



WAGNER  
SOCIETY  
nsw

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

# WAGNER QUARTERLY

ISSUE NO 23

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SEPTEMBER 2018

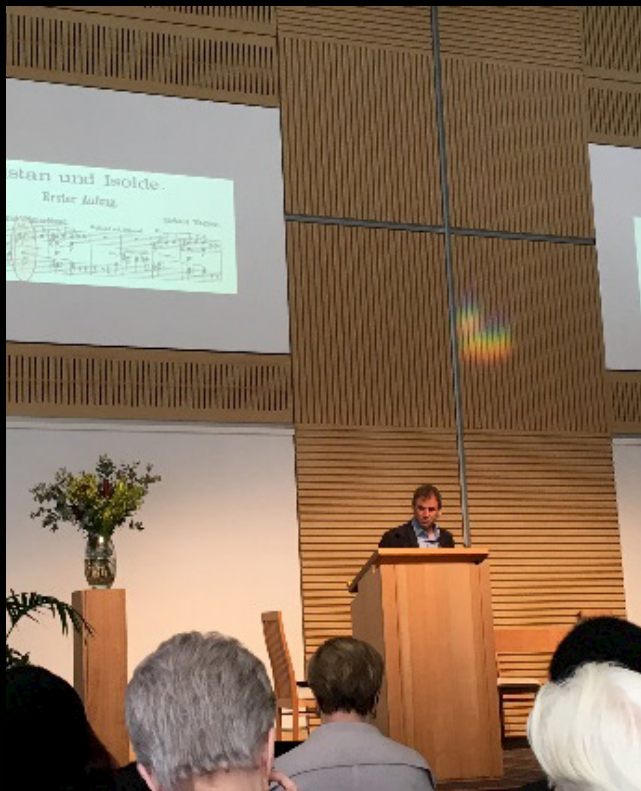


Woodcut of the City of Nuremberg from the Nuremberg Chronicle 1493

## QUARTERLY HIGHLIGHTS:

HEATH LEES - THE GENIUS OF WAGNER'S MASTERSINGERS	P.7
PETER BASSETT - LORTZING'S HANS SACHS AS INSPIRATION FOR <i>DIE MEISTERSINGER</i>	P.8
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Dr Antony Ernst's Seminar on *Tristan und Isolde* on 5 August at the Uniting Church, Willoughby



President Colleen Chesterman and Vice President Leona Geeves with Celeste Holmes at Celeste's recital and talk at the Goethe Institut on 17 June

## FOR YOUR DIARY

## 2018

24 Sep – 2 Nov	4 Cycles of Keith Warner's Ring at the Royal Opera House with Nina Stemme, John Lundgren, Stefan Vinke and Stuart Skelton conducted by Antonio Pappano.	ROH Covent Garden, London
14-22 November	Opera Australia's <b>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</b> . A co-production with Covent Garden, the cast will include Melbourne Ring veterans <b>James Johnson</b> as Sachs, <b>Stefan Vinke</b> as Walter, <b>Warwick Fyfe</b> as Beckmesser, with <b>Natalie Aroyan</b> debuting as Eva. Details: <a href="https://opera.org.au/whatson/events/die-meistersinger-von-nurnberg-melbourne">https://opera.org.au/whatson/events/die-meistersinger-von-nurnberg-melbourne</a>	Melbourne Arts Centre
<b>2019</b>		
30 Jan & 1 Feb	The Bayreuth Festival in association with Katharina Wagner will present the Carsten Die Walkure in Abu Dhabi	The Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi
9 Mar – 11 May	The Ring at the Met	New York
7 – 17 June	The Ring in Kiel with Bradly Daley as Siegfried	Kiel
13 – 23 June	Wagner Days in Budapest. - 2 Ring Cycles. Information from <a href="http://www.finearttours.com">www.finearttours.com</a>	Budapest

## COMING EVENTS 2018 - SUNDAY STARTING TIMES MAY VARY

PLEASE CHECK THE SCHEDULE ONLINE FOR DETAILS

DATE	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
30 September	<b>12.30pm: DVD: Wagner – a Genius in Exile</b> 2014 film by <b>Andy Sommer</b> <b>2.00pm: Brickbats and Bouquets – Bayreuth 2018</b> Presented by members who received tickets from the Wagner Society and attended the Bayreuth Festival	Goethe Institut
21 October	<b>1.00 – 5.00pm: SEMINAR: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg – Dr David Larkin</b> , lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium, presents a seminar as background to the new ROH/Opera Australia Melbourne production on 13, 17, 19, 22 November. <b>NO DVD</b>	Goethe Institut
25 November	<b>2.00pm: Concert</b> by a special guest and outstanding young artists supported by the Wagner Society, followed by <b>Christmas Party</b>	St. Columba Uniting Church. 53A Ocean St, cnr Forth St Woollahra

Advice about changes to the Program will be emailed to people who have given their email addresses to the Society's Webmaster; the latest updates will also be available on the Society's webpage: [www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au).

Admission to each event will be \$25 a Member, and \$30 each non-Member, \$10 (Full-time students) Seminar/Concert \$40 (m), \$45 (n-m), \$20 (fts).

**Goethe-Institut address 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)**

DONATIONS RECEIVED SINCE  
JUNE 2018

Barbara Brady; Marco Belgiorno; Peter Craswell; John Fawcett; Richard Gastinea; Ray Hollings; Brett Johnson; Richard King; Peter Rowe; Gary Richards

**Our thanks for the generous donations to help the Society's objectives.**

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## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

The past three months have included a number of varied events for the Wagner Society in NSW. One of the most important was the distribution of tickets to Bayreuth to members. As Bayreuth is preparing for a new Ring, 2018 had a limited offering of operas. Nonetheless 7 members applied for tickets and we were able to supply excellent seats to this small number from the tickets provided by the Friends of Bayreuth and the Verband of Wagner Organisations. Our members were able to attend their choices from *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal*, *Hollander*, *Meistersinger* and *Walkure* from the Castorf Ring. Those who have been in touch have been very positive, particularly recent members Georgina Carnegie and Mandy Shaul who have been delighted by the experience.

In June we welcomed Celeste Haworth, a mezzo-soprano from Sydney who has degrees in music from Sydney and Vienna and who was most recently a principal soprano at the State Opera in Wiesbaden. She described her career in Europe and sang beautifully. But it is apparent that many members are away in June, so attendance was small and we will return to the committee decision to not have a meeting that month.

In early August, the always popular Antony Ernst, now director of the Royal Danish Orchestra in Copenhagen, gave a seminar on *Tristan und Isolde*. An enthusiastic audience filled the Willoughby Uniting Church to listen to him. He emphasised the importance of the relationship which overwhelms the two characters, pointing to the *und* which links the characters so strongly, between the focus on *Isolde* in Act 1 and on *Tristan* in Act 3. In Act 2 *und* establishes the intensity of their passion. As usual, volunteers from the Society provided a range of delicious contributions for afternoon tea, much enjoyed by us all.

Antony's eloquent discussion of *Tristan und Isolde* was particularly appreciated by the large number of members who travelled to Perth for WASO's celebration of its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary with two performances of this opera. The NSW Wagner Society and many of our members had contributed to support Stuart Skelton in the role of Tristan, and we were warmly welcomed because of this. Sadly, Dutch soprano Eva-Marie Westbroek withdrew because of illness two weeks before, but WASO found an excellent replacement in Gun-Brit Barkmin, singing *Isolde* for only the second time. Small, intense and with a voice of great depth, she was a strong replacement. Asher Fisch supported her sensitively particularly during the *Lieberstod*,

The performances and two associated events constituted a festival. On the night before the first performance, Asher Fisch, using the piano to illustrate the points he was making, described his passion for Wagner's music and underlined its originality, its power and musicality. He then interviewed the two experienced singers performing *Brangane* (Ekaterina Gubanova) and *Kurwenal* (Boaz Daniel), whom Asher had known before both had left Israel as young men seeking careers in music). It was a bravura lecture and identified many aspects of the opera, its power and brilliance.

The Thursday night performance showed the strength WASO has developed in playing Wagner's music. Stuart Skelton sang with great power and tenderness; in the last act he appeared without a jacket, his shirt pulled out, to remind us of his injury. Gun-Brit Barkmin sang with great strength and sensitivity and won the support of the audience in the role. Gubanova and Daniel were magnificent. Also excellent was bass Ain Agner, so often seen in roles such as *Fafner* or *Hunding*, as the rejected King *Marke*. He was dignified, tightly controlled in the face of his betrayal. There was a moment's silence at the conclusion before the audience leapt to their feet with enthusiastic applause.

On Friday night the Western Australian Wagner Society hosted celebratory drinks in the Concert Hall foyer, attended by both Asher and Stuart. Asher praised the work of his orchestra and could not resist showing us all the wooden *holztrompete*, which had been specially made for these performances and which rang out in the second act. The WASO brass section also has a beautiful set of German-made instruments.

A second performance took place on the following Sunday. Nobody who attended these performances would regret it. In this newsletter NSW Wagner Society members have given their views, all very positive.

We have much to look forward to in the next three months. In September we will have a feedback session from those members who are attending Bayreuth. Some members are going to the Keith Warner Ring at Covent Garden, with Nina Stemme and Stefan Vinke as the leads, and we look forward to hearing from them as well. In October David Larkin will provide us with an introduction to *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, which many of us will be attending in Melbourne in November. And we expect to have a very special guest for our Christmas celebration.

I would like to thank new Committee Member Lis Bergman is assisting Jenny Edwards with the web-page and e-mails to members.

### NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear members, I hope you enjoy this September *Meistersinger* edition and like the more substantial articles and reviews that I have included. I invite to you to send me articles for future issues, especially your thoughts on the various Wagner productions around the world that many of you have attended this year. Thank you to members Minnie Biggs, Esteban Insausti, Mailis Wakeham and Terence Watson who have contributed wonderful reviews. Special thanks to Peter Bassett, Heath Lees and Colin Mackerras from other Antipodean Wagner Societies who have allowed me to republish their very interesting articles. I appeal to all members to submit articles or reviews.

**Mike Day**



# REPORTS ON MUSICAL EVENTS AND MEETINGS

## 17 JUNE MEETING AUSTRALIAN MEZZO-SOPRANO CELESTE HAWORTH

Following a brief introduction by Leona, Celeste sang an excerpt from Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, accompanied by pianist Bradley Gilchrist. She sung it with fervour, wholeheartedly. Celeste explained that she loved to sing Strauss, Mozart and Wagner – and that Wagner himself had said that the human voice was the best instrument – also that “joy is not in things, it is within us”.

From here on Celeste, assisted by Florian, projected photos of her musical life and entertained us with amusing and insightful anecdotes. She told us how she particularly loved living and learning singing in Vienna's State Opera, as she found the streets packed with culture, art and history. When she was offered three choices, she chose Vienna and stayed there for two years, singing Strauss, Mozart and Wagner. However her passport only allowed her 20 hours a week.

Lohengrin was her first Wagner opera, which she sung in what had been Mozart's home in Vienna.

Celeste came back to Australia in 2014 to sing Rossini's operas and sang a wide range of roles, which she still enjoys. She mentioned that another singer, Catherine, sung Elektra louder than she'd ever heard. When she was invited to sing in Verdi's *Othello* she was given a very different appearance, and in *Figaro*, she was made up to look older.

In response to a question “What is a full-bodied singer?” Celeste explained that it means the use of one's body as well as their voice, and provided a demonstration as well.

Before leaving, Celeste said that she will be singing in *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, as well as on Radio 102.5 “Fine Music” whom she had contacted and was immediately offered to sing for a recording.

Celeste does teaching too. However, she said she'd still love to undertake the roles of “Carmen” and “Delilah”.

To a final question regarding young upcoming singers, Celeste suggested that they learn French, Italian and German, and go overseas, as there is no way to learn, and no set path to learning how to sing. She then suggested we look at pages 39 and 28 in the Goethe Institut's *Kulture 2018 Edition 28* magazine (the magazine which had been placed onto all seats in the auditorium).

**Mailis Wakeham**

## 5 AUGUST SEMINAR

### ANTONY ERNST ON *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*

Society members always look forward to Antony Ernst's annual seminar and this year he was more brilliant than ever. His ability to talk and keep the audience of more than 50 members and guests engaged for hours without using notes, seamlessly incorporating visuals, recordings and piano quotes was extraordinary. He effortlessly explained and made clear difficult concepts from Kant, Schopenhauer and Buddhism and their influence on Wagner and *Tristan und Isolde*. He made me believe I understood Kant's theory of *phenomena* and *noumena* and how Wagner uses this with reference to Tristan's and Isolde's preferred (real) world of night to the (false) world of day. Antony's light touch and wicked sense of humour and irony kept us smiling throughout. He also incorporated some wonderful music by Bach and Sibelius to demonstrate the use of chromaticism, as well as sections from the finales of Acts 1 and 2 of *Tristan* with the incomparable Kirsten Flagstad.

One of his main insights, to which he returned several times during the afternoon, was about the importance of the *und* in *Tristan und Isolde* and its relationship to the famous “Tristan Chord”. In example after example Antony demonstrated the revolutionary impact of *Tristan und Isolde* on all Western music and drama that came after. In *Tristan* Wagner created a complete musical/theatrical world in real time expressing the inner emotions of the lovers – the first ‘subjective’ opera.

**Michael Day**

## COMMITTEE 2018 - 2019

President	Colleen Chesterman	9360 4962
Vice President	Leona Geeves	
Vice President and Quarterly Editor	Mike Day	0413 807 533 michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com
Treasurer	Margaret Whealy	0414 787 199
Secretary	Barbara de Rome	0411 018 830
Membership Secretary	Jenny Edwards	9810 6033
Members	Mailis Wakeham	9331 7353
	Estaban Insausti	
	Nick Dorsch	0419 751 694
Technical Consultant	Florian Hammerbacher	wagner_nsw@optusnet.com.au
Public Officer	Alasdair Beck	9358 3922
Webmaster	Ashish Nanda	wagner_nsw@optusnet.com.au

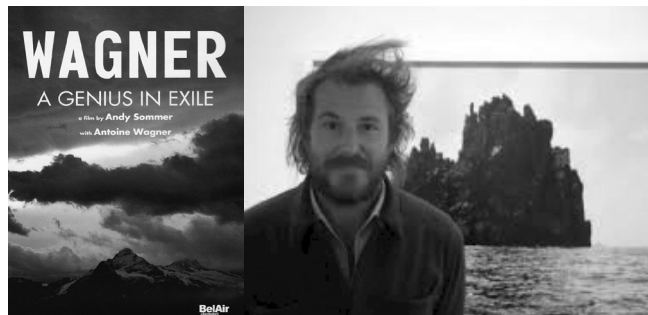
## FUTURE EVENT - 30 SEPTEMBER DVD

To be shown before the Brickbats and Bouquets meeting with recent Bayreuth Festival attendees

### WAGNER: A GENIUS IN EXILE

Antoine Wagner, a photographer and filmmaker living in New York, has long had a special passion for shooting landscapes and nature. But it wasn't until he investigated a famous distant relative that he came to see deeper roots to his professional interests. Wagner, 30, is the great-great-grandson of Richard Wagner, as well as the great-great-great-grandson of Franz Liszt. As the son of Eva Wagner, the co-director of the annual Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, he was steeped in family history as a child. "Growing up my mother used to work late so I'd go and hang out with her at the opera. I've always had the opportunity to learn more about it and be part of discussions about my ancestor. But this was the first time I feel where I got a connection that was so strong."

Earlier this year, Antoine Wagner produced and starred in a documentary film with the director Andy Sommer called "**Wagner: A Genius in Exile**," a musical road movie in which he is shown retracing his great-great-grandfather's flight to Zurich, Switzerland after he became enmeshed in the Dresden revolutions of 1848 and 1849. "On the barricades in Dresden, he got threatened with imprisonment and possibly the death penalty," Antoine Wagner explains. "So he packed up his belongings, got a fake passport from his friend Franz Liszt, headed to Lindau overnight and crossed Lake Constance and got to Rorschach. He basically manages to cross over the glaciers, frozen peaks and from hut to hut in Zurich." Antoine Wagner says he was particularly interested in exploring the shielding and inspiring effect of the mountainous Swiss landscape on his



relative's music and psyche. "The first sets in Bayreuth were basically copy-pastes of Swiss landscapes," he noted.

After reading about the composer's travels and studying maps of northern Switzerland, the filmmakers constructed a route that would take place over five weeks in the summer of 2012, extending from Lake Constance to Zurich. They also interviewed numerous musicians, scholars and other experts. During the filming, Antoine Wagner also developed a forthcoming book of landscape photography called *Wagner in Switzerland* as well as a traveling exhibition of "photo sculptures" that will tour Europe. The filmmaker has also come to realize that listening to Wagner requires an effort that goes beyond background listening. "It can't be ambient music and the soundtrack of your life," he said. "The amount of concentration required due to the subtexts and the amount of layers is endless."

Jul 25, 2013 · by Brian Wise - <https://www.wqxr.org/story/308639-antoine-wagner-how-i-came-know-my-family-heritage/>

## THE TRAVELLING TENOR'S WAGNERIAN VOYAGE

The small group opera tour company, **The Travelling Tenor**, travelled last year to the production of Wagner's Ring Cycle presented by Kiel Opera in the capital city of Germany's northernmost state, Schleswig-Holstein. This presentation of The Ring Cycle was particularly poignant as it starred Australian tenor, Bradley Daley, as Siegfried in his Ring Cycle debut in this role (the first Australian tenor to sing Siegfried in Germany). He has performed Siegmund in Opera Australia's Ring Cycle previously.

Due to the popularity of the entire Hamburg & Kiel trip and the wonderful feedback from guests, The Travelling Tenor is thrilled to offer the opportunity to join them for a trip to the Kiel Ring Cycle, starring Bradley Daley, from June 7-17, 2019. Guests will spend three nights in the luxurious Westin Hamburg, set inside the amazing new Elbphilharmonie, before spending a week experiencing the Ring Cycle and relaxing in lovely accommodation in Kiel.

The trip also includes premium seats to the rarely performed *Daphne* by Richard Strauss at the Hamburg State Opera, an exclusive recital presented by Kiel Opera artists, tours of the Hamburg Composer Museums & the Elbphilharmonie, and a backstage tour of Kiel Opera House, where guests can see and handle props and puppets used in the Ring Cycle and meet artisans working on sets & costumes for the upcoming season.



To top it all off, before the performance of Siegfried, guests are invited to watch Bradley Daley in the makeup chair and to actually walk out onto the stage for a first-hand look at the Siegfried set.

**If you would like to join The Travelling Tenor, Wagner Society members will receive a saving of \$250PP off the price of the trip. Simply mention "WAGNER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER" at time of booking.**

**For more information:**

**Visit:** [www.thetravellingtenor.com](http://www.thetravellingtenor.com)

**Email:** [info@thetravellingtenor.com](mailto:info@thetravellingtenor.com) or

**Phone:** 0405 906 697

## THE GENIUS OF WAGNER'S *MASTERSINGERS*

by Heath Lees

Most people follow Bayreuth's lead and start their count of Wagner's 'mature' operas from *The Flying Dutchman*. This yields a list of ten items, with the Ring operas counted individually as four. Of these ten works, one stands out as profoundly different from all the others: *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. An immediate point of difference is that the other nine 'mature' operas are grounded in a fantasy world of myth and legend, but the story of *The Mastersingers* is rooted in real European history. The specific town of Nuremberg still exists, with part of its artistic glory still resting on its famous Renaissance guild of Mastersingers, led by the well-known Nuremberg poet and playwright Hans Sachs. Some of Sachs' fame came from his allegory about the "Wittenberg Nightingale" Martin Luther, bringing a new dawn to humanity. As a further tie-up with real history, Wagner actually uses Sachs' opening line of "Wachet auf!" during his opera.

Another unique aspect of *The Mastersingers* in Wagner's works is that it is a comedy. Apart from one very early attempt, Wagner never wrote comedies. He liked nothing better than when the main characters met their end at the end. Indeed, during one of his boyhood tragic scenarios everyone died before the interval. Undaunted, Wagner brought them back to the stage as ghostly spirits in the second half. When Wagner first began to plan *The Mastersingers*, it was as early as 1845. At that time he thought of it as a bit of fun, or rather a bit of therapy. Warned off work by his doctor, Wagner decided to entertain himself with a short comic opera as an add-on to his recently completed *Tannhäuser*, something like the slapstick satyr plays that used to follow the great tragedies in classical Athens.

Still keeping to the Greek tradition of comedy, Wagner seized the opportunity for some healthy satire in his new work. In the opera's pedantic figure of Beckmesser, Wagner had in mind Vienna's most famous and most outspoken music critic, Eduard Hanslick. Using the same semitransparent cloak of reality, Wagner also included himself in the opera, since the 'instinctive' musician Walther is clearly an alter-ego for Wagner himself, whose new creative art had been targeted by so many. In addition (and this is where the comedy ceases) Wagner inserted himself into another place in this story since he increasingly came to identify with Hans Sachs — the poet-cobbler who secretly loved Eva but gave her up after learning that she preferred Walther, the younger man.

The renouncing spirit of Schopenhauer runs all through this strand of the story and reminds one of the epic sense of farewell that Wagner experienced just before beginning work on *The Mastersingers*, when he finally abandoned all hope of a permanent relationship with the great love of his life, Mathilda Wesendonck. A further exceptional feature of this work is its length. Having begun with the intention of writing

a short, 'add-on' opera, Wagner found *The Mastersingers* growing almost by itself, until it eventually took its place as the longest single opera in the European repertoire.

It also had one of the longest gestation periods in history because, having started on the idea in the summer of 1845, Wagner found it rudely pushed aside by a mental storm of inspiration for *Lohengrin*, followed by an actual storm of revolution in Dresden in 1849, then a long exile in Switzerland, more huge music-dramas . . . when he finally settled down seriously to compose *The Mastersingers* it was 1865, fully 20 years after he had first conceived the idea.

*I think there is no work of art which represents the spirit of a nation more surely than "Die Meister Singer" of Richard Wagner. Here is no plaything with local colour, but the raising to its highest power all that is best in the national consciousness of his country.*

**Ralph Vaughan Williams**

One last exceptional feature about *The Mastersingers* is to be found in its overture. Wagner had already discarded the word 'overture' by the time he came to compose it in 1862. Some seventeen years earlier, the instrumental opening of *Lohengrin* had firmly established the name of 'prelude'. What Wagner disliked most about the typical overture was its empty, tub-thumping character, usually

rustled up after the opera had been composed, its opening musical clichés followed by a motley parade of the opera's most singable tunes, and finally some closing gestures — dramatic for tragedy, sprightly for comedy. *Lohengrin* had ushered in a new age for the overture. The work actually depends on the glowing sound-world with which it opens, where the prelude moves us to picture the distant hero's magical arrival, his eventual, majestic appearance, and his quietly sad departure at the end. Yet the overture — sorry, prelude — to *The Mastersingers* was itself exceptional because it was the one occasion when Wagner actually completed it before writing the opera.

All the uniqueness of *The Mastersingers* can be seen crystallised into this prelude — a complete symphonic picture that is a miracle of counterpoint and a marvel of orchestration. Five main themes appear in the prelude, and at the end, three of them are drawn together — the Prize Song theme, the pompous opening theme and the fanfare-like 'long' theme that Wagner copied from an actual tune from the 16th-century mastersingers themselves. The prelude presents the whole story in advance, and it does so in music that mixes 16th-century counterpoint with some of J.S. Bach's best-known procedures, binding them all together in a kind of symphonic development that was unequalled in the nineteenth century.

From beginning to end, *The Mastersingers* stands out in the history of opera — and in the horizon of Wagner's work - not just because it is different, but because its genius is unrivalled.

Re-printed from the Wagner Society of New Zealand's Newsletter, February, 2018.

Heath Lees will be giving a talk on *Die Meistersinger* during the November season in Melbourne



## LORTZING'S HANS SACHS AS INSPIRATION FOR WAGNER'S *DIE MEISTERSINGER* by Peter Bassett

Albert Lortzing (1801-51) wrote his comic opera *Hans Sachs* in 1840, and it was first performed that year at Leipzig. His best-known work, *Zar und Zimmermann* (*Tsar and Carpenter*) had had its premiere three years earlier.

For 150 years, Lortzing was, after Mozart and Verdi, the most performed opera composer in Germany.<sup>1</sup> In 1928/29 there were 843 performances of his works in German theatres, compared with 821 of Mozart's.<sup>2</sup> The decade 1955-65 saw 8,719 Lortzing performances, a number exceeded only by the operas of Verdi, Mozart and Puccini.<sup>3</sup> However, there have been fewer stagings of Lortzing's works in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

In modern times, *Hans Sachs* was performed at the Young Artists' Festival at Bayreuth in 1983, and since then it has been staged at Saarbrücken (1985), Heidelberg (1986) and Osnabrück (where it was also recorded) in 2001.

Lortzing was related by marriage<sup>5</sup> to August Röckel, Wagner's assistant at Dresden and fellow revolutionary, who spent thirteen years in Waldheim prison for his involvement in the 1849 uprisings. Röckel was the nephew of Hummel who was a pupil of Mozart, Clementi, Albrechtsberger, Haydn and Salieri, friend of Beethoven and Schubert and teacher of Mendelssohn and Czerny who, in turn, taught Liszt. It was a very small world, musically speaking in those days.

In his essay *A Communication to my Friends*, Wagner recalled that, in the mid-1840s, 'certain good friends' (including, no doubt, Röckel) had tried to persuade him to compose an opera in a lighter genre, for which Lortzing provided the obvious model.

And so, during a health cure at the spa at Marienbad in Bohemia in 1845 (a seminal year in the Wagner story) he began to think about Hans Sachs and the Mastersingers of Nuremberg as possible subjects for a lighter work. At Marienbad on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1845, he signed off on a long and detailed three-act prose sketch that was remarkably close to the drama we know today. 'I took Hans Sachs' he wrote later, 'as the final manifestation of the artistically creative popular spirit, and set him, in this sense, in contrast to the pettifogging bombast of the other Mastersingers; to whose absurd pedantry of *Tabulatur* and prosody, I gave a concrete personal expression in the figure of the "Marker."<sup>6</sup>

Virtually all of the key ingredients of Wagner's finished work are to be found in that 1845 sketch, and at the end, added as an afterthought, is the couplet with its word play on 'Holy Roman Empire' and 'holy German art':

'Tho' the Holy Roman Empire dissolve in mist,  
yet for us will holy German art persist.'



Albert Lortzing

Sachs's final words echo those of Schiller, written fifty years earlier. 'While the political empire totters' said Schiller, 'the spiritual empire has become increasingly secure and more perfect.'

However, there are interesting differences between the 1845 sketch and the finished version. Some are matters of detail such as the relocation of the action in Act One from the church of St Sebaldus, Wagner's first choice, to that of St Catherine although, in fact, St Catherine's wasn't used by the Mastersingers until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, long after the time of Hans Sachs. Other differences are of greater consequence and relate to the characters. Sachs is cynical, even calculating in the sketch; and the (unnamed) young knight is more prone to self-pity than self-

confidence. The sketch also reveals that Wagner was in two minds as to how the Marker (unnamed) should get hold of the prize song. Should he steal it? Or should Sachs give it to him, passing it off as a work of his youth and thereby perpetrating a cruel hoax? In the sketch, the love-interest is fully developed in the first scene, whereas it is handled more tentatively and to better effect in the final score. Sachs' soliloquy in Act Three is not the philosophical reverie on folly and delusion that it became, but a discourse on the decline of German poetic arts. There is no reference yet to 'the sad tale of *Tristan und Isolde*' because Wagner hadn't considered this story in 1845. But there are references in the sketch to Siegfried, Grimhilde and Hagen, and to Wolfram's Parzival, characters who were already jostling for attention during that crucial holiday at Marienbad.

*Die Meistersinger* wasn't finished until 1867 - *Lohengrin*, most of the *Ring* and *Tristan* having intervened. However, the huge libretto was completed in January 1862, well before Bismarck came to office in Prussia, two years before Wagner met Ludwig II of Bavaria, four-and-a-half years before Prussia's victory in its war with Austria and Bavaria, and eight-and-a-half years before the Franco-Prussian War.

National pride in the 'old Thuringian spirit', 'the great Emperors' and the poetic wealth of 'our great German past' features in the 1845 sketch but not in the libretto, and there is a reason for this. The works that influenced Wagner in 1845, such as Lortzing's opera, the play on which it was based, and even the original writings of Hans Sachs, stressed love of the fatherland, and so he picked up this theme. However, by 1861 his ideas had matured and the finished work became a study in aesthetics and humanism. Any traces of those earlier influences were now directed firmly towards art.



We know that at the time of the 1845 sketch, Wagner was interested in the history of 'the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation' as it had been called since the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This thousand-year *Reich* that had begun with Charlemagne in 800 AD, was finally dissolved on 6 August 1806 at the behest of Napoleon. The empire had been in a long, slow decline and it took only a puff from Napoleon to blow it away. The constituent kingdoms and principalities then became attractive targets for the French. Wagner was especially interested in the empire's Ottonian dynasty (also known as the Saxon dynasty) that included King Henry the Fowler, immortalized as König Heinrich in *Lohengrin* (begun 1845), and the Hohenstaufen dynasty. The latter featured in his 1843 plans for an opera to be called *Die Sarazenin* (The Saracen Woman) and 1846 plans for an opera about Friedrich Barbarossa. The Hohenstaufens were also at the centre of his *Wibelungen* essay of 1849, in which he sought to link history and myth.

Nuremberg had been a free imperial city from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which meant it was governed by a powerful town council answerable directly to the emperor but not to other princes and rulers. It did not become part of Bavaria until 1806. The emperor at the time in which Lortzing set his drama, 1517, was Maximilian I. Maximilian was a keen supporter of the arts and sciences and surrounded himself with scholars whom he appointed to court posts. His reign saw the first flourishing of the Renaissance in Germany. Maximilian appears on stage in Lortzing's opera, resolving conflicts and restoring harmony, as good monarchs should.

In *Die Meistersinger*, Sachs refers in his closing address to the threat of 'foreign mists and foreign vanities', a provocative phrase to modern ears but one that reflects an historical reality – the anxiety felt about the cultural alienation of the emperor from his people following the death of Maximilian in 1519. Maximilian's successor was Charles V of Aragon and Castile, who claimed that he spoke Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to his horse. He was succeeded by his brother, Ferdinand I, who was emperor during the period in which *Die Meistersinger* is set, although neither he nor any other political figure appears in Wagner's drama - unlike Lortzing's.

Religion plays a more important role in *Die Meistersinger* than it does in Lortzing's *Hans Sachs*. Reformation, renaissance and renewal all find expression in *Die Meistersinger* through the recurring metaphor of baptism. The action is set at a time when Luther's Reformation was taking hold in northern Europe, and the Counter-Reformation was being launched by Pius IV, whose pontificate began in 1560 - the very year in which *Die Meistersinger* is set. How can we be so sure about this date for the opera when Wagner specified only 'about the middle of the sixteenth century' in his libretto? Because 1560 was the only year in which the historical Hans Sachs was a widower. He remarried the following year.



Lortzing's comic opera – *Singspiel* really, because it has a lot of spoken dialogue - had its first performance on 23 June 1840 as part of a Leipzig festival that celebrated the quadricentenary of the invention of moveable type. Amongst the other works in the festival was Mendelssohn's Symphony no 2, *Lobgesang* (Hymn of Praise), commissioned especially for the event. This symphony was concerned with mankind's progress from darkness to enlightenment through the dissemination of God's word via the Gutenberg Bible. The opera on the other hand was devoted to one of the most prolific users of words, who wrote over 6,000 works of various kinds

including more than 4,000 mastersongs, disseminated through the agency of moveable type.

It seems unlikely that Wagner had seen a *performance* of Lortzing's *Hans Sachs* before he penned his own thoughts on the subject, since he was in Paris at the time of the 1840 premiere and was still there in 1841 when further performances were given in Leipzig and in Detmold where Lortzing had once lived. He was fully engaged in his duties as Kapellmeister at Dresden when another performance was given at Detmold in May 1843, and he was preoccupied with *Tannhäuser* at the time of the revised staging at Mannheim in May 1845. However, there are so many coincidences between *Die Meistersinger* and Lortzing's opera that he must have been familiar with the latter, at least from the page. He refers to Röckel as having modest ambitions as a composer and 'with no higher purpose than to equal the achievements of his brother-in-law Lortzing'. So he knew what those achievements were. Perhaps Wagner didn't want people to think that *his* ambitions were also modest, or that he was cribbing another composer's ideas. He was similarly coy in admitting that his interest in the Tristan story had been kindled by Schumann's plans in 1846 for an opera on the subject - plans, incidentally, to which both Hanslick and Mendelssohn were privy.

We know that Wagner liked the score of *Zar und Zimmermann* because, years later, it was amongst the works he would play and sing for his own amusement – badly, one witness recalled, but with great vivacity and expressiveness.<sup>7</sup>

Albert Lortzing lived to be only 49, and in the period before his death he was under huge stress and deeply in debt. His wife and the surviving seven of their eleven children were left virtually destitute and, although friends came to their rescue, it was too late for poor Lortzing. His music was popular, but it was pirated with impunity in those days before adequate royalty arrangements, and this robbed him of income. He was treated badly by theatre managements and, in the end, was reduced to conducting vaudeville in Berlin. He was too ill to attend the opening performance of his last opera *Die Opernprobe*, too poor to pay for a doctor, and died the following day.

Lortzing's *Hans Sachs* was loosely based on the dramatic poem of the same name by Johann Ludwig Deinhard von Deinhardstein. This play was successful and was translated into other languages. It was certainly known to Wagner. Deinhardstein, in addition to being a writer and critic, was an official at the imperial court and teacher of aesthetics at the diplomatic academy in Vienna. He was literary manager and assistant head of the Hofburgtheater and a censor for the imperial police under Metternich. His play *Hans Sachs* was first produced in Vienna in 1827, and Goethe, no less, provided a prologue for a subsequent Berlin performance. In fact

it was Goethe who had rediscovered Sachs in the course of his exploration of the world of the sixteenth century, and who had written a poem in 1776 (the bicentenary of Sachs's death) entitled *Explanation of an Old Woodcut Representing Hans Sachs' Poetical Calling*. Echoes of this poem can be heard in *Die Meistersinger*, especially in the *Wahn*-monologue and in Walther's evocation of the Muse of Parnassus. The Berlin performance of Deinhardstein's play was prefaced by Goethe's poem for which a special introduction had been written, and this was declaimed by the actor Eduard Devrient who was to become an associate of Wagner in Dresden from 1843 and whose advice led to the creation of the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. So, not only did Wagner have a connection with Lortzing through Röckel, he had another with Deinhardstein through Devrient.

In Lortzing's opera, set in 1517 when the historical Hans Sachs would have been 23, the action turns on Sachs's first courtship and marriage. He is a young master cobbler in love with Kunigunde, daughter of Meister Steffen (the equivalent of Wagner's Pogner), a goldsmith and status-conscious mastersinger who is elected Bürgermeister.

Steffen has chosen a prospective husband for his daughter in one Eoban Hesse<sup>8</sup>, an Alderman from Augsburg, not far from Nuremberg. Steffen announces that his Kunigunde will be the prize at a singing contest open to everyone. But since he is unwilling to leave anything to chance, he secretly arranges for the masters to award the prize to Eoban. In *Die Meistersinger*, Beckmesser thinks he has a similar 'understanding' with Pogner. In due course, Eoban is declared the victor with a song about the death of King David's rebellious son Absalom, even though the spectators clearly prefer Sachs's song of love and the fatherland.

The Emperor Maximilian appears on the scene. Sachs's apprentice Görg (the equivalent of Wagner's David) had



Statue of Hans Sachs in Nuremberg

stolen one of his master's songs, intending to send it to his sweetheart Kordula (the equivalent of Magdalene) who is Kunigunde's cousin. But the song was lost and, by chance had fallen into the hands of the emperor who admires it and wants to know who wrote it. Eoban Hesse claims that it is his work, but when he is asked to perform it, he gets into a frightful muddle, confusing it with his 'Absalom' song, and everyone laughs at him. It is pretty clear where Wagner's treatment of Beckmesser came from. Eventually, Görg's confession leads to a dénouement which leaves Sachs and his Kunigunde to live happily ever after.

The historical Sachs did indeed marry a woman called Kunigunde Kreuzer who died in 1560, and he remarried the following year when he was 67. His second wife was called Barbara, and she was 29 when they married.

Amongst the other characters in Lortzing's opera is the 'First Marker' (historically, there were three Markers to scrutinize a performance) whose name is Meister Stott. Stotterer means 'stutterer', so associations between the marker and stuttering or stammering definitely pre-date Wagner.

There is further common ground between Lortzing and Wagner in terms of dramatic devices. We find a rudimentary use of leading-motives in Lortzing's score, with the theme of the emperor's admiration for Sachs handled in much the same way as the 'forbidden question' theme in *Lohengrin*. In both *Die Meistersinger* and *Hans Sachs* there is a full-scale dance of the Apprentices. In each work too, we are given a rhythmical cobbling song with nonsensical words used as a refrain between verses. In *Die Meistersinger*, Sachs sings 'Jerum! Jerum! Hallo halloe! Oho! Trallalei! Trallalei! Ohe!' In Act Two of Lortzing's opera, Görg sings: 'Juchhe! Juchhe! Jufalalalalalala fallalei! Juchhe! Juchhe!' and so forth. The devices are similar, but while in *Die Meistersinger* we have a complex, dramatic situation built around the attempted elopement of Walther and Eva, Görg's song is, by contrast, charmingly naïve.

In *Meistersinger*, as Sachs bellows loudly and strikes his hammer, he sings about Adam and Eve being driven out of paradise and treading painfully because they went unshod - which is why angels were the first cobblers. We hear the surprised and then resigned interjections of Walther and Eva, whose escape has been foiled, and the cantankerous mutterings of Beckmesser who, like the serpent, is there to tempt Eva with his serenading. There are references to Adam and Eve and the serpent in Goethe's poem on Hans Sachs.

Deinhardstein's play was a tragedy, but Lortzing turned it into a comedy with the help of his friends Philipp Reger and Philipp Düringer. The main contributions of Lortzing and his librettists were the singing competition, the outdoor celebration, the theft and garbling of a love poem, and the treatment of the populace as an important participant in the action – all features that were to be picked up and developed by Wagner.

In both the play and comic opera, Sachs is disliked by the establishment (personified by the Bürgerers), and by his fellow guild members. In the play he is derided as being too smart for his own good, always wanting to be different and paying little heed to the *Tabulatur*. Beckmesser picks up this theme in *Meistersinger*. In Lortzing's opera, Sachs is patronized because of his lowly occupation – a humble *Schuster* (cobbler) – and lack of sophistication. But the townsfolk love him, and in his competition with Eoban Hesse they are definitely on his side, supporting him in defiance of the self-interested verdict of the middle-class masters.<sup>9</sup>

When Emperor Maximilian brings about the happy ending, he is carrying out the wishes of the people. Just as Sachs is the people's artist, so Maximilian is the people's emperor: 'Is he not the father of his people?' Sachs asks in Act One. 'Is there anyone in the empire who does not love the emperor?'<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Wagner advocated a similar role for the Saxon king during the 1848 upheavals, proposing that the existing power structure be swept away, but that the king should remain as father of his people and head of a crowned republic. This put Wagner squarely in the camp of those not to be trusted. The Minister of Culture at the Saxon court at the time was Baron Ludwig von der Pfordten, soon to become Prime Minister to the King of Bavaria and an arch-enemy of Richard Wagner. Undoubtedly, much of the hostility towards Wagner in Munich in the 1860s had its roots in his last few years in Dresden.

Lortzing and his librettists make use of an old 18<sup>th</sup> century piece of doggerel to the effect that Hans Sachs was a shoe-maker and a poet too (*Hans Sachs war ein Schuh-/Macher und Poet dazu*). Wagner also uses this at the end of Sachs's cobbling song. In Act One of *Die Meistersinger* there is a variation of it (although it is usually lost in the din at the end of the Act) when Sachs says of Walther: 'If I, Hans Sachs, make verse and shoes, he's a knight and a poet too'.

Maximilian arrives at Sachs's workshop incognito and tells him that the emperor has read some of his verses and wishes to meet him. He has heard that a Bürgermeister in Nuremberg is offering the hand of his daughter as the prize in a singing contest and asks if this is true. Sachs, overflowing with love for Kunigunde, confirms that it is. He had almost forgotten the song contest the next day. What should he sing about? Manly virtues or women's tenderness? Or the joy of love that makes the heart beat faster? What was it that made him turn to poetry? Love's happiness, and the fatherland.' This combination of love and fatherland is proclaimed repeatedly by Sachs, notably in his prize song. Sachs is overwhelmed by the realization that the emperor has him in his thoughts, and this becomes a recurring and consoling theme throughout the work.

The *Flieder*-monologue has a counterpart in Lortzing's opera in Sachs's Act One monologue: 'Wo bist du, Sachs? Hat mit ein Traum umfungen?' (Where are you, Sachs? In the midst of a dream?)

Wagner's Beckmesser combines two of Lortzing's characters: the First Marker, Meister Stott, and Eoban Hesse, the opinionated, classically educated Alderman from Augsburg. Eoban arrives at Sachs's workshop with a pair of shoes that need mending (paralleling Sachs's mending of Beckmesser's shoes in Act Two of *Die Meistersinger*). He has all the qualities that we know and love in Sixtus Beckmesser, who is of course the only Mastersinger in Wagner's work to be classically educated, to have a Latin first name and to occupy an important official position. Eoban even *sounds* like Beckmesser and can't accept the fact that his rival is a humble cobbler. 'Ein Ratsherr und ein Schuster' ('an Alderman and a cobbler') – they are unlikely competitors. At one point Eoban mockingly says to the apprentice Görg: 'then you're also a shoemaker and a poet too', to which Görg replies: 'Most kind of you! But please! ...A tombstone is the place for lines like these'.

There is no procession of guilds in either Lortzing's opera or Deinhardstein's play, since this feature was entirely Wagner's innovation. In fact, there were no craft guilds in Nuremberg after 1394, when an uprising led to their dissolution. Wagner got the idea of a procession of craftsmen when he was in exile in Zürich and witnessed the *Sechseläuten* festival, still held each year in April to drive out winter spirits and welcome the spring.<sup>11</sup>

In Act Two of Lortzing's opera, an unruly crowd gathers on the festival meadow for the song contest. 'Stille' (be quiet) and 'Ruhe' (calm down) people call out, in the manner of the cries of 'Silentium!' from Wagner's apprentices, but no-one takes any notice. The choruses with their drawn-out vowel sounds anticipate Wagner's treatment of the 'bleating', 'stretching' and 'baking' of his guilds. We hear the stammering interjections of Meister Stott as he struggles to make his announcements and others impatiently finish his sentences for him.

Sachs is invited to perform his patriotic poem and song, which draws enthusiastic 'bravos' from the crowd. Eoban then performs his song, provoking gales of laughter for his clumsy account of Absalom being caught by his beautiful long hair in a tree (and summarily executed). This anticipates Beckmesser's mangled, half-remembered lines: 'on airy paths I scarcely hang from the tree' and the crowd's aside that 'He'll soon hang from the gallows, the gallows!' Undeterred, Meister Steffen in his noblest 'Pogner' voice awards Kunigunde's hand to Eoban, much to the crowd's astonishment and Sachs's despair.

In Act Three, Eoban is obliged to perform before the Emperor the poem he had claimed as his own work. However, his bungled performance as he steals quick glances at the text and introduces scraps of his Absalom song, clearly anticipates the scene in *Die Meistersinger* when Beckmesser confuses Walther's 'morning dream' with his own ludicrous serenade from the night before.



Lortzing's Sachs then intervenes and declaims the poem properly. Eoban's disgrace in front of the Emperor is complete and he is sent packing. Lortzing actually goes further than Wagner in rubbing-in the fraudster's humiliation. Despite everything, Wagner's Sachs is still able to refer to the Marker as 'friend Beckmesser'.

In Lortzing's opera, class rivalry features prominently, with the rivals being the socially high-flying Eoban and the humble, non-conforming Sachs. But class has little or no place in *Die Meistersinger*. 'Whether lord or peasant doesn't matter here' says Wagner's Sachs, 'Here it is only a question of art'. Steffen is class-conscious in a way that Pogner is not. Indeed, Pogner's motivation for offering that which he values most – including his daughter – is not to acquire a socially acceptable son-in-law but to respond to the accusation that Nuremberg values its commerce more highly than its art.

Lortzing's opera concludes with the people praising the emperor, but Wagner replaces the figure of Maximilian with Sachs, and Sachs's roles as lover and artist are given to Walther. So, it is a poet, not an emperor – art, not politics – that brings about the happy ending of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

*Die Meistersinger* is the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Merry Wives of Windsor* of the Wagnerian canon, and much else besides. Its score is a miracle of musical invention and its libretto one of the great works of theatrical poetry. However, there is no doubt that Wagner owed more than a few dramatic ideas to Lortzing's *Hans Sachs* (as Lortzing did to preceding works). It is clear too that certain controversial features in the characterisation and treatment of Beckmesser have their origins in Lortzing's comic opera of 1840 and the theatrical traditions from which it sprang.

## POSTSCRIPT

Before Wagner and Lortzing there was Adalbert Gyrowetz, a Bohemian composer who, at the age of 71, wrote a 'Romantic, Comic *Singspiel* in Two Acts' called *Hans Sachs im vorgerückten Alter* (*Hans Sachs in Later Life*). This was completed in 1834, the year of Wagner's *Die Feen*. Coming from a musical family, Gyrowetz started life as a lawyer and linguist, which enabled him to acquire a post in the imperial bureaucracy in Vienna where he had special responsibility for the military archives. For a few years he was essentially a part-time composer, but in 1804 he accepted a post as Vice-Kapellmeister at the court theatres, and his course was set. Importantly, he nearly always had a paying job until his retirement in 1831, and he became one of the most revered figures in Vienna's musical life. He lived to be 87, and although his final years were rather lean financially, his friends, who regarded him as a living link with Haydn and Mozart, made sure that he didn't go short. One of his most generous benefactors was Meyerbeer. Today Gyrowetz is all but forgotten.

Gyrowetz developed a warm relationship with Mozart and befriended Beethoven. He was a pallbearer at the latter's



funeral, and then survived him by twenty-three years. His career lasted so long that he himself began to feel like a visitor from another age – a kind of Beckmesser, keeper of the sacred flame of outmoded musical styles. Wagner makes no mention of Gyrowetz, although he must have known of him as the composer of some 30 operas, 28 ballets, 40 symphonies, 11 masses and a vast number of chamber works.

In his *Singspiel*, the fifty-year-old Sachs helps a younger man to win the lady, just like Wagner's Sachs. The younger man is a nobleman who has sought Sachs's help in becoming a Mastersinger – like Walther von Stolzing. One of Sachs's monologues anticipates to some extent the *Wahn*-monologue in *Meistersinger*.

What does Gyrowetz's *Singspiel* sound like? No recording has been made of it, and it hasn't been revived in modern times, but we do know that he modelled his composition style on that of Josef Haydn, whom he idolized and knew well. Indeed, one of his symphonies was mistakenly attributed to Haydn. He composed about 100 songs, and the 21 year-old Eduard Hanslick, who met him in 1846, wrote: 'I was thrilled to make the acquaintance of the venerable man who had been a friend of Mozart and Haydn and whose operas and ballets had flourished in Germany and Italy for decades. Every morning he composed a song, and he presented to me the latest egg, just new-laid, inviting me to a meal with him next day at midday sharp.' Hanslick, who was also a native of Bohemia, once remarked that musical history began with Mozart and culminated in Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms. So he would certainly have approved of Gyrowetz.

*Hans Sachs in Later Life* had been planned for Dresden in 1833 but doesn't seem to have been performed there until the following year. It would be nice to imagine Wagner coming across the score in the theatre archives when he took up his post in 1842, but to date, no evidence has been found to support this.



A live recording of Lortzing's *Hans Sachs* is generally available in a digital remastering of a 1950 mono recording featuring Max Loy conducting the Nürnberger Singgemeinschaft and Fränkisches Landesorchester, and singers Karl Schmitt-Walter, Albert Vogler, Max Kohl, Friederike Sailer, Margot Weindl, Karl Mikorey and Richard Wölker. Notwithstanding the high quality of the performances, this is an abridged and adapted version by Max Loy and Willi Hanke (*Schauspielhaus* of the *Theater der Stadt der Reichsparteitag* in Nuremberg), prepared for the centenary celebrations of 1940 and tailored to Nazi propaganda interests.

Another live recording, in this instance using the complete 1845 text and score, was made in 2001 by the Osnabrück Symphony Orchestra and Chorus of the Metropolitan Theatre Osnabrück, conducted by Till Drömann, with singers **Gerard Quinn, Michail Milanov, Kate Radmilovic, Marlene Mild, Ulrich Wand, Mark Hamman, Hans-Hermann Ehrich and Silvio Heil. The text and score for this recording were assembled from autograph sources by Antje Müller, Frieder Reininghaus and Erich Waglechner.**

Endnotes

- 1 Jürgen Lodemann, *Lortzing, Gaukler und Musiker*, Steidl, 2000.
- 2 Hugo Leichtentritt in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 72, No 1056, Feb. 1931, pp 160-161. In the Nazi years after 1933, when the number of Wagner performances actually decreased by more than a third in Germany, the number of Lortzing performances increased dramatically. It was the reassuring appeal of the *Volksoper* (the light opera tradition cultivated assiduously by the regime) that was most in tune with those times, not the Schopenhauerean world of Wagnerian music drama.
- 3 Figures published by the Deutscher Bühnenverein, covering all the theatres in Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland.
- 4 Fewer than thirty performances are scheduled for 2008, in Germany and the United Kingdom.
- 5 Caroline Henriette Charlotte Elstermann-Lortzing (1809-1871) married (Karl) August Röckel in December 1840. She was the foster-daughter of Johann Friedrich Lortzing (Albert's uncle and an actor and associate of Goethe). Her mother was Beate Elstermann. Wagner in *Mein Leben* refers to the composer Lortzing as Röckel's brother-in-law, which is not correct, but there was a family connection.
- 6 *A Communication to my Friends*, 1851, tr. William Ashton Ellis, University of Nebraska Press, p.329.
- 7 Berthold Kellermann, quoted in Ronald Taylor, *Richard Wagner, His Life, Art and Thought*, Paul Elek, 1979, p. 232.
- 8 Deinhardstein's character was called Eoban Runge (tr. stake or supporter = pillar of society?). The historical Eoban Hesse was quite unlike his operatic namesake and was a poet of Nuremberg. He was a confidant of Martin Luther and accompanied him to Rome in 1519.
- 9 Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis, Princeton, 2003, pp. 189-190.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *ibid.* p. 138.

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## REVIEW: DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG IN BEIJING: A GREAT EXPERIENCE MARRED BY POLITICAL CORRECTNESS by Colin Mackerras

### Introduction

For a Wagner lover, and a long-time student and frequent resident of China, it is an unusual and splendid treat to hear and see *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Beijing. The co-production, by the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and Opera Australia, the director, set and costume designers and a few others are the same as premiered at Covent Garden in March 2017 and as will be shown in Melbourne later this year. The cast, conductor, orchestra and chorus are entirely different.

I have quite a few criticisms, especially of the production, and shall return to some of them. However, overall I was impressed by this *Die Meistersinger*. I saw it twice, on 31 May and 2 June 2018, and came away both times feeling exhilarated overall, but offended by the liberties the director Kasper Holten took with the story.

### The Production and Conception

The whole concept of the work has been adjusted for this production. The story is set in the twentieth or twenty-first century, not the sixteenth. The focus is not the Mastersingers of Nuremberg but a contemporary club of Mastersingers. The opening scene is therefore not a church, as Wagner intended, but a club, where the Mastersingers come to dine, enjoy themselves with the other members, and hold formal meetings. In the first act women accompany the Mastersingers when they come for the meeting, but withdraw when the meeting actually takes place. In the third act Hans Sachs's studio is like a room in a contemporary run-down office. The final scene is the main formal annual event of the club. It is indoors and resembles more a graduation ceremony than a sixteenth-century midsummer meadow festival.

We are still confronted with the idea of art, and the role rules play in it. But there is more, because it is the whole contradiction between modernity and tradition that is under debate. When at the end, after winning the prize in the form of Eva, Walter rejects membership as a Mastersinger, he is actually refusing to join an old-fashioned club, one of the practices of which is to give away women as prizes. So Eva enthusiastically agrees with his decision to refuse membership, and shows it vehemently. When he finally accepts joining the club, she shows her opposition in quite clear terms, walking to the back of the stage in a huff.

Personally, I felt the new conception had a lot of sense, but I also felt confronted by some of its implications. Hans Sachs's final monologue in praise of true German art is convincing to Walter, but this is a sexist club of which Eva disapproves. It left a bitter taste at the end. I'm used to the traditional idea that Walter and Eva are both delighted at their union and it's a truly happy ending for them (don't they both sing of their emotions so passionately in Act III both before and during the ecstatically beautiful quintet, "Selig wie die Sonne"?). Holten's ending was not only quite different from what Wagner intended, but totally inconsistent with the rest of the opera. I found it offensive and out of character that Eva should suddenly be shown as a rabid feminist because Walter is willing

to become a Mastersinger. It was like negating the heroes of the opera, who are the Mastersingers of Nuremberg.

In Act I, during the monologue of Hans Sachs's apprentice David on the rules of the Mastersingers, he gropes one of the female club attendants and then makes an overture to one of the men. Both flee in shocked horror. It is tasteless and totally out of character to introduce our contemporary obsessions into this opera and apply them to the apprentice.

### Costumes and Acting

The actors were mostly excellent. Apart from a few idiocies like the one just mentioned, American Brendan Gunnell acted convincingly as Hans Sachs's apprentice David, though he looks a bit older and fatter than I usually imagine David. The standout for acting was German Jochen Kupfer as Beckmesser, who brought the role very much to life, including the general nastiness towards Walter and Sachs. If he had a fault it was that he looked too nice. In fact, he is tall and handsome and more like a suitor than the Walter, German Daniel Kirch, and towers over him when they are together. Danish bass-baritone Johan Reuter portrayed the wayward and thoughtful nobility of Hans Sachs very well indeed. Among the women, American soprano Amanda Majeski as Eva was mainly excellent. Not only does she look the part, very attractive with long fair hair, but until the end her acting was convincing, from the petulance she shows in Act II when she hears of Walter's failure to become a Mastersinger, to her loving attitude both to Sachs and Walter in Act III. The final minutes when she changes her mind about Walter (and Sachs) because they are too politically incorrect I found so baffling and silly that I suspended judgment on her acting.

This production is set in contemporary times, not in the sixteenth century, and the costumes reflect the fact. Sachs usually wears the ordinary clothes of the modern European man. But there is also great complexity. The attendants/servants in the club wear the clothes we usually associate with the exclusive club of the contemporary age. And on the formal occasions, the Mastersingers wear the magnificent robes appropriate to their status. Eva's wardrobe is varied. Her white wedding gown as the prize in the last scene is quite magnificent and must have cost a fortune.

### The Musical Performance

For me in Wagner, it is the music that matters most. I sum up this performance by saying it was mixed but dominantly very good indeed.

In charge of the opera's musical side, Lü Jia (born in Shanghai in 1964) has an international reputation, especially in Italy, and is currently the chief conductor of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) orchestra, established in 2010. Under his baton, the orchestra produced some very beautiful sounds and kept together remarkably well in the extraordinarily complex music near the end of Act II. There were quite a few places throughout where the singers were slightly out of time with the orchestra, but overall I thought they did an excellent job of this complex score.



Among the singers the standout was the Eva of Amanda Majeski. She has a truly lovely voice and her high notes were beautiful and steady. Her style everywhere matched her character and she sang the beautiful music from her entrance in Act III to the end of the quintet with a rare confidence and subtlety.

Hans Sachs is probably the longest and most demanding baritone role in the repertoire. Reuter has a nice voice and he generally sang in a style appropriate to the role. However, he was not always perfectly in tune and lacked confidence in places. On the first evening, but not the second, he broke down altogether for a few bars in “Aha, da streicht die Lene schon ums Haus”. Lü Jia guided him and the orchestra together again but it was definitely a moment of tension.

The Walter of Daniel Kirch was quite good, but I won't go stronger than that. It's not the most beautiful tenor voice I've heard and he seemed to strain quite seriously, especially in the high register. Fortunately, he rose to the occasion in the Prize Song, with a good smoothness and a ringing high note at the end.

Beckmesser was excellent, and able to create very good musicality from the rather thankless music that characterizes the role. I also admired Austrian Manfred Hemm as Pogner. He has a nice voice and sang the role of the rich and proud but in some way quite unassuming goldsmith with great humanity. Among the minor characters, the one that stood out for me was the nightwatchman of Act II. He doesn't have much to do, but his music is very important, including the absolutely marvellous end of the act. Belgian bass Tijn Faveyts has a powerful and beautiful voice that made me think he could have done well in one of the major roles.

A few of the less important Mastersingers were sung by Chinese, as well as the apprentices, and chorus. They did well and I have rarely heard “Wach auf” in Act III sung with such enthusiasm, passion and even grandeur. But considering this was an NCPA performance, Chinese solo singers were notable by their absence.

### Chineseness

This brings me to the general subject of the Chinese context. *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *The Ring* cycle, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* have all been performed in China. However, as far as I know, this is the first time for *Die Meistersinger*.

For a start, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) is a very modern building right in the centre of Beijing and beside the Great Hall of the People. Opened in 2007, the NCPA, is a truly wonderful place. As a frequent resident in Beijing I am a constant visitor for concerts and operas, both Western and Chinese. The Western media may be telling us that the Chinese government is against Western culture, but in terms of Western classical music I don't see the signs of that. There are several performance sites in the NCPA, apart from the opera house. A French design, from the outside it looks like a gigantic egg, which is why many people call it simply “The Egg”.

Although the house was more or less full on both evenings, many people left after the second act. Of course, it's a pity to leave early (as any Wagner lover can tell, the third is the longest but the best act). But apart from the obvious difficulty of getting home after the performance, I was struck by the significant number of children, and that may be a reason. I think it is a



The Mastersingers Club in Act I with some club attendants and dining/meeting tables in the foreground. In the centre Beckmesser (the tall one) talks to Pogner about his hopes for marrying Eva. In the front, with his back to us, is Walter, while David stands to the left of two club attendants further backstage.

good thing to take children to performances of Wagner (and other great music for that matter). Moreover, I had the feeling the Chinese audience was quite enthusiastic. I'll also add that the Chinese chorus, dancers in “The Dance of the Apprentices” and club-servants were obviously enjoying themselves hugely, and I think it was the same for the orchestra.

I add a few minor points. My seat for the second performance was very good indeed and cost 550 RMB; that is about A\$100. Every opera I have seen in the NCPA has translations. English is placed in bright and easily visible letters above the stage, and Chinese characters (going from up to down) on both sides. The managers judge, probably correctly, that these two languages will be known to the vast majority of the audience. The second, and totally unrelated, point is that a not frightfully appetizing roll and a bottle of water was provided free during the first interval. The performance began at 5:00, and both intervals were half an hour in length. There are two cafés where sandwiches, cakes, ice cream and drinks can be purchased at quite a high cost. The atmosphere of the whole place is excellent and I just love going there.

### Conclusion

It's a very old controversy to ask how much we can adapt great operas (or dramas) to the modern world. My general position is that I want it to retain as much of the original composer's conception as possible. Applying that criterion to this production, I think Wagner's story and conception makes more sense and is more emotionally satisfying than Holten's, but after all he's left most of the Wagner intact and the performance was good enough to make the show memorable. And the Chinese setting, with the overwhelmingly Chinese audience, in the heart of Beijing, was more or less unique. To see such a good performance of this great work in China was for me a profound and unforgettable experience.

### Credits

Conductor: LÜ Jia | Director: Kasper Holten | Set Designer: Mia Stensgaard | Costume Designer: Anja Vang Kragh | Lighting Designer: Jesper Kongshaug | Choreographer: Signe Fabricius | Chorus Master: Marco Ozbič

**Review and photography by Colin Mackerras** for Wagner Society Qld on Wednesday 6 June 2018 in Essays & Reviews

The Royal Opera House/Opera Australia co-production reviewed above will be seen in Melbourne in November but with a different cast

# NSW WAGNER SOCIETY MEMBERS CELEBRATE

## WASO's *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*

Many members have written in appreciation of the WASO performances of *Tristan und Isolde*; some extracts follow.

### Thursday, August 16:

**Pattie Benjamin** (who lived in Perth before moving to Sydney): Much has been said and the critics have very properly raved about this superb concert production. I'd like to add that Perth managed this, despite being small and the most distant capital city in the world, which I think needs acknowledging. It was an amazing accomplishment.

### Bruce King:

Others have posted about the magnificent *Tristan und Isolde* in Perth on Thursday night. We had heard Skelton sing *Tristan* wonderfully but in a diabolically perverse production at the English National Opera in 2016 (I think) and he was as good again in this concert version. The great pleasure of the night was the stand-in soprano Gun-Brit Barkman who completely won the audience to her performance. It was a stunning night.

### Marie Leach:

The WASO performance of *Tristan und Isolde* was a wonderful experience. How privileged were we to be there, to have the depth, passion, despair and tragedy of this wonderful opera conveyed to us so vividly and perfectly by the rich, Wagnerian sound of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Asher Fisch; and by such glorious singers as Gun-Brit Barkmin, a truly fiery Irish princess, Stuart Skelton, our own wonderful heldentenor, Ekaterina Gubanova (who I had seen some weeks before as Fricka in the Munich Ring) as a loyal Brangane and Ain Anger (Fafner and Hunding in the Munich Ring) as a wounded, dignified King Marke. The performance was 'book-ended' by two other very special occasions: a reception in Perth by the WA Wagner Society on the night after the opera at which we had the opportunity to hear a very interesting talk from Asher Fisch and to meet with him and Stuart Skelton; and the truly excellent seminar delivered by Anthony Ernst the week before in Sydney, with his focus on conceiving the opera as *Isolde* (Act I), '*und*' (Act II) and *Tristan* (Act III); this profound insight and more brought for me a new and enriched way into this complex opera.

### From two Melbourne members:

#### Liz Dax

Travelling across the Country to attend this outstanding musical experience was well worth the effort. How unusual in Australia to reach the end of any musical tour-de-force and for the entire audience to rise to its feet in applause. Furthermore, as is so unusual these days, everyone waited until the last of the magical sound dissipated before offering their appreciation. Yes, we could sing the praises of the accomplished artists individually, all fully steeped in their craft, the splendid orchestral rendition of the epic Wagner work, Asher Fisch's command of the music and his musicality but the magic of bringing it all together was extraordinary and laudable. Congratulations to the mindful audience as well! We would do it all again in a heartbeat!

#### Hugh Taylor

I was really impressed especially as it was a concert performance and I was anticipating missing the sets, acting and costumes. In fact it was the best *Tristan* I have seen. The conductor, orchestra and singers were all terrific as others have very justifiably said. But we had wonderful seats, thank you Wagner Society, and one could see and follow the interaction of Asher Fisch and the WASO and also with singers who were magnificent and were not distracted by acting or moving upstage or lying down and dying. It was riveting. We could see and hear every nuance in the wonderful production of this great piece. It was a real treat.

### Minnie Biggs attended both performances:

The *Tristan* matinee, number 2 performance, was superb. *Isolde* was more confident, expressive in face and body, engaging, smiling and really connecting physically with *Tristan*. A joy to behold, and to hear, as before.

Stuart came on for the 3rd act with just his tie off, collar unbuttoned. Suit as usual. I thought him marginally better, if possible, in the first performance in his rolled-up shirtsleeves, shirt-tails hanging out. More emotionally wrought (though it may have been my seat position, or the *deshabille* outfit!)

In performance 2, Asher threw his baton overboard and continued conducting Act 2 with a ballpoint! An audience member handed it back up at the end. Not a pause for breath, or a note!

There was not such a delicious long pause, silence, at the end of acts 2 and 3, before clapping. One of the most beautiful moments in opera is that suspended silence. Then thunderous applause.

### Sunday, August 19:

#### Claire Brauer:

What a wonderful weekend! I'd appreciate it if you could offer my thanks to the WA Wagner Society for their kind hospitality on Friday night. What a pleasure to listen to Asher speak. I thoroughly enjoyed Sunday's performance - WASO has much of which to be proud and I'm sure there will be more special events in the future. I was very glad to be a part of it all.

#### Frances Butcher:

This performance of *Tristan und Isolde* was a great success, bringing together a majestic performance of the WASO under the baton of Fisch and the opera with Australian superstar heldentenor, Stuart Skelton, as *Tristan* and renowned soprano Gun-Brit Barkmin as *Isolde*. The event showcased in equal measure Richard Wagner's immortal opus and the enduring talent of the WASO, being a concert in oratorio format with the cast standing facing the audience and singing without the staged animation of opera. This afforded the audience the opportunity to appreciate the beautiful music created by the WASO and see it in action. It did not diminish the power and pathos of the opera. If anything the music enhanced the romance and tragedy of the story: a gloriously powerful sound from the podium which is hard to achieve in a smaller orchestra pit. We and, assuredly, the rest of the audience were thrilled that the event was such a success for the WASO in its 90th year. The atmosphere within and outside the concert hall was festive and inclusive and a great advertisement for this magnificent orchestra. Asher Fisch has joined the stratosphere of famous international conductors.

Wagner fans love Stuart Skelton and his imposing muscular presence. He triumphed again as *Tristan*. Were they his tears at the standing ovation at the end? Gun-Brit Barkmin was enchanting as *Isolde*, her Teutonic heritage, range and diction making her perfect for the part. The other roles pleased, especially Ain Anger as an understated, impressive King Marke. We had the fun of meeting Brent Grapes, Principal Trumpet WASO, whom we had noticed leaving the stage with the brand-new rare wood "Tristan Trumpet" from Germany. He played it off stage and then returned. He was one of the stars of the moment receiving publicity because he got to play the new trumpet. Check him out: Musos of WASO: Brent Grapes. In sum, this was a glittering occasion inspiring love of the opera and the orchestra and imbibing one with a sense of pride, delight and well-being at taking part of the celebrations

#### Lourdes St George:

It was a full throttle musical performance! Amazing - worth traveling 4000km to hear.

Asher Fisch has been able to mould the WASO Orchestra into a true great European sound.

## REPORT FROM BERLIN: WIELAND WAGNER SYMPOSIUM AND SOME MUSIC-DRAMA + OPERA 9 TO 12 & 18 NOVEMBER 2017 By Esteban Insausti

It was with some trepidation that I made my way to the Deutsche Oper on a cold Friday afternoon (10 November). I knew that the symposium would be entirely in German despite its “international” branding. And so it was that over two days, an afternoon and a morning, the symposium offered several papers on the work of Wieland Wagner whose centenary it celebrated. Wieland being one of the major theatre visionaries of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as Richard’s grandson. To complement the symposium during the same weekend the Deutsche Oper performed *Tannhaeuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Der Fliegende Hollander*, the whole thing promoted as a “Wagner Wochenenden”.

The symposium was held in the foyer of the Deutsche Oper offered three papers and a film of Wieland from 1967, sandwiching two conversations moderated by Rainer Fineske (President of the Wagner Society Berlin-Brandenburg): one with Anja Silja, Wieland’s muse/collaborator for the last 6 years of his life, the other with Dr Nike Wagner, Wieland’s third child and successful dramaturg/arts organiser. I decided to miss the film at the end of the Friday session as I needed to get back East for *Satyagraha* at the Komische.

The papers presented were as follows:

- Ingrid Kapsamer from Vienna presented “Wieland Wagners ‘Kultisches Theater’ am Beispiel seiner Berlin Inszenierungen 1959-1962” (Ritual Theatre in Berlin productions between 1959 and 1962).
- Josef Lienhart presented “Szene in Licht und Farbe: Wieland Wagner in Bayreuth 1951-1966” (Staging in Light and Colour: Bayreuth 1951-1966).
- Stephan Moesch from Karlsruhe presented “Symbol und Wirklichkeit – Wieland Wagners Wandlungen in Bayreuth” (Symbol and Reality - Wieland’s transformations in Bayreuth).

What came across all three papers was the breadth of Wieland’s output and the focus of his dramaturgy. As a designer and director he was very collaborative (and very generous I assume). The blocking and movement in most of his productions are owed to his wife, Gertrud Reissinger, a dancer and choreographer. His conception of the two “Rings” at Bayreuth stem from the traditions at Bayreuth that he saw growing up in the Festspielhaus as well as the influences and theories he obviously absorbed around



Anja Silja as Senta, Bayreuth 1960

Germany. As an artist he roamed widely and was far more inquisitive than his privileged cloistered upbringing would suggest - the work and theories of Adolphe Appia, the avant-garde Kroll Opera productions, the theories of Jung, the theatre of Brecht, together with more classical fare all fed his imagination. Growing up in Bayreuth he was exposed to a “free” education with the best in the business (at the time). His grandfather’s immersion in Classical Greek theatre also made its way into his dramaturgy. Hence the sense of ritual that imbued his productions in Berlin and later Bayreuth. The use of symbols and primordial totems (seen in the Berlin production of “Aida”, 1961) became fully realised at Bayreuth in productions like “Tristan und Isolde” (1962) with its giant funerary

stele, and the second “Ring” (1965). In his second Bayreuth “Ring” the wall/backdrop was a direct reference to the Classical Greek skene (or even the more elaborate Roman theatre scaenae-frons) gnarled by runes and skulls and other primordial symbology, blurring what was a natural material (stone, wood) and what was applied.

For me one of the most interesting aspects of Wieland’s work is the progression of the dramaturgy and scenography of his two “Rings” at Bayreuth (1951-1958 and 1965-1969). Here he synthesises all his talents and influences over the tetralogy. The economy, purity and decluttering of 1951 gave way to the almost Baroque 1965 production. The 1951 “Ring” was both a necessity showing generational and scenographic change but also making a political break with the past. Wieland tweaked and added to the production over the next 7 seasons displaying great flexibility and confidence. The use of colour and spare forms immediately conjure Wieland the painter as well as the successor and realiser of Appia’s thesis. The statue like forms and limited movement of characters suggesting Classical Greek “gods”. The mannered makeup, beards and wigs adding to the sense that we were watching Aeschylus orchestrated by Wagner. And then after a 5 year break we get a completely different but not dissimilar production where the endless vista or edge of the world is replaced by a wall. Wieland is one of the great scenographic innovators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his influence remains to this day.

The conversation between the soprano Anja Silja and Rainer Fineske about her cultural collaboration with Wieland Wagner was lively. The great soprano displaying palpable reticence in revealing matters that are clearly private (often punctuated with a sharp monosyllabic reply) but also



expansive in what it was like to “co-create” a role anew with Wieland. She seemed to me to be as charismatic, intelligent and dynamic now as she would have been in her 20s. The second conversation with Dr Nike Wagner was more in depth and my German did not match what was being said to make it intelligible or satisfactory. There was a poignant moment when both Nike and Anja waved to each other across the foyer at the beginning of the talk (a public acknowledgment that the potential animosity over the favours and love of Wieland and the damage caused all those years ago wasn't there anymore).

That was the symposium. I enjoyed it despite not being able to understand everything. My rudimentary grasp of the language of Goethe was enough to understand what was going on albeit missing a lot of the detail. Two observations about the symposium. One, it was a shame that there wasn't a paper analysing Wieland's Stuttgart productions as I think they are far more experimental than the ones in Berlin. But I assume that because the symposium was being held in Berlin at the Deutsche Oper and hosted by the Berlin Chapter of the Wagner Society it had to be Berlin-centric. The second observation is a practical one: I assume I was not the only non-German speaker there and despite the event being branded an international one, and by the very nature of its subject matter of international interest and importance, it was assumed we were all fluent in German. A translation of the papers or a precis of them in English and French would have added value to the appreciation of the symposium and acknowledged that interest in all things Wagner is not limited to Germany. Now briefly about the productions.

The *Tannhaeuser* by Kirsten Harms with designs by Bernd Damovsky was somewhat thin, not minimal - as a minimal production can say much with little. So I rather say “thin” because there was not much context, and what there was didn't add to our understanding of the narrative or the psychology of the piece. Bits of gear came up from the stage (in the most unsexy bacchanal in memory) or descended from the fly (empty armour appropriately). The singing and orchestra sounded great under Michael Boder. Andreas Schager sang the title role, Emma Bell doubled Venus and Elizabeth with Markus Brueck singing Wolfram.

*Lohengrin* promised much on paper - Klaus Florian Vogt, Petra Lang (Ortrud) and Donald Runnicles in the pit – and it delivered. This was a performance that was just “on” from the first tremolo. I was much impressed by Klaus Florian Vogt's beautiful tenor, clear, pure and to my ears higher than your normal heldentenor. The production by Kasper Holten with staging by Steffen Aarfang didn't get in the way of the music. The swan was a projection on the “fog” high above the back of the stage which then assumed physical form as giant wings carried by Lohengrin as he appeared centre stage. Rachel Willis-Sorensen sang Elsa and Simon Neal Telramund.

The “Dutchman” in a production by Christian Spuck with sets by Rufus Didwiszus was all shades of black and grey, very foggy and atmospheric. The production was from the

point of view of Eric, not as spurned or jilted lover, but as a man who understood the sacrifice to be made by Elsa for the Dutchman and could do little to prevent it or alter the outcome. The production could have done with a bit more colour (where were the red sails of the Dutchman? Or the ghost chorus?) but overall I loved it. Conductor John Fiore and orchestra were particularly fine with Alexander Krasnov as the Dutchman and Elisabeth Teige as Senta.

As a personal side programme/commentary to all that Wagner I took advantage of what was on offer in Berlin that week (which was not insubstantial) and saw/heard *Pelleas et Melisande* and *Satyagraha* at the Komische Oper. Seeing all these works close together underscores both the influence of Wagner and the challenge he set those that came after him to renew, to challenge and to deliver theatre that is of its time, that adds to the narrative of the art form and questions its relevance. So I got to experience three early Wagnerian music-dramas side by side an early 20<sup>th</sup> century opera heavily influenced by Wagner and a late 20<sup>th</sup> century work seemingly denying Wagner but adopting his epic, mystic and sublimative ways. How, who and what will take up the legacy of Wagner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Debussy drew heavily on Wagner writing his opera although what came out is pure Debussy and very French. The sound and themes so transparent and fragile that the whole thing could pass for a dream, with the same ephemeral qualities of a dream. For me *Pelleas et Melisande* is a frustrating mix of atmospheric beauty and a promise that never quite delivers. This production by Komische Chief Barry Kosky was tight and set in a stage within a stage, claustrophobic in its dimensions with lighting that highlighted the artifice of the construct. Jordan de Souza conducted, Nadja Mchantaf sang Melisande, Dominik Koeninger sang Pelleas and Guenter Papendell Golaud.

The same could not be said for Philip Glass' *Satyagrah*. The second of Glass' so called biography operas, between *Einstein on the Beach* and *Akhanaten*, with which Philip Glass could lay claim to doing a Wagner by challenging/changing the notion of what opera is in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Satyagraha* focuses on the formation of the concept of passive resistance by Gandhi during his time in South Africa. Each act of the opera is overseen by key a figure in the making and practice of the passive resistance movement – Count Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Luther King. The opera has a challenging narrative mixing Indian mythology with historical and anecdotal events, all of it sang in Sanskrit. Whilst the dancing throughout this performance, choreographed by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (who also directed the production), was perfectly attuned to the music I found it distracting from what is – to me - a static work (in the same sense that “Parsifal” is a static work). Jonathan Stockhammer conducted and Stefan Cifolelli sang the role of Gandhi. Whatever one may think of Glass' music there is no question that his hypnotic sound and absolute mastery of the theatrical makes for a compelling but challenging evening. And by the end of “Satyagraha” a truly transcendent experience. And so it was at the Komische Oper on a bitterly cold night.

## THEATRE REVIEW: DRESDEN

Reviewed by Terence Watson

World Premiere of Justin Fleming's *Dresden*  
at The King's Cross Theatre, Sydney

Director: Suzanne Millar

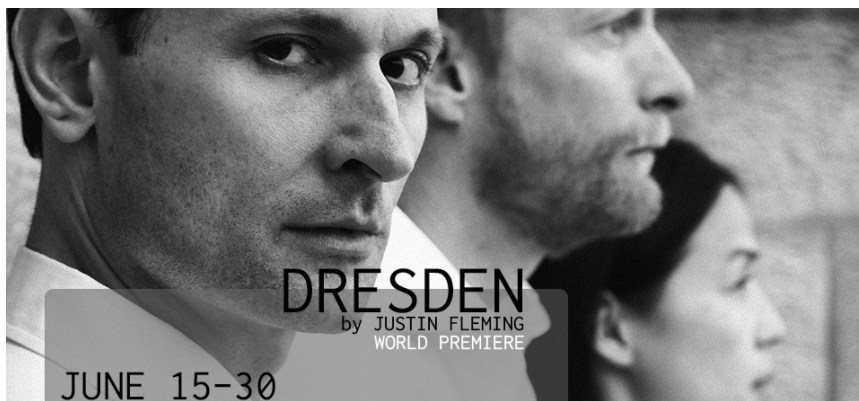
Cast: Jeremy Waters as Wagner; Renee Lim as Cosima Wagner; Yalin Ozucelik as Hitler; Ben Wood as August Kubizek (Gustl); \* Dorje Swallow as Carl Reissiger (Wagner's Kapellmeister "boss" at Dresden), Julius Schladebach (antagonistic critic in Dresden), Ludwig II and a Dresdener; Tom Campbell as Meyerbeer, Joseph Tichatscheck (Wagner's choice of tenor for the role of Rienzi), Dramaturg (an invented character? who advises Hitler on his speaking technique and speechwriting skills) and a Dresdener.

Creative/Tech Team: Patrick Howe (set design), Benjamin Brockman (lighting design), Max Lambert (sound design), Charlie Vaux (stage manager), Rebecca Blake (assistant director), Hannah Goodwin (production assistant), Andrew McMartin (production manager), John Harrison (producer).

After I was reminded by our Editor Mike Day that the play was about to open, I attended a preview performance on 17 June and was so taken by the intelligence, wit and dramaturgical skill of Fleming's writing, and the bravura acting of the cast, that I returned on 26 June for another viewing, and was not disappointed. You might recall that Mike Day interviewed Fleming for the June 2018 issue 149 (members can login at [www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au) to read the interview). Fleming rightly commented: "The play, I admit, makes some hefty demands: there are no small parts, no 'supporting actors'. Every character in it is big." This is especially noteworthy given the play lasts about 90 minutes—I counted about 25 scenes—but they are very packed minutes.

The title gives no immediate clues as to its content. Although most Wagnerians know the role Dresden played in Wagner's life, there are many other associations, many of which provide content for the play. Not the least of these is the status of Dresden as one of the great centres of European cultural history. The play is structured in episodes of Wagner dictating *Mein Leben* to Cosima. Interpolated into this structure is a series of flashbacks and flashforwards, some of which occur simultaneously, which creates a slightly dizzying sense of time travel and challenges the audience to work out what is happening and when. Apart from the time stream of Wagner dictating, there are three other streams: the premiere of *Rienzi* in Dresden and its effect on Wagner and his career; Hitler's experience of *Rienzi*—for him and us, a life-changing and world-changing event—and why it drove him to change the world; and a fantasy stream in which Wagner and Hitler confront each other.

Indicative of the complexity of this overlapping of times and places, Fleming constructs a scene in which Wagner, facing one direction, watches Reissiger conduct the premiere, while



Hitler, facing the opposite, watches the Linz performance he saw at the age of 17 years, in some kind of rapture. Wagner receives the accolades of the Dresden audience, while Hitler, a moment later, continues to applaud the performance long after the audience has left. This is both a moving and chilling moment, since it shows Hitler as open to aesthetic experience, but at the same time "twisting" the work and his response into a conversion experience that reveals his destiny to him. The footnote contains information suggesting that this whole episode was probably a fantasy built on an undoubtedly strong response to the performance. Fleming uses the spirit of this episode to good effect to point the contrast between an apparently sensible, good-natured person, Gustl, with a sense of humour, and the humourless, budding demagogue.

Fleming underscores this scene with another in which Hitler makes an impassioned and quite irrational historical and metaphysical link between the original *Rienzi* (Cola di Rienzo, c. 1313-1354, tribune from May to December 1347, and of whom Hitler probably knew little apart from Wagner's portrayal), the might of imperial Rome, Wagner's *Rienzi*, as a prophecy of his own destiny, and his own warped ideas of rebuilding Germany into a modern-day Rome and saving the German people. This scene is especially chilling in the light of history. Hitler tells Kubizek that Wagner was specifically reminding him of the greatness of the Roman Empire and calling him to rebuild Germany in that image.

Suddenly—the scenes take no more than 5 minutes—we are confronted by a powerful argument about Wagner's influence on Hitler. But this focus is not on the important matter of the anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic beliefs, but on the kind of *Weltanschauung* each man cultivated in which such beliefs could exist, and, in Hitler's case, become incorporated into inhuman policies and practices. For Wagner, anti-Jewish beliefs and practices were part of a larger agenda designed to belittle all competitors, establish an alternative vision of Germany to that of Bismarck's *Realpolitik*, and to refocus debate on aesthetic, rather than "merely" political and social, values. For Hitler, anti-Semitic beliefs and practices were underpinned, in part, by misguided, self-serving interpretations of pseudo-scientific explanations of race, a messianic desire for an



empire, and a craving to build a military machine powerful enough to take revenge on the victors in the Great War. Fleming gives Hitler a speech that, like many politicians' speeches, dresses his delusions and desires as a commitment to restoring the dignity and status of the German people.

This survey of some key scenes in the work indicates the subtlety and complexity of the ideas and history the play covers. Yet, because of the historical range of the play, Fleming has opportunities to introduce comedy to underscore the play's serious intent. For instance, because the original *Rienzi* took over 6 hours to perform, Wagner wanted to cut it, but his tenor Tichatscheck refused to allow it. Fleming gives Campbell a deliciously camp scene in which he, in white tights and top and huge black cloak, flounces around an increasingly frustrated and out-flanked Wagner, laying down the law to him: without him singing, there is no show, and he loves singing the full role. Similarly, Hitler is given a scene with a Dramaturg who, in a very modern-seeming mixture of haughtiness and boredom presumes to give the older Hitler advice about how to write and deliver a Nuremberg rally speech. It seemed to me that Fleming might be taking the opportunity to parody a dramaturg or two with whom he might have had dealings.

There are also many moving vignettes. Early on, Wagner and Cosima walk around moonlit Dresden admiring the beauties of the once imperial city. I'm not sure there's any evidence for this, but it allows Fleming to set up a later scene. This later scene opens from blackness to reveal a rain of dust, with two men standing in it. Immediately, we knew this was Dresden after the British bombed it flat. For me, this was intensely moving, as I had been to Dresden a number of times since 1994 and watched parts of the old city being rebuilt, culminating in the opening of the beautiful Frauenkirche. The two men are in shock as they talk about the destruction and death around them. Another

scene in which Wagner dictates more of *Mein Leben* shows the genuine love between the couple as they cuddle in the garden, with the manuscript pages abandoned on the grass.

As the play approaches its climax, the historical lines converge. Hitler makes his first visit to Bayreuth to beg the widowed Cosima to give him the original manuscript of *Rienzi*, still safe in Dresden at this time, to turn into a sacred relic for the Nazi party's headquarters in Berlin. Cosima haughtily refuses, and adds insult to her distaste for Hitler, by giving him a copy and curtly autographing it for him. Hitler is annoyed at not having his wish granted and overwhelmed by being in such close, though vicarious, contact with the Master. The Mss has been lost, it seems.

Fleming, though, with the licence an artist can take with history, grants Hitler his dream of meeting Wagner by putting them both in the bunker in Berlin (following a scene in which Wagner dies in Venice). This gives Fleming the opportunity to imagine a conversation that could happen between any artist and a deluded fan. Wagner is rightly outraged when Hitler explains how he understood Wagner's "call" across time as a directive to recapitulate *Rienzi's* rise and fall. The "call" is, though, what his demented mind read into Wagner's work. However, Fleming rightly raises the question of the effect of powerful works of art on their audiences, including his own play and its audiences.

It seems to me that Fleming's implied answer is sensible and plausible: a person who writes the kind of propaganda that dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and their contemporary imitators, want to hear is not an artist. Artists who write works that deal with the joys and anguish of being human do not proselytise or propagandise. But that position cannot preclude or negate the possibility that an artist's work will be co-opted into the service of a dictator and demagogue. Fleming's play, though, it seems to me, leaves open the question, central



Rienzi





Yalin Ozuclik as Adolf, Drje Swallow as Ludwig, Jeremy Waters as Richard

to the understanding of Wagner's works and his status as a major western cultural figure, of the role played by his extra-artistic writings and the views they contain on such matters as Jews, the status and role of Germany, and the explicit aim to use artworks to effect moral change in society. As an artist, Fleming does not tell us how to answer this question, but he makes us think about how we might answer it, and what kind of values and principles play into that answer. Fleming is to be congratulated for his powerful and thought-provoking contribution to this continuing debate.

The cast responded exceptionally well to the challenges of Fleming's script. The rapid changes of scene and characters, the complex layering of timelines, the quick-fire dialogue all demanded versatile and energetic performers. Waters, Lim, Ozuclik, and Wood carried the main threads and so did not change characters, but Campbell and Swallow relished the chances Fleming gave them to inhabit a range of other characters, using just small changes of clothes, occasional props, and a significant change of manners to differentiate them for the audience. Waters' Wagner was a compliment to the real Wagner who was not tall, well-built, blond and blue-eyed, but, whether intended or not, the casting suggested a comment on both the artist and Hitler, who was also nothing like his Aryan fantasy. Waters brought considerable passion, nuance and great timing to his role. He conveyed well the hypocrisy and double-dealing with which Wagner rather too frequently engaged with people for whom he had little respect, such as Meyerbeer. Ozuclik, though, looked enough like Hitler to be disquieting, especially when he donned that moustache later in the play. He brought conviction and intensity to his portrayal, making his final demented confrontation with Wagner deeply disturbing, reminding us that Hitler probably always knew that he, like Rienzi, would end badly, but accepting that this was his destiny! Sadly, for me, Lim was the weakest characterisation. Lim is the opposite in appearance to Cosima, petite, delicate, soft-voiced; Cosima was tall and big (taller and bigger than Wagner), imperious and manipulative (her diaries of her life with Wagner record many episodes of rows, calculated weeping fits, and reconciliations, but also many episodes of tenderness and appreciation). The scene between Cosima and Hitler needed a performer closer to Cosima's build and demeanour to give it gravitas.

The ensemble was very impressive, showing the benefits of long experience, especially given the split-second timing between short scenes and multiple characters, and the tiny stage in which they had to work. Suzanne Millar's direction

kept the action flowing tautly and raised and lowered the tension effectively. As a Wagnerian familiar with Rienzi, I appreciated Max Lambert's sound-design using music from the opera, underscoring more intimate moments, as well as giving me a thrill for a moment during the scene of Rienzi's premiere. Benjamin Brockman's lighting had not struck me during the preview, but it registered during the second visit as it changed, for instance, from the brilliance of Rienzi's opening night to a dappled garden, to the falling ash, and the harsh light of Hitler's suicide. I had not been to the Kings Cross Theatre before, but I liked the closeness to performers of the 80-odd seat venue. Sydney should be grateful for the existence of such vital, valuable theatre spaces, companies willing to work in them, and writers willing and very capable of producing high quality, provocative works to be presented in the stages by such talented and committed performers. If you missed seeing a performance, or, like me, would like to see it again—agitate for a revival!

\*If you are interested, Kubizek wrote a memoir about his early friendship with Hitler: *The Young Hitler I Knew: The Memoirs of Hitler's Childhood Friend* (2011, Frontline Books). The publicity blurb explains: "August Kubizek met Adolf Hitler in 1904 while they were both competing for standing room at the opera. Their mutual passion for music created a strong bond, and over the next four years they became close friends. [...] In 1908 Kubizek moved to Vienna and shared a room with Hitler.... [...] Hitler moved out of the flat...without leaving a forwarding address; Kubizek did not meet his friend again until 1938." Ian Kershaw's Introduction warns us to take Kubizek's laudatory record cautiously. Kershaw recounts, as an illustration, Kubizek's account of the aftermath of Hitler's revelatory encounter with Rienzi:

Another story described by Kubizek, and repeated in countless books on Hitler, also seems elaborated to the point of near fantasy. This is the lengthy episode of the nocturnal climb up the Freinberg, a mountain just outside Linz, following a visit to a performance of Wagner's *Rienzi*.... Kubizek has Hitler, in near ecstasy, elucidating the meaning of what they had seen in almost mystical terms. After the war Kubizek remained insistent that the story was true. [...] Kubizek concludes... by telling how Hitler recounted the episode to his hostess, Winifred Wagner, ending: 'in that hour it began'. But this was Hitler showing off his 'prophetic qualities' to an important admirer, Frau Wagner. Whatever happened on the Freinberg that night...nothing 'began' then" (pp. 12-13).

## OPERA REVIEW: A (very) PERSONAL REPORT ON THE SAN FRANCISCO RING CYCLE by Minnie Biggs

Not a 'review'. Not a 'critique'. Not a musical analysis. Just a personal love letter. From a modest, relatively young Ring virgin. Adelaide, Melbourne, Bayreuth, Met on HD.

This Francesca Zambello production was in many ways the most satisfying of all. There will always be details or aspects that grate, disturb or are just plain unpleasant, and at the same time, redeeming factors which lend to construct a whole opinion. This production had stand out details and literally no dramatically painful aspects. Which is saying a lot for a Wagner Ring.

The SFO orchestra was directed by their very own Donald Runnicles, (in charge of the SFO for many years.) He was received and applauded like a rock star, the orchestra was ...fine. I could not find fault but my recollection of the incomparable Bayreuth orchestra and the excellence of our Pietari Inkinen had more sparkle, more excitement. That they linger in my mind is what is most interesting while the Runnicles SFO does not.

The singers: Falk Struckmann as Alberich, a little weak starting out, came into his own, but "our" Warwick Fyfe is the Alberich of all time. A new Canadian Filipino friend agreed, so it is not just my own chauvinism! Stefan Margita as Loge was a great performer throughout, made me think of Fyfe, with his superb acting ability supporting his voice. Greer Grimsley started off Wotan a bit soft and weak- come to think of it, Irene Theorin as Brunhilde did the same thing! Both of them came very good to excellent. Brunhilde to great strength and beauty. (I wonder what that was about the production. Weak starts? Saving their voices?) Karita Mattila and Brandon Jovanovich were lovely as Sieglinde and Siegmund. Ronnita Miller as Erda was a fabulous personification of Erda, quintessentially huge round earth. I was not keen on her voice (which was given to wobbles which some people like.) David Brenna sang a fine Siegfried, a bit light, I wrote at the time. Andrea Silvestrelli as Hagen was brilliant in Gotterdammerung, such a bad man! Brian Mulligan as Gunter and Melissa Citro as Gutrune very fine. I had some problem with the costumes, hair and makeup of Brunhilde and Gutrune at the end, looking as alike as they did, and suppose there was a reason for this which I missed, and which none of the seminars or talks mentioned.

All of my journal notes begin with "Beautiful". "Wow!" "Fantastic. "Ahaaaaa...."

Beautiful was the first word describing the stunning visuals- video projections- created by S. Katy Tucker. The first, for Das Rheingold, smoky watery cloudy images moving and morphing on a scrim into almost recognisable pictures but not conclusively, for me absolutely in sync with the music, a perfect beginning. And then startled by the brilliant red sandstone cliff images moving around and down and down into the Niebelheim. She was inspired by the red desert of America and I could only think of our MacDonnell Ranges beyond Alice Springs, and also the descent into MONA in Tasmania! These videos started each act of the operas and were all stunning and moving and closely connected to the story location. The watery Rhine at the end became clogged

with rubbish. The devastation of the world. Zambello was focused on the destruction of nature, the quest for power and corruption, based in America, familiar themes quite beautifully evoked in the projections.

While her vision is in line with Wagner's purpose, and the visuals and the direction supported it, I wonder how much we as audience members take in, absorb his teachings? In many ways the end of the world seems even closer now than it did in his time, but have we learned? If we have accepted and understood, have we acted upon his lessons?

The light panels in the stage floor were an effective addition to the atmosphere, and much of the physical direction - the staging- was striking. The Valkyries standing in a straight line up some stairs, the set squared off to make an aesthetically satisfying picture. As was the Gibichung wedding, the arrangement of the chorus lined up, again using stairs and a squared off stage. Beautiful design.

One of the surprising turns of the production was the arrival of the Valkyries by parachute dressed like Amelia Earharts. (Actually they were stage hands in the parachutes crossing and descending to the stage and the singers came on packing their chutes. Clever.) They were carrying or connected to large photographs of actual dead American soldiers from several wars, (with family permission.) When I read about this before seeing it, was quite put off, sure I would not like it, but to my surprise, it worked really well. There was an understated subtlety about the old photos, real dead warriors.

The surtitles, a subject few have addressed- these were done by Zambello- left me with mixed reactions. While the story was made crystal clear, much of the dialogue was contemporised, sometimes dumbed down. I do not think Wagner would have wanted the audience laughing or giggling at jokes he did not make, or would he have?

And while we are on dumbing down, the woman who gave the pre opera introduction talks was a highly qualified musicologist and more. But she spent too much time making references to Harry Potter themes and other movie music being like leitmotifs, and went on about how the characters keep telling the story of what happened over and over. Really!

The talks and program articles by our Peter Bassett were informative and enlightening, and charming. And the symposium and forums by the SFO and Wagner Society of Northern California were excellent. There was a lot offered, all of it of the highest quality. There were twenty nine nationalities and people from 48 states. At the largest symposium the audience was made up of half brand- new comers, a good sign for the future. Altogether, a great success.

What struck me strongly is how much is new, how much more I learn and how much more I understand with each viewing. It seems truly extraordinary that there can be such profound insights, listening as new, as for the first time, to what sounds fairly familiar but with so much greater depth. I guess this is the essence of genius.



# WASO's TRISTAN UND ISOLDE, PERTH, AUGUST 2018



Ekaterina Gubanova, Boaz Daniel, Stuart Skelton, Asher Fisch, Gun-Brit Barkmin. Photo Andy Tyndall. Courtesy WASO



Stuart Skelton, Asher Fisch, Gun-Brit Barkmin. Photo Andy Tyndall. Courtesy WASO



Asher Fisch



Stuart Skelton and our President Colleen Chesterman



Asher Fisch, Stuart Skelton



## ADDRESS

Please note our permanent address for all correspondence:

The Wagner Society in New South Wales Inc  
GPO Box 4574 SYDNEY NSW 2001

Telephone: 9360 4962 (Colleen Chesterman, President)

Website: [www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au) | Website enquiries: [wagner\\_nsw@optusnet.com.au](mailto:wagner_nsw@optusnet.com.au)

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*Beckmesser causes uproar by exposing Walther von Stolzing's 'mistakes' for all to see.*  
(Painting by Michael Echter of the first performance of Die Meistersinger in Munich, 1868.)

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*We always picture a very noble character to ourselves as having a certain trace of silent sadness... It is a consciousness that has resulted from knowledge of the vanity of all achievements and of the suffering of all life, not merely of one's own.*

**Schopenhauer: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* -  
The World as Will and Representation**

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The Wagner Quarterly is laid out, produced and distributed by MKR Productions  
154 Matcham Road | Matcham NSW 2250 | Ph: 0402 834 419 | Email: [michael@mkrproductions.com.au](mailto:michael@mkrproductions.com.au)

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