate the seats among the successful applicants as follows:
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  - b. other applicants of two or more years standing will be balloted second; and
  - c. the remaining applicants will be balloted last.
5. Cheques from successful applicants will be banked, and each successful applicant notified of their seat numbers (and given a refund or asked for further money as required.).
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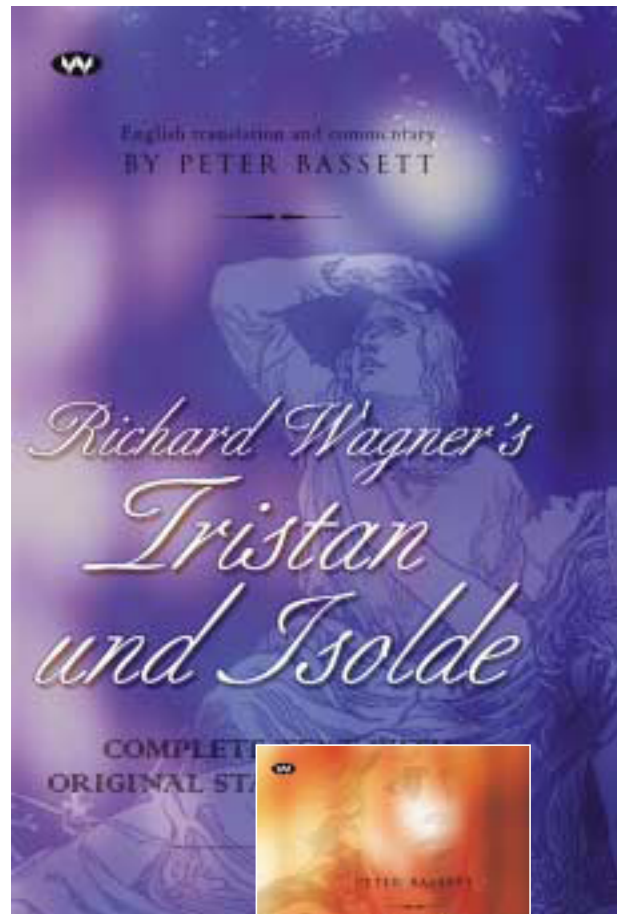
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