

# Sunday 27 September 2020: Tabatha McFadyen, via Zoom

Tabatha McFadyen's talk from Berlin  
about singing and directing  
4 - 5.30pm, Sunday 27 September 2020  
via Zoom



## About Tabatha:

Originally trained as a classical singer, **Tabatha McFadyen** is now primarily active as a director of both opera and theatre. Tabatha's first engagement with Opera Australia was in 2015 as an extra chorister in Graeme Murphy's production of *Turandot*. In 2020, Tabatha returned to the company as a Trainee Director, under the umbrella of the Opera Australia Young Artist Programme. This would involve directing a new production of *Rembrandt's Wife* by Australian composer Andrew Ford, and acting as Assistant Director in productions of *La Traviata* (Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour), *La Juive* and *Lohengrin*. Unfortunately all were postponed or cancelled due to the coronavirus.

Tabatha made her directorial debut with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Brisbane Shakespeare Festival in October 2019. As an assistant director, she has worked alongside directors such as Barrie Kosky (*Frühlingsstürme*, Komische Oper Berlin, 2020), Tomo Sugao (*Götterdämmerung*, Mainfranken Theater, Würzburg, 2019, for which Tabatha received **Wagner Society in NSW** funding assistance), and Tama Matheson (Brian Howard's *Metamorphosis*, Opera Australia, 2018; and Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Manuel Theatre, Malta,

2018.)

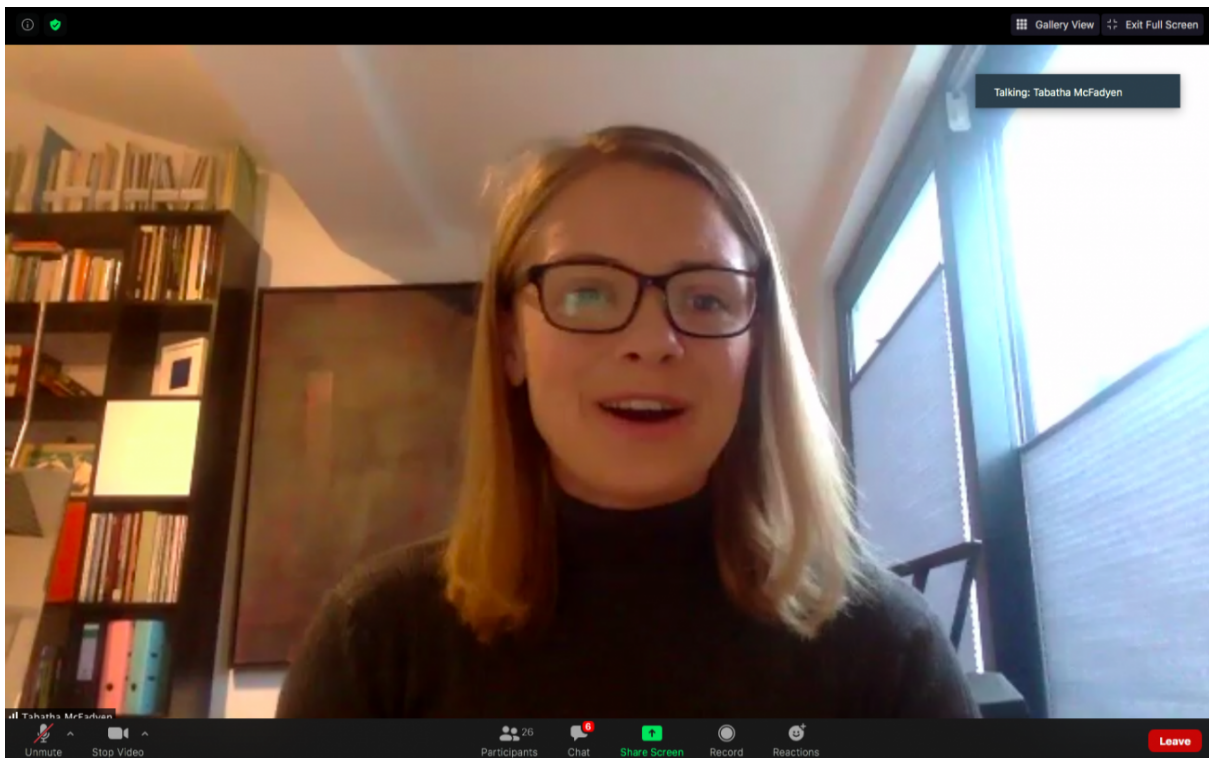
Tabatha also actively engages as a performer, most recently featuring as the soprano soloist in A Christmas Carol in the Royal Albert Hall (Words and Music), and jumping in for the Sydney season of Metamorphosis as Greta. She has performed with conductors such as Johannes Fritsch, Giordano Bellincampi and Vladimir Ashkenazy, and also, having a particular bent towards contemporary composition, with some of Australia's finest chamber musicians. She has been a finalist in the Australian Singing Competition, the Hans Gabor Belvedere International Singing Competition (Latvia), and was the first prize winner of the 49th International Antonin Dvorak Singing Competition. She also won the National Liederfest and the Mietta Song Prize with long-time musical collaborator, Alex Raineri. Tabatha managed to complete both a Bachelor of Music with First Class Honours and a Graduate Certificate in Opera at Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, which she followed with postgraduate study at the Universität Mozarteum, Salzburg.

## Report from the December 2020 Quarterly



On Sunday 27 September we had our first Zoom meeting, the first of several until Covid restrictions are lifted. 29 members and friends accepted Tabatha McFadyen's invitation to join her online from her home in Berlin.

Tabatha entertained and stimulated us with news of what she has been doing over the past year and her thoughts on the impact of the pandemic.



The Wagner Society in NSW sponsored Tabatha to undertake an interternship last year with the Mainfranken Theatre in Würzburg, where she worked on a very innovative production of *Götterdämmerung*. All of the performers were making role debuts as were the Japanese director Tomo Sugao and conductor Enrico Calessio. The staging was in the German Regietheater tradition where the director is allowed freedom to interpret works as they wish; in this case the overall concept was "Museum World", where the gods were in glass vitrines and the focus was shifted to Hagen, rather than Brünnhilde and Siegfried! Provocative, but according to Tabatha and Society member John Barrer, who had attended a performance, successful. Tabatha expressed gratitude to Irish tenor Paul McNamara (Siegfried) for helping her with understanding the Regietheater approach where performers are often given a lot of freedom to direct themselves. Paul praised Tabatha highly for very quickly pulling the production into shape. Paul was due to perform in Sydney next year and the society had planned to have him talk to us but sadly this is unlikely to happen until 2022.

The most innovative aspect of the production was the rearrangement of the score by Eberhard Kloke and the reduction of the number of orchestral players to just 17 – the normal number is 88+. A traditional Wagner tuba was included but several new instruments such as a marimba and a flugelhorn were added. Although this was performed last year Tabatha observed that because of Covid it may well become more common to reduce numbers of players and chorus members to help with social distancing.

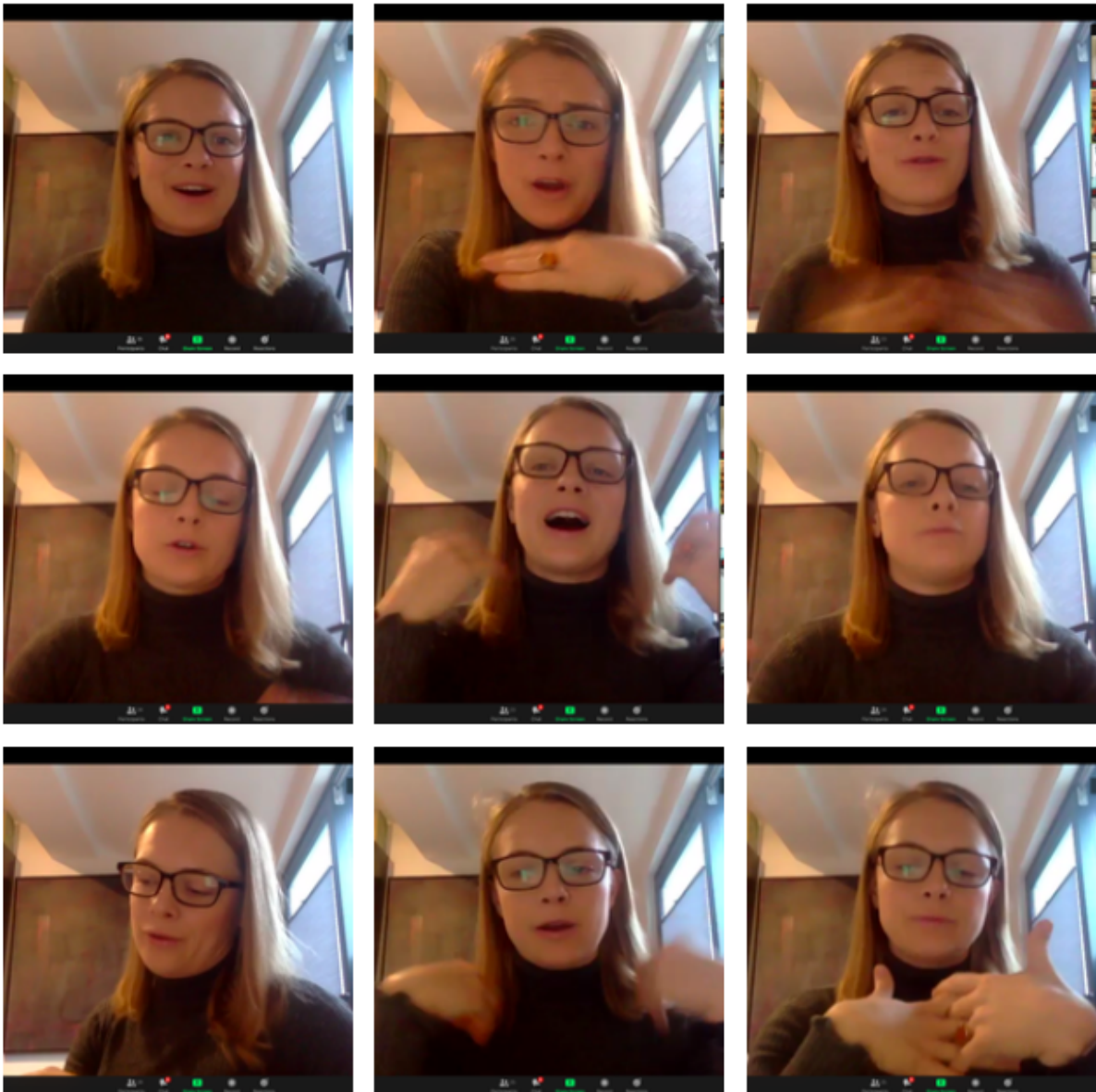
Tabatha shared with us her thoughts during her enforced period of inactivity due to lockdown. She questioned the value of opera – asking “where does opera fit in?” and came to the conclusion that it is worthwhile because it ‘allows access to the ambiguous’. Ambiguous in the German sense of ‘many-meaningness’. As an example, she cited Wagner’s use of the orchestra to tell a different story to what the characters are telling. Opera has a richness and complexity that allows for the acceptance of contradictions – in contrast to current society’s simplification and polarisation. The arts have an obligation to counteract this - opera shouldn’t just be a ‘product’. Tabatha stressed the importance of the audience as an essential part of the artistic process. Work needs to be demanding, exciting and connected to community to be worthy of audience engagement.

This led into a question and answer session about sponsorship. Germany has a reputation of being paradise for opera performers, but Tabatha said that, although it was much better than Australia, Germany still had tight budgets and reduced staffing in the regional theatres. However, the general attitude to the arts in Germany is phenomenal compared to Australia. The German Covid rescue subsidy for the arts is 50 Billion Euros!! The current Australian Government response has been pathetic.

Würzburg is a city in Bavaria with about 130,000 inhabitants, including 40,00 university students. Tabatha told us of the tremendous support the state gives to the students. Each student pays a levy of 2 Euros per term and in return for this they can attend performances for free. This builds up future audiences and values their cultural heritage. (In Berlin cinema tickets are more expensive than the opera for young people). Würzburg has the largest Wagner Society in Germany, which helped with financing the Ring. (Rheingold had reached final rehearsal stage before being postponed).

Tabatha couldn’t tell us if the postponed *Lohengrin* in Melbourne (for which she is assistant director) will go ahead. She was very disappointed that it didn’t eventuate as she was looking forward to working with the wonderful tenor David Butt Philip, who was to be covered by Bradley

Cooper, whose coaching with Siegfried Jerusalem et al we sponsored.



Tabatha shared how much she has missed live performances – opera on screen is no substitute for the real thing- but ended on a positive note with the observation that the Arts get better after a crisis. Tabatha expressed her appreciation of the Society’s sponsorship.

Our vice president Marie Leech thanked Tabatha for a wonderful talk and discussion and expressed the hope that we can hear her in person next year. For more about Tabatha visit

[https://opera.org.au/artist/tabatha-mcfadyen/-](https://opera.org.au/artist/tabatha-mcfadyen/)

(Editor’s note: Würzburg has a magnificent baroque Residence with a sensational staircase and ceiling by Tiepolo – well worth a visit. I stopped there on my first visit to Bayreuth in 1970.)