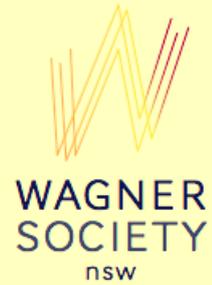




CELEBRATING  
**40 YEARS** 1980 - 2020



Thursday 28 January 2021, 8 - 9pm:  
Susan Bullock CBE in conversation from  
London, via Zoom, with Dr Robert Mitchell



Photos of Susan Bullock with, top left: Dr Robert Mitchell,  
bottom right: host Esteban Insausti

## Report by Minnie Biggs

Nearly 30 Wagner Society members and guests enjoyed meeting English dramatic soprano Susan Bullock on Zoom from London on January 28th.

Susan started by describing rehearsing *Elektra* last March, a role she has sung many times in many great houses, and being rudely and effectively disrupted at the end of the rehearsal with the announcement that indeed it was the end. The end of opera as we know it. The end for many months to come. Other cancelled performances included *Hänsel und Gretel*, *Kát'a Kabanova*, and some recitals.

That she was fortunate to be able to record a performance at the Grange Opera in September plus some individual short pieces for the 'bite-size' Proms, which raised money for struggling artists, was little comfort in nearly a year of absolutely no other singing engagements of any kind. For a singer who is accustomed to constant travel, out of one suitcase into another, nearly a year at home in London. With

her husband and a piano and occasional walks and trips to the store. Not even a hairdresser. For a lifelong stage performer! Of course, we are all aware of this kind of situation, we have all shared in it to one degree or another but hearing from her, out of the mouth of one of the great Brünnhildes, was quite another thing. Sobering.

And speaking of mouths, she spoke most interestingly about learning the Wagner roles. Her first was Isolde for the ENO in English but she was determined to learn the opera in both English and German at the same time, and indeed, soon after her first performance, she was asked to sing it in Frankfurt. In German. A subtle difference in the language is the pronunciation of the last consonant, often dropped off in English and most often necessarily precisely pronounced in German. She talked of the work and concentration of learning the words, some of which Wagner actually made up, the sense of which is apparent. She would literally take the syllables and form them in her mouth, learning them from the inside out, as it were, ingesting, understanding them fully. And later she was aware of other singers who said the words with a glazed expression, no idea of really what they meant or said.

Susan gave us some fascinating background to her surprisingly unplanned career – starting with great success as Madama Butterfly and leading to *Elektra* and Brünnhilde, which many members were thrilled by in the 2013 Melbourne *Ring*. Susan acknowledged that it was a great gift to her to be invited to sing such demanding and complex roles.

What is ahead? Who knows? Planning for Klytaemnestra, Mrs Lovatt in *Sweeney Todd*, and Mother in *Jenůfa*. Plenty lined up in the imaginary future but much uncertainty. Travel allowed? Quarantine restricted? All challenges relatively easy for us laypeople but for a singer, preparing for a role, another story. Locked in, alone.

And another snag. Who of us in Australia is aware of some of the ramifications of Brexit? Suddenly the English are obliged to obtain visas to go to ... not Europe, but France, or Spain. Or both. Different consulates. Not (yet) fully (?) prepared for this work. Queues, paperwork. A nightmare.

Thank you, dear Susan, and may your beautiful voice soar once again. Before too long.

*From the Wagner Quarterly 160, March 2021*

### **About Susan Bullock:**

Susan Bullock thrilled Melbourne audiences with her feisty Brůnnhilde in the 2013 Armfield Ring Cycle. Her unique position as one of the world's most sought-after British dramatic sopranos was recognised by the award of a CBE in June 2014.

Of her most distinctive roles, Brůnnhilde has garnered outstanding praise leading Susan Bullock to become the first ever soprano to sing four consecutive cycles of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Royal Opera House under Sir Antonio Pappano. Appearances as Richard Strauss' Elektra have brought her equal international acclaim and collaborations with some of the world's leading conductors including Fabio Luisi, Semyon Bychkov, Seiji Ozawa, Sir Mark Elder and Edo de Waart.

In recent seasons, she has extended her repertoire to include new roles such as the title role Minnie in *The Girl of the Golden West* (ENO), Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* at Houston Grand Opera and Klytaemnestra (Elektra).

## About Robert Mitchell:

A veteran of over 5,200 performances in more than 120 operas, baritone Robert Mitchell first sang with Opera Australia at the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973 and made his last appearance with the OA chorus in the 2017 concert performances of Parsifal. Having principally undertaken chorus responsibilities during those 44 years, his final principal role with OA was as The Captain in the world premiere seasons of Kate Miller-Heidke's *The Rabbits*. Robert's other roles included Spalanzani: *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Lillas Pastia/Guide: *Carmen*, Antonio/Annibale: *The Gondoliers*, Liberto: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Maître d'Hôtel: *The Merry Widow*, Diener: *Lulu*, Government Whip: *The Eighth Wonder*, Officer: *Der Freischütz*, Messenger: *La Traviata*, Penizek: *Countess Maritza*, Frère Jean: *Roméo et Juliette*, Polish Gentleman/Soldier: *Death in Venice*, and others in *La Bohème*, *The Mikado*, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Boris Godunov*, *Yeomen of the Guard*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Capriccio*.

Robert has also been a soloist for the Sydney and Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festivals, Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, Chamber Soloists of Sydney and the Warringah and Wollongong Symphonies and has broadcast for ABC Classic FM. In 2015 he gave the first performance of Australian composer Gordon Kerry's song cycle 'Jean à Jean' which Robert commissioned in memory of his late partner Denis Condon.

After completing the Diploma of Music Education, for his Master of Creative Arts (University of Wollongong) Robert undertook a survey of the work of French singer/teacher Pierre Bernac. For his PhD (University of Sydney) he prepared a critical edition of Offenbach's five-act operetta *La Vie Parisienne*. A past State and National President of the Australian National Association of Teachers of Singing (ANATS), Robert has taught at Macquarie and Western Sydney Universities. He has lectured to music interest groups and written articles on a wide variety of musical subjects, teaches singing privately and is currently chairman of the Opera Australia Benevolent Fund.