

THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NEW SOUTH WALES INC
NEWSLETTER

No. 81, December 2000

Registered Office: 20/67 Moverley Road, Maroubra NSW 2035

COMING EVENTS

<i>DATE</i>	<i>EVENT</i>	<i>LOCATION</i>
10 December 2000	Christmas Party - Barry Walters on visiting Wagner's residences; video of Wagner's favourite walk around Tribschen	Goethe Institut 2.00 PM
18 February 2001	Video: <i>Das Rheingold</i> (Bayreuth 1991/92 - Barenboim & Kupfer - Tomlinson, Finnie, Johansson, Svenden, von Kannen, Hölle, Kang etc) Whole Ring Cycle to be shown over 2001-2002.	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
18 March	TBA	[Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
8 April	[3] Sun 8 April, Goethe Institut (Palm Sunday, Sunday closest to Good Friday) Video: <i>Parsifal</i> (Cast details to be supplied)	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
20 May	Annual lunch to commemorate Richard Wagner's birthday 22 May 1813. Guest speaker, Rita Hunter, honorary life member	TBA
June	No meeting	
15 July	Annual General Meeting Guest speaker / performer TBA	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
August 4 August	No Society meeting Joint <i>Lohengrin</i> seminar with Art Gallery	Art Gallery of NSW
16 September	TBA	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
21 October	Video: <i>Die Walküre</i> (Metropolitan, Levine & Schenk, Lakes, Norman, Moll, Morris, Ludwig, Behrens etc)	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
18 November	TBA	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM
9 December	Annual Society Christmas Party Additional entertainment TBA	Goethe Institut 1.00 PM

COMMITTEE 2000-20001

President	Barbara McNulty	9487 1344
Vice President and Newsletter Editor	Terence Watson	9517 2786
Treasurer and Membership Secretary	Roger Cruickshank	9357 7631
Secretary	Dennis Mather	9560 1860
Members	Shirley Robertson	9707 2225
	Lindsay Knight	9550 3290
	Julian Block	9337 6978
Public Officer	Olive Coonan	9344 3470

FOR YOUR DIARY

<i>Lohengrin</i>	Re-studied production from Opera Australia. Performances. Cast: Lohengrin, Glenn Winslade; Elsa, Lisa Harper-Brown; Telramund, John Wegner; Ortrud, Bernadette Cullen; Heinrich, Donald Shanks. Conductor Sebastian Weigle, Director Andrew Sinclair.	Fri 10, Tue 14, Fri 17, Wed 22 & Sun 26 mat; August Sun 1 & Thurs 6 September - in Sydney
<i>Parsifal</i>	New production from State Opera of South Australia Cast: <i>Parsifal</i> Poul Elming, <i>Amfortas</i> Jonathan Summers, <i>Kundry</i> Margaret Medlyn, <i>Klingsor</i> Daniel Sumegi, <i>Gurnemanz</i> Manfred Hemm;. Conductor Jeffrey Tate; Director Elke Neidhardt.	22, 26mat, 29mat Sep 02mat October 2001 - in Adelaide
Wagner Spectacular	Simone Young conducting the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra, Tristan Act 2 (Horst Hoffmann & Lisa Gasteen), <i>Tristan</i> Prelude, Siegfried Idyll and "other orchestral masterworks from Wagner's music dramas."	Friday 26 October 7.30pm - in Sydney
<i>Tristan und Isolde</i>	Production from Opera Australia. Cast: <i>Tristan</i> , Horst Hofmann; <i>Isolde</i> , Lisa Gasteen; <i>Brangane</i> , Bernadette Cullen; <i>Kurwenal</i> , Daniel Sumegi; <i>Konig Marke</i> , Bruce Martin. Conductor Simone Young; Director Neil Armfield.	November on Tues 13, Sat 17, Tues 20 & Fri 23 - in Melbourne

THE PRESIDENT'S REPORT - December 2000

Dear Members

My trip to Bayreuth this year, while greatly anticipated, proved to be somewhat of a disappointment. While in Salzburg we heard all sorts of rumours that Hans Sotin and Waltraud Meier had pulled out of their roles as Gurnemanz and Sieglinde. Newspaper crits of the new Ring were passed from hand to hand and eagerly discussed with the result that we went to Bayreuth not knowing what to expect.

Parsifal was our first opera and Matthias Holle was singing Gurnemanz and, while Christoph Eschenbach conducted the second slowest performance on record, it was well sung and seemed to have a new lease of life. *Meistersinger* was good and *Lohengrin* well sung. Roland Wagenführer was ill and so *Lohengrin* was sung by Robert Dean Smith (who also sang Walther the preceding night!). The production remains very dark in many ways.

Now at last *The Ring* and *Rheingold* was most enjoyable. The singing was good and the production by Jurgen Flimm and Erich Wonder, while very contemporary, worked well. The only cause for concern was Giuseppe Sinopoli's conducting, which was uneven and inconsistent. *Walküre* opened with a wonderful depiction of Hunding's house and I shall treasure for many years the scene between Placido Domingo and Waltraud Meier as Siegmund and Sieglinde. Unfortunately, the third act with the Valkyries was a huge let down. Much flashing light and abseiling down the walls of Valhalla while a small army of women engaged in some form of military drill and queues of walking dead heroes made for a very busy and rather messy stage.

In *Siegfried* things went from bad to worse and the appearance of a young Hagan as a snivelling schoolboy in Act 2 served no useful purpose. The scene was bleak in the extreme and the dragon, made of black plastic, was not effective. The third act is best forgotten as Gabrielle Schnaut was having great difficulty with her voice.

Götterdämmerung opened well, but the last act was very disappointing as Flimm seemed to have run out of ideas. A series of scrimms does not suffice for the immolation or the destruction of the world. A young Parsifal just before the final curtain left us puzzled.

Since my return I have met with Adrian Collette from Opera Australia to talk about a closer relationship. I was glad to assure him of our continuing support for future Wagnerian productions. I asked him about the possibility of a future Opera Australia Ring Cycle and await his response with interest. I have also contacted Craig Bush from the Art Gallery of NSW and we have arranged a seminar on *Lohengrin* at the Gallery on 4 August 2001.

It is with great sadness that we record the death of Lady Finley. Berry had many friends among our members and will be missed by all who knew her. We extend our sympathy to her family.

Those of you who were at the Annual General Meeting are aware that the Committee is concerned about our financial position and that it has been necessary to increase membership fees for next year. Our Society's primary aim is to support and encourage regular performances of Wagner's great operas .

To be able to maintain our past level of grants, it is essential that we cover the costs of all functions including our monthly meetings. The Committee resolved to seek your cooperation in attending as many meetings as possible as we need a minimum of 40 members to cover the costs of a film afternoon and 50 when we have speakers or singers.

It is expensive to use the Goethe Institut, but I doubt if we could find anywhere that gives us such pleasant surroundings, in a venue that is so convenient, together with high quality audio visual equipment. With this in mind, the Committee has decided to change the format of the Christmas Party slightly by asking each of you to bring a plate to the party. We will supply wine and soft drink as well as Christmas cake and of course we will run our usual raffle with prizes of a Christmas cake, a Wagner watch and a bottle of champagne.

On Friday, 24 November Terence Watson and I were pleased to have the opportunity to farewell the German Consul to Sydney, Dr Roever and his wife who are returning to Bonn. We look forward to developing an equally friendly relationship with his successor.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the Christmas party and extend my best wishes to you all for a happy festive season and a happy, healthy New Year. **B McNulty 21.11.2000**

ADDRESS

Please note our permanent address for all correspondence
The Wagner Society in New South Wales Inc
GPO Box 4574 SYDNEY NSW 2001
Telephone: 9487 1344 (Barbara McNulty, President)
Website: <http://www.wagner-nsw.org.au/>

NEW MEMBERS

Mr P Bassett, Ms P Bellamy, Mr J Henningham, Mr K Tan, Mr C & Mrs E Thomas,
Mr R Thurling.

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 have been received from Dr Sue Kelly and Anonymous.

TWO MORE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SERIES: MEMBERS REMEMBER (See also Members Remember on the Website for Betty Maloney on the early years.)

Richard King: The Wagner Society—20 Years On

Through the wonderful synchronicity of life, a chance remark opens doors and creates a new realm of experience. Dr Leonard Hansen, making his first visit to Bayreuth in 1980, asked the Lufthansa staff if they knew of other Aussies making the pilgrimage, preferably someone who had been there before. My friends at the airline mention Murray Smith and me as regular visitors, although we were not booked for that year. We already knew Leonard through our work, but we were unaware of his interest in Wagner. During his visit to our gallery, we discussed starting a Society in Australia with the principle aims of promoting Wagner's work, of encouraging singers and musicians, and of demonstrating to our friends at the (then) Australian Opera that there was an audience for Wagner's music dramas.

I had been a member of the British Wagner Society since 1966, but I had failed to obtain any Bayreuth tickets through them. A chance remark at dinner one evening with a friend from Lufthansa enabled me to obtain tickets by flying with that airline. I suggested to Leonard that he obtain a copy of the British Society's constitution and talk with the "Friends of Bayreuth" people during his visit to Europe. We would launch our society on his return.

Leonard was very enthusiastic and convened the first meeting in Bayreuth with several Aussies he had met on the trip. From memory, these were Betty Berryman, Reg and Betty Maloney, Margaret and Clare Hennessey, and Leonard's life partner, Michele Arnould. The gallery, "The Print Room", became our venue for events and the registered office of the Society. At that stage, the thought of incorporation had not been developed, although we were aware of the legal implications should anyone injure themselves while on our premises or participating in an event.

It was a time of "much enthusiasm". Our first public meeting was publicised mainly by word of mouth and a small advert in the Sydney Morning Herald, attracting about thirty people. Many gave extra money to become "foundation members". A few weeks later we had public screening of Wagnerian documentaries at the AMP theatre at Circular Quay. The crowd was so big that many were turned away. The Society was born.

It became a standard joke that we had a business called the Wagner Society and a hobby called The Print Room! We had lectures by our patron, Charles Mackerras (later Sir) picnics, theatre parties, fundraisers, and recording afternoons at the Concordia (German) Club and the gallery. Annual dinners were arranged on or near the Master's birthday. The membership continued to expand and our reputation, too. Knowledge of our existence and endeavours began to spread interstate with various people taking on the task of forming

their own state Societies. As far as I know, all are still in existence and thriving, as is our group. Our friends at the Australian Opera began to realise we were a force to be reckoned with. One evening, for example, a group of us went to a restaurant at Darlinghurst frequented by the Opera's top brass and singers. As we walked in, Moffat Oxenbould said "Look out! Here's the Wagner mafia!"

We sponsored the Bayreuth Scholarship, but later provided the airfare for the Scholarship winner. Sponsorship of headline singers in AO productions also gave the Society a high profile by being acknowledged in the programs and, often, by having "flyers" placed on the seats, thus encouraging more people to join. Leonard would often match, dollar for dollar, the amount the Society would donate to AO productions. He dearly loved the Society, giving all his spare time to running it, as did our Committee members. There was always a lot of paperwork, as well as the constant demands of making good contacts.

Our guests of honour at our annual dinners regaled us with song or repartee. Werner Bauer, for example, gave very generously of his time and experience, accompanying our singers and finishing with a rendition of Happy Birthday as though composed by Wagner himself.

Leonard became unwell in the late 1980s and stood down as President. I succeeded him for a number of years. The indomitable Olive Coonan then followed and, through her tenacity, continued our steady growth. The Goethe Institut in Woolhara became our second home. Jessie Anderson's memorable spreads of fine food in excellent quantities have passed into folklore. Jessie and Keith have retired to the country, as have I.

When Leonard was President he would not keep the Committee members disciplined and on the subject. He loved hearing about everyone's experiences of all subjects. On the other hand, Olive would only allow a short time to outline the agenda item; no-one was allowed to interrupt. The Chairman of the British Society sat in on a meeting one evening. Leonard later asked him how our meetings compared with theirs. The visitor said he was amazed by the amount of material the Committee got through in such a short time. Olive would say of me: "He doesn't even butter you up, before he tells you off!" By and large, we had great fun at these meetings with only the odd occasion when "ideologies" clashed.

No Committee members were reimbursed. When a member would continually criticise or complain about our way of working, I would always invite them onto the Committee. Our secretaries have done a wonderful job of keeping minutes, typing correspondence, etc. Keeping the membership records was a particularly onerous task. The ticketing for theatre parties and Bayreuth was very time consuming. All those who have resigned or passed on over the years gave their all. We were very fortunate to have such great people on board. As I used to say at many gatherings of members and friends, there are people being born into the physical realm and then dying without ever experiencing the spiritual journey of Wagner. To me, life would not have been complete if I had never turned the handle and opened the door to something so life enhancing. Here's to the Wagner Society in NSW (and like Societies elsewhere)! May it continue to grow and prosper!

(Clare Hennessey asked me to write this memoir and if I have not mentioned someone who should have been recognised, please forgive; it is not intentional.)

Richard King, Member No. 15, Past President, Honorary Life Member

Alec Cohen Bayreuth: 1954—1955: A personal reminiscence

I first visited Bayreuth in 1954 and again in 1955 with my wife, Aviva. We had just finished our university studies in Perth, WA, had married in Sydney and were off to London in late 1953 as soon as we had saved money for the boat fare. It was like sailing into heaven. The rich concert life, the theatre, the prospect of Bayreuth, of live Furtwängler concerts, created a sense of youthful euphoria which lasted 2½ years before we returned to Perth and the sun.

Believe it or not, tickets to Bayreuth, including the performance of Beethoven's 9th symphony, presented no difficulties. It's worth remembering that the times were musically very rich. Sibelius and Richard Strauss were still alive, as well as the 20th century Russian composers. Callas and Flagstad were in full flight, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was at the beginning of his long career. Einstein was still alive. However, the cold war was a reality and Europe had just come out of its nightmare, having lost 40 million of its citizens. Evidence of the terrible conflict was very obvious - food rationing in England and devastation everywhere, especially in Germany. Wahnfried was a ruin.

We approached our visit with the enthusiasm that only youth can generate. We had listened to the ABC's annual broadcasts of Bayreuth, beginning in 1951. As an engineer, I was also fascinated by the prospect of experiencing the famous acoustics of the Festspielhaus. In fact, I was overwhelmed by the breadth of Wagner's genius. How could one man write his own poetry, compose the music, direct the musicians, train the singers how to sing and act, the dancers how to dance, etc etc, and top of it all by building his own theatre to his own ideas on acoustics and create a unique sound. I couldn't wait to experience the result.

We travelled by train to Bayreuth in 1954. I recall one ugly incident. Travelling with a fellow member of the English Wagner Society, we sat opposite a young German girl who spoke excellent English. In conversation, she said: "OK. Hitler did one good thing-he got rid of the Jews". That sticks in my memory as fast as all the wonderful memories of our first and subsequent visits. But, as if to compensate, for most of the operas we sat next to a German girl of our age who was alone. We began a friendship which has lasted to this day.

Wieland Wagner's productions of *Parsifal* conducted by Knappertsbusch remains the greatest theatrical experience of my life. I clearly remember that Aviva and I were both completely overwhelmed by the first act. All we could do during the interval was to sit speechless on the slope of the Green Hill, embrace and shed a few tears.

The ninth of August 1954, prior to the second Ring cycle was the date of the long-anticipated performance of the 9th symphony, conducted by Furtwängler. I recall waiting for the bus on Maximilianstraße. When a Festspielhaus bus arrived, a gnome-like ticket inspector called out: "This way to the 9th", as he ushered us into the bus. This was repeated at every stop. Was this musical heaven? I thought at the time what a privilege it was to be going to our very first performance of that work, in Bayreuth and with Furtwängler directing. It was, of course, magnificent - listen for proof to the 1951 Bayreuth performance still available on commercial CDs.

I remain intrigued to this day as to how Wagner's performance of the symphony on 22 May 1872 sounded in Bayreuth's Markgräfliches Opernhaus which only seats about 450 people - small by any standards. Yet Wagner seems to have assembled over 300 performers on the stage. We, though, were at the next best performance.

Wieland Wagner's production of the Ring, well established by its fourth year, was the talk of the opera world. Perhaps stimulated by the lack of money, the production was minimalist in the extreme - relying on virtually no sets, simple but beautiful lighting, acting, movement and spatial illusion to recreate and revitalise the operas. I am sure the grandsons felt that they were completing Wagner's work. Despite overcoming every possible obstacle the real world could throw at him, Wagner was not able to sweep away the trappings of the 19th century operatic style. Realism giving way to imagination was, no doubt, the underlying theme of the first post-war season.

The cast included Hans Hotter as Wotan, Astrid Varnay and Max Lorenz as Sieglinde and Siegmund, Martha Mödl as Brünnhilde. Wonderful singers such as Greindl, Neidlinger, Weber and, believe it or not, one Birgit Nilsson or Ortlinde! Of course, it's impossible to comment on their performances but some impressions do stay clearly in my memory: the power and glory of Wilhelm Pitz's magnificent chorus throughout the season. However, I was not thrilled by the conductor of the Ring - Joseph Keilberth. There was I, all of 24 years old, passing judgement and saying to myself: "Where is Wagner? Why isn't he in the pit - he has just conducted the 9th; he can't be too far away. Why isn't he in there, stirring up the his incredible brand of magic (and cranking up the decibels)?" I suppose that was really asking too much; it was the only part of the dream that didn't come true!

The operas we experienced in 1955 were *Lohengrin* (Wolfgang), *Tannhäuser* (Wieland), *Der fliegende Holländer* (Wolfgang). Again, the productions were simple and magical. Birgit Nilsson was Elsa - who could possibly forget that bridal procession starting what seemed like 50 metres in stage rear, lit only by small candles held by the chorus who escorted her to her tragic fate. Who could forget Astrid Varnay as Senta, the spinning song and sailors dance and chorus. And Yes -Dietrich Fischer-Diskau as Wolfram and the Venusberg ballet dressed only in body tights.

Unfortunately, the whole world of Wagner remains the subject of endless heated and pointless debate: his great works, his own life, and the lives of his descendants, his politics, and his anti-Semitism. It seems he will never rest in peace.

However, my memory of our first visit (perhaps clouded by youthful enthusiasm) was one of relative peace in the Wagner world. The grandsons stripped Bayreuth of the nonsense of the previous 50 years and started afresh. It seemed to me that the essence of the productions was an optimal synthesis of the music and the mythology. We just enjoyed the experience and will never forget it.

Alec Cohen , Member No. 355, 21 November 2000

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

The Society has copies of the most recently published Occasional Papers available for purchase by members: No. 3 *Orpheus Ascending Poem and Essay A reassessment of Wagner* by Peter Nicholson (\$8), Nos 4,5,6 and 7 *Wagner's Ring Cycle* by Antony Ernst (\$20), and No 8 *Power in the Ring* by Terence Watson (\$10). Contact the President (9487 1344) or the Editor (9517 2786) for details or purchases.

FUNCTION REVIEWS

September 17: Have your say!

Discussion of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's *Götterdämmerung* with special Guests, Bill Gillespie, Head of the Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, WA and Peter Nicholson, writer and poet.

To follow up the SSO's conclusion to its acclaimed concert performance of the Ring cycle, the Wagner Society conducted a Seminar on the performance and on the implications of the views of Gottfried Wagner, great grandson of Richard Wagner, after his visit to Australia. To broaden the discussion to the significance of Wagner today, extracts from videos were shown: two films by Petrus Van der Let - *Hitler's Religion* and *The Wagner Dynasty* - and *Wagner*, from the "Great Composers" series.

The following are some of the comments on the *Götterdämmerung* performance:

- It was a worthy conclusion to the cycle which had generally been of a very high standard, especially Elizabeth Connell (the "pre-eminent soprano of this period" in Mr Gillespie's view) and the hand picked, intensively rehearsed chorus.
- The cost, promotion and timing of and ticketing for the event by the SSO, but especially by the Olympic Games Arts Festival organisers, was totally inadequate.
- Mr Nicholson noted that the event had been trivialised in some media, as shown by the website CitySearch's listing, adding that the website's ironic view of the concert indicated the mode Australians adopted when faced with serious cultural issues.
- It was also noted that the Wagner family itself had to take much of the responsibility for the adverse attitudes many people had to Wagner and his music dramas.
- The audience enthusiastically agreed the President should write to the SSO and congratulate them on the quality of the performance and that the Committee should discuss raising with the Premier all aspects of the ticketing process.

Mr Gillespie noted that the success of the South Australian Opera Company's performance depended largely on a fortuitous opportunity provided by South Australia's loss of the Grand Prix to Victoria and the expeditious submission to the South Australian Government of a strategy for a replacement attraction which depended on tourism, the concurrent proposals from the Victorian State Opera Company to undertake the Ring at some time in the future, as well as the long-standing rivalry between Adelaide and Melbourne.

People generally agreed with Mr Gillespie's point that there was a crucial need for more Australian performances of Wagner's works, whether staged or in concert versions, to build audiences, particularly among younger people, and, more pragmatically, so that people did not have to spend large amounts travelling overseas to performances. It was premature to say whether any Australian city might take on permanent role as the host for Ring cycles, but there was scope for the opera companies and/or symphony orchestras to work both independently and collaboratively to stage or perform in concert the main music dramas.

As background for those who had not attended Gottfried Wagner's talk or were not aware of his views from other sources, the excerpts from the Van der Let films focussed on Herr Wagner's views on the Wagner family's and Germany's failure to confront and resolve its antisemitic history. The audience generally considered Herr Wagner's views to be very one-sided and not to contribute greatly to a better understanding of that complex artist, Wagner. Both Mr Gillespie and Mr Nicholson agreed that the films showed how an artist can be used for different political and social purposes, regardless of the artist's views.

October 15—Wagner Society 20th Anniversary

For the Wagner Society 20th Anniversary celebration on October 15, the Society was privileged to have as its Guest of Honour, Herr Horst Hoffmann, Australia's renowned *heldentenor*, and Society Life Member, for his premiere performance with the Society. Herr Hoffmann was joined in recital by Ms Adele Johnston (soprano) and Ms Fiona McCabe (pianist). The wide-ranging recital showed many aspects of both Wagner and the performers and threw in a few unexpected bonuses as well.

Ms Johnston sang the *Wesendonck Lieder* as a substantial and deeply moving start. It reminded one that these songs were intended for an intimate (perhaps *very* intimate) performance rather than a large concert hall. Ms Johnston brought a rich, warm to the songs and was supported by a supple and sympathetic piano line from Ms McCabe. Ms McCabe brought to light three rarely heard piano pieces of Wagner's which, despite her performance, suggested that Wagner would have been very unlikely to rival Liszt as a piano composer.

Ms Johnston returned to introduce the *Lohengrin* segment of the recital with Elsa's *Traum* ("Lonely, in troubled days..."). Herr Hoffmann then sang the grail narrative in ringing tones and nuanced declamation showing his wealth of experience in this and other Wagnerian roles. Ms Johnston then followed with another aria from Elsa, *Euch liften, die mein Klagen*. The cumulative impact of these three extracts was powerful and surely whetted the appetite for Opera Australia's performances of *Lohengrin* in Sydney in August next year. One cannot forget also Herr Hoffmann's own appearances (regrettably his farewell performances) in *Tristan und Isolde* in Melbourne in November next year.

After the drama and passion of *Lohengrin*, Herr Hoffmann and Ms Johnston took a lighter direction to finish with extracts from operettas of Franz Lehar, *Giudita* by Ms Johnston, and *Das Land des Lächelns* and *Die Lustige Witwe*, duets by Herr Hoffmann and Ms Johnston.

Judging by the applause for all the music performed, the celebration achieved its purpose and members were richly rewarded for their support and interest. The President, Mrs McNulty, expressed the audience's feeling in thanking the performers for their generosity and the wonderful quality of their performances. As a final surprise for the Society at large, the three artists gave us a delightfully spontaneous rendition of "Happy Birthday", reminding us of the heritage of the Society in which all members could take pride.

THE 2000 BAYREUTH RING

More Reviews And Views. (For details of cast and production team see the last Newsletter (No. 80 September 2000).)

Jim Leigh Wonders: A *bühnenbilderische* Ring? (3rd cycle 21,22, 24,26 August 2000)

The new Bayreuth *Ring* was a fascinating and engrossing experience. Jurgen Flimm has wide experience in many German drama theatres. His opera experience is more limited but he has directed numerous operas in Europe, often in association with Wonder, who has wide European experience as an opera designer. He designed the current Bayreuth *Tristan*.

The production is very true to Wagner. Mid 20th C capitalism is being replaced by early 21st C capitalism even though the politics is but a vehicle. The overriding new idea is extensive use of visual leitmotifs (*bühnenbilderische leitmotive*) to weld the cycle together. While Flimm and Wonder have sought a somewhat different aesthetic in *Rheingold*, its visual motives recur. For example there is the *ship* motif - broken canoes for Rhinemaidens in

Rheingold Scene 1, presaging Siegfried's later tragic Rhine journey—seen again whole in *Gotterdammerung* Act 1 where Siegfried launches the boat and again as the front only when the Rhinemaidens re appear in *Götterdämmerung* Act 3; the rope motif-(control) binding Alberich in *Rheingold*, Walkure SAS jumping down on it in *Walkure* Act 3, leading bear in *Siegfried* Act 1 and as noose when Mime's head is forfeited to the Wanderer in the riddle scene, and woven by Norns; and the travel motif—box for Alberich as a toad, suitcases for gods moving to Valhalla and Mime and to my eyes, that enclosing Brunnhilde in magic fire, suggested by bureaucratic red tape around a large rectangular box.

Another feature is scenic overlay. Hunding's hut (a Russian summer house with an ash tree in it), is present from *Walküre* onwards. Siegmund's and Sieglinde's love scene occurs in a similar setting to that between Siegfried and Brunnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*. An elaborate system of detailed deep perspective painted backdrops unifies the decline of the old god industry, its obliteration when the dragon is slain and Siegfried regains the ring, and its regeneration by Siegfried and Brunnhilde's world redeeming love. They are also used to show the final destruction of Valhalla and the cleansing of the curse by the Rhine.

Das Rheingold.

This was probably the best of the four parts. It is by far the busiest in settings and stage business. It is very much like a play, with the gods clearly distinguished as very much ordinary folk (Schiller's "gods as men" and Wagner's own "men as gods"). Froh cracks open a beer can and Wotan uses the office water cooler with plastic cups.

The Rhinemaidens introduce the image of the broken boat and the central elevator used by the maidens. Alberich steals gold dust from the hearth-like trough in front of the stage. The Rhinemaidens are all young and good looking, wearing one piece swimming costumes under bathing robes. All sang well: von Kannen was magnificent throughout the cycle as Alberich. He bore a strong physical resemblance to "Lichtalberich"-Wotan, sung powerfully and beautifully throughout by Alan Titus.

Much was made of the second scene of *Rheingold*. This introduced the first of the perspective backdrops. A vast rundown industrial city with large buildings in the distance, and Wotan Pty Ltd's 1970s rundown factory, with the front office grubby and very ordinary. Valhalla was a pill box like structure with slits for windows. Freia had curly hair and seemed to have a black nightie on. Froh was a student or junior management with a briefcase and Donner an older, soon to be redundant, time server. Fricka had a frumpy skirt and cardigan. The gods were packed ready to move into Valhalla. The giants were on very effective leg-extending prostheses which enabled convincing murder in scene 4. Loge was a dashing character with commedia del'arte characteristics—not averse to song and dance routines. His initial entrance was preceded by a bolt of real fire.

The descent to Nibelheim was by elevator into Alberich's newer 21st century industry with computer terminals and drone-like Nibelungs making micro chips under controlled dust conditions, dressed in protective suits and working almost in synchrony. Mime, sung by Australia's Michael Howard, was more conventional, a bespectacled fuss pot.

Everyone wanted to hear Sinopoli's Ring, after his *Tannhäuser*, *Dutchman* and *Parsifal*. The answer was similarly, with loving attention to detail and continuing regard for the singers. The orchestral transitions were symphonic rather than over-dramatic. The always amazing Bayreuth acoustic allowed everything to be fully heard, probably at its best in row 30 centre where we all were. As to the individual singers, those in *Rheingold* were faultless. It was

hard to switch from the drama to the music, but this is what Wagner intended.

The metaphor of *Das Rheingold* was the transfer of power from old to new, and the fact that this power was now compromised by the loss of the gold, ring and Tarnhelm to the giants. A near disastrous stage mishap occurred when a skip bearing ingots came off the tracks and only very timely intervention by three stagehands got it back on without stopping the show for a beat. If they hadn't, the whole Freia scene could not have happened properly at all. As it was Freia was very nervous standing on the railway tracks behind the bars which looked none too stable. This anxiety communicated itself to the audience.

The rainbow bridge was not that effective from our view. The ending had the first of many characters on stage when Wagner didn't want them there. In this case, Mime slunk out from under the rail tracks with his Globite suitcase.

Die Walküre

The Ashtree had an archery target covering the sword and two pinned instruction notices. Act 1 was dominated by Waltraud Meier and Placido Domingo. Kang's Hunding was big but monotone. The spring night scene was effective. It was very likely Meier's and Domingo's final appearances. Meier was crying at her curtain call. Personally, I prefer Poul Elming as Siegmund, and Meier possibly has too big a voice for Sieglinde.

Act 2 Scene 1 showed the inside of Valhalla, as is now standard, rather than the wild place of the text. Wotan's office has improved, but he knows they are in for a fall and is on his mobile phone, shredding documents. When Fricka wins, she seats herself in the biggest executive chair like a newly appointed CEO. Wotan later trashes the place at "das Ende".

Gabriele Schnaut was eagerly awaited as Brünnhilde, although it was her 99th performance at Bayreuth. She is fair and good looking but was clothed in a SAS-like outfit. She had not been singing well in the earlier cycles, but was reasonable in *Walküre*. The Fricka's scene was excellent as was Wotan's long central narration.

Scene 2 showed Siegmund dragging Sieglinde on a sled. The set was four corners of a ruined building and a desolate wintry backdrop with two huts and rows of sticks. The annunciation of death and the final fight were rather tame. Fricka's gloating after Siegmund's death was a theatrical *tour de force*. The *Walküren* sisters seemed to have been selected for intimidating bulk, as the Rheinmaidens had been for slender good looks. Fierce in their SAS gear, they abseiled down the inside of Valhalla. Sinopoli's ride was rather light, consistent with his overall style of letting instrumental detail be heard. Wotan's angry entrance and the sisterhood's halfhearted shielding were well done and, cleverly, Brünnhilde changed into a nightdress behind her sisters.

I thought the final scene very clever, with rotating curved panels created from the Valhalla walls gradually enclosing her and the magic fire represented by static radiating red rays on the floor and two bands of red tape gradually boxing her in. The orchestra was a little sloppy in the final scene. There were prolonged curtain calls, mainly for Meier, Titus and Domingo and only muted respect ..and a few boos...for Schnaut.

Siegfried

The Act 1 scenery was overlaid on that from *Walküre* Act 1, except for a wintry backdrop. Mime had a lot of stage business and was adequately sung without caricature. Schmidt's roars were transformed into ringing pure power at the right times. He very convincingly

acted the boorish young Siegfried (and the more mature one later). The forging scene was convincing. The Wanderer was hanging about for longer than usual in the Act (now a cliché). The re-forged sword is put back into the Ashtree, not used to smash the anvil. I'm not sure if one of the bits of paper on the tree in *Walküre* was a set of forging instructions.

Act 2 scene one introduced a new character, the schoolboy Hagen doing his homework under Alberich's supervision. Neidhohle was a vague space, but the dragon was a giant space-age techno-monster occupying the entire stage; his destruction a Chernobyl-style meltdown, his skeletal frame remaining. Kang's booming offstage voice was terrifying. Schmidt sang and acted through the forest murmurs very well indeed and used one of Wotan's instruction sheets for his horn whittling exercises. As a premonition, he cut himself and tasted his own blood. With Fafner's death, the backdrop changed to complete post-nuclear desolation. The Alberich-Mime scene was a little boring, as usual, but both Howard and Schmidt acted well in the scene of Mime's false blandishments. Wotan, in the background, still manipulated his patently unfree hero. The orchestra played superbly.

Act 3, as usual sounded different and Sinopoli brought out all the contrapuntal work in the Prelude. The desolate backdrop remained. Erda was frosted and seated in Valhalla's executive chair. The odd scenic motive of the mine equipment from *Rheingold* Scene 4 reminded us of "easy come easy go" in corporate power games. I now started to listen more carefully for the first appearance of the "World inheritance" or "Siegfriedslied" motif foreshadowing a new era based on love rather than power; and very moving it was.

Siegfried's ascent through the fire was played with curtain down right up to his first words. This very well played symphonic interlude allowed one to hear the first transition to high strings in the whole work. The fire music was much better played than in *Walküre*. The final love duet was staged simply in the curved opening panel from *Walküre*, with a backdrop of snow, but with advanced lighting effects and some good acting. While both Schnaut and Schmidt have big voices and neither was outsung, some ugly roars and screeches could be heard. The final totally botched high C by Brünnhilde on "Lachender Tod" seemed the result of uncertainty-whether to even go for it. There were a few boos but apparently not as many as in the first cycle. It was Schnaut's 100th Bayreuth performance.

Götterdämmerung

The Prelude opened on Brünnhilde's rock also with a snowy background. The Norns were weaving with large knitting needles. Brünnhilde, a happily married woman, was quietly sewing Siegfried's socks in the background, while he was mucking about with his boat in the bullrushes, getting ready for an early start down the Rhine. All Norns sang well, especially Judit Nemeth as 3rd Norn. The dawn love duet was sung over a cosy morning-after breakfast, with Brünnhilde affectionately attending to Siegfried's needs before sending him happily off to work. Both sang out well and Schnaut relieved everyone when she seemed in more confident form. The boat was realistically launched,

The Gibichung Palace was a chrome and glass corporate headquarters with busy executives and office workers on its three levels. Hagen was the CEO and Gunther possibly a concerned heavy investor. Gutrune was desperate for a husband. Tomlinson was perhaps too nice as Hagen, while Gunther was very powerfully sung, with perhaps too much bravado. A sign of Sinopoli's orchestral clarity was the audibility of the Golden apples theme after Hagen's rejection of the blood brotherhood cup. Some critics said he had been coarser in *Götterdämmerung*. An interesting feature was the arrival of the office workers coming up from stage rear, as if from a U-Bahn station. Waltraute was sung by Violeta Urmana in a

rather dull confrontation on chairs reinforcing the “gods as men” line. Alberich lurked in the background before Hagen’s Watch began.

Act 2 showed the altars to Wotan, Donner and Fricka, along with some runic looking backdrops. The mens' chorus was strong and the characters' movements in and around the building were carefully rehearsed. Schnaut was good in this Act and the conspiratorial trio went really well, with the difficult to pick up "murder" motif emphasised by Sinopoli.

The Rhinemaidens’ reappeared on the prow of a boat and they were more obviously tarty than in *Rheingold*. One was putting on her face; another shaving her legs! Fafner's skeletal remains were visible as was Neidhohle, as a roped off construction site. The maidens on the prow resembled the New World discoveries monument in Lisbon. The backdrop re-introduced the initial industrial world lost by the gods and now in the hands of the Gibichung men. Siegfried’s narration and death was witnessed by rifle bearing hunters on collapsible chairs, but also directly by Brünnhilde in the background.

The Immolation was very effective, with the destruction of Valhalla, the return of the ring and the cleansing by flood done by overlapping scrimms. A variety of regenerative scenes replaced the corrupt world, including the one with the huts from Act 2 scene 2 of *Walkure*. Valhalla’s remnants sank into the Rhine like destroyed battleships. Then the final statement that the Schopenhauerian denial of the will to power itself and its replacement by erotic love is not enough to redeem the world. Denial of the erotic principle is also demanded. This was depicted by a young knight with armour and spear in a completely clean background—Parsifal, the 5th part of the Ring. An extremely interesting interpretation of the Ring as timeless myth, wholly consistent with Wagner. My only criticism: the drama overshadowed the music at times.

Jim Leigh 4 Sept 2000

[Jim's reviews of *Lohengrin* and *Meistersinger* will be in the February 2000 Newsletter Ed]

Bill Watson - Bayreuth 2000 - a disappointment

It is now over two months since my wife Edna and I attended the Bayreuther Festspiele performances of the Ring cycle, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Lohengrin*. In commenting on the experience, I must stress that my best musical experiences have been in Germany, notably in Bayreuth, Berlin and Dresden. This means that my expectations were very high for our fourth Ring cycle at Bayreuth. These expectations were not satisfied.

Part of the disappointment may have been caused by the large heads which obstructed my view of the stage. Fortunately, the heads did not interfere with the superb sound produced by the orchestra under Sinopoli.

Although I enjoyed the modern brightly lit sets and costumes, I thought there was a lack of continuity between sets, and the unimaginative blank curtain between scenes was a cop-out. In the cycle, some of the mechanical gadgets didn't work, giving it an under-rehearsed feeling. But the main problem related to vocal quality, which in the past has been beyond reproach. Poor quality certainly did not apply to Waltraud Meier, surely one of the greatest operatic singers, as Sieglinde, or to Plácido Domingo, whose light flexible voice and excellent acting made him a very good Siegmund.

There were also excellent performances from many others, eg John Tomlinson as Hagen, Gunter von Kannen as Alberich and Violeta Urmana as Waltraute. But for me, the show was spoilt by the poor showing by both Schmidt as Siegfried, and Schnaut as Brünnhilde.

Both were consistently too loud and lacked adequate variation in colour and lyricism. It may have been deliberate intention of Director Flimm to emphasise that power and not love is the major motivator of mankind. Alan Titus as Wotan had a very good voice but he, too, was consistently too loud, and not an adequate replacement for Tomlinson.

The lack of variation made me very conscious of the tedious element of the Wagner librettos. I was never so conscious of Wagner's need for a good editor. Surtitles would have helped, but I can scarcely expect them in English in Germany.

Germany is awash with tales of the power struggle within the Wagner family. It seems the next decade may see radical changes in Bayreuth when Wolfgang Wagner finally leaves. It is interesting to reflect on the parallel between Wolfgang and his family; between Wotan and his underlings, and between the oldies of Bayreuth and the younger generation in Germany.

Bill Watson 21 November 2000

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED:

The Society acknowledges with thanks receipt of the following publications from Wagner Societies and related organisations:

Hatje Cantz Verlag - new publications to coincide with 2000 Ring; "rosalie - Bilder zum Ring" DM98, German text only, and "Buhnenbilder stage design" by Erich Wonder, DM78, text in English and German; Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany - *Kulturchronik* No 3, 2000 (includes interview with Jurgen Flimm; Richard Wagner Society of South Australia Inc - Newsletter 138 September-October 2000; The Richard Wagner Society Inc (Melbourne) - Notice of meeting on 8 October 2000 for a panel discussion of the new Bayreuth Ring; Wagner Society of New York, Inc - Summer 2000 issue of *Wagner Notes* (Vol XX111, No 4), Membership Application and Renewal Form (Complimentary), List of coming events; Toronto Wagner Society - *Wagner News* August 2000 (Vol 12, No 1), Advertisement for one-day symposium "The Wagner Inheritance" on Saturday 16 September to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Society; Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany - *Kulturchronik* No 3, 2000; Richard Wagner Society of South Australia Inc - Newsletter 138 September-October 2000; Wagner Society of New York Inc - Summer 2000 *Wagner Notes* (Vol XX111, No 4); Toronto Wagner Society - *Wagner News* August 2000 (Vol 12, No 1); Richard Wagner Nachrichten Oct-Nov 2000; Newsletter October 2000 from the Wagner Society in Queensland; *Wagneriaani* No 16, The Finnish Wagner Society; Newsletter 138, Sept-Oct 2000, The Richard Wagner Society of South Australia Inc

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

The Editorial Committee consists of the President (*ex officio*), the Vice President (Editor), Dr Terence Watson, and one or more Committee members as nominated by the Committee of Management, including Mr Roger Cruickshank.

ADMISSION TO THE GOETHE INSTITUT

When functions begin at 1.00 PM the door will remain open until 1.20 PM. We are obliged to keep the door locked when no-one is in attendance but a committee member will return to the foyer briefly at 1.40 PM to check for latecomers. Please do not press the buzzer.

Media Release from the Los Angeles Opera: The Ring Cycle

"The Ring Cycle, beginning with *Das Rheingold* in May 2003, will span two seasons. This new staging, the first presentation of the Ring in Los Angeles, will feature staging effects designed by Industrial Light & Magic (ILM). Peter Mussbach will direct, with Kent Nagano conducting. The Ring Cycle continues into the 2003-2004 Season with *Die Walküre* (September 2003) followed by *Siegfried* (March 2004) and *Götterdämmerung* (May 2004).

On 12 September 2000, Bernard Weinraub, in the New York Times, quoted Mr Domingo, the new artistic director, as saying: "We are in California....We will have a 'Ring' that approaches the California style, in a way. Why not use the California style in our operas?" He added: "Everyone's always trying different things with 'The Ring' doesn't have any less power in the music and the singing. Powerful music is powerful music".

THE RAVEN'S REPORTING, COMPILED BY CAMRON DYER

This list is not cumulative and should be read in conjunction with Newsletters Nos.79 and 80. There is also a comprehensive list in chronological order on the Society's Website.

Bayreuth	<i>Die Meistersinger</i> - July 25, August 2, 5, 14, 17, 27, 2001. <i>Lohengrin</i> - July 26, August 4, 7, 16, 19, 25, 2001. <i>The Ring</i> - July 27, 28, 30, August 1; 8, 9, 11, 13; 21, 22, 24, 26, 2001. <i>Parsifal</i> - August 3, 6, 15, 28, 2001.
Bonn	<i>Götterdämmerung</i> - February 18, May 20, June 3, 24, 2001.
Cassel	<i>Lohengrin</i> - June 8, 2001. [no other dates]
Catania	Massimo Bellini Theatre <i>Das Rheingold</i> - December 19, 21, 27, 29, 2000, January 5, 7, 9, 2001. <i>Die Walküre</i> - March 13, 16, 18, 20, 22, 25, 27, 2001.
Dublin	<i>Holländer</i> - April 1, 3, 5, 7, 2001.
Los Angeles	<i>Lohengrin</i> - September 12, 2001. [no other dates]
Magdeburg	<i>Die Walküre</i> - February 16, March 24, May 12, 2001. <i>Lohengrin</i> - June 2, 2001.
Majorca	<i>Holländer</i> - June 8, 2001.
Meiningen	<i>The Ring</i> - April 13, 14, 15, 16, 2001.
Münster	<i>The Ring</i> - May 17, 20, 24, 27, June 8, 10, 14, 17, 2001.
Nordhausen	<i>Holländer</i> - February 9, 2001. [no other dates]
Regensburg	<i>Tannhäuser</i> - January 19, 2001. [no other dates]
Saarbrücken	<i>Tristan und Isolde</i> - April 1, 8, 13, 21, 2001.
Schwerin	<i>Tannhäuser</i> - January 19, 21, 25, 28, 2001.
Stockholm	<i>Lohengrin</i> - January 9, 12, 15, 20, 23, 26, 29, February 2, 2001.
Trier	<i>Lohengrin</i> - March 18, 2001. [no other dates]
Turin	<i>Lohengrin</i> - April 10, 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 29, 2001. <i>Das Rheingold</i> - June 15, 17, 2001.
Vancouver	<i>Holländer</i> - March 24, 27, 29, 31, 2001.
Verona	Teatro Filarmonico <i>Holländer</i> - October 14, 16, 18, 20, 2001.

Members' Market

Members of the Wagner Society in NSW are invited to use this space to advertise for sale or purchase second-hand Wagnerian recordings and publications. There is no charge, but please limit advertisements to fifty words.