



CELEBRATING
40 YEARS 1980 - 2020



WAGNER
SOCIETY
NSW

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY

ISSUE NO 32

159

DECEMBER 2020



Arthur Rackham The Rheinmaidens 1911

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Dear members and friends,

The end of this Covid Year 2020 is fast upon us. Whilst we may not be totally back to a pre-pandemic "normal", culturally we are seeing 2021 seasons being launched, and subscriptions renewed. Let us hope that we can start 2021 in a positive manner with live music at its core.

From the Society's point of view 2020 is difficult to sum up. We started the year with a spectacular concert led by Anthony Negus in memory of Jane Matthews but then everything fell silent due to travel and meeting restrictions. Fear of the contagion together with the suspension of a normal social, working and cultural life hit hard. Everything, theatre, concerts, opera was cancelled, stopped. I sincerely hope that everyone has managed to endure this hard period and dipped into the many Wagnerian wonders that were on offer online.

Your Committee was no less affected and carried on as best it could via zoom and email. Whilst we struggled to understand what we could do given the uncertainty of when we could get back to "normal", we managed to rally in the last quarter with three zoom events. Tabatha McFadyen, David Larkin and Warwick Fyfe were magnificent and took to the zoomsphere like the pros they are. I thank them on behalf of the Society for their entertaining presentations.

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SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

To promote the music of Richard Wagner and his contemporaries and to encourage a wider understanding of their work.
To support the training of young Wagnerian or potential Wagnerian performers from NSW.

WAGNERIAN SUBJECTS BY BRITISH ARTISTS



Arthur Hacker 1858 - 1919
Temptation of Sir Percival 1894



Edmund Blair Leighton 1852 - 1922
Tristan and Isolde 1902



Charles Ricketts 1866 - 1931
Siegfried and the magic bird 1930



Arthur Rackham 1867 - 1939
Siegfried and Brunhilde 1911

FOR YOUR DIARY

2021

3,5,7, Feb 2021	<i>Das Rheingold</i> Melbourne Opera's first instalment of a complete <i>Ring Cycle</i> . Conducted by Anthony Negus. Directed by Suzanne Chaundy	Melbourne
28 Oct - 21 Nov 2021	Opera Australia presents 3 cycles of a new <i>Ring</i> at QPAC	Brisbane

COMING SOCIETY EVENTS 2020 – SOME EVENTS WILL BE ON ZOOM DAYS AND 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
Thursday 28 Jan	8.00pm Susan Bullock talks to us from London	Zoom
Thursday 11 Feb	8.00pm Lise Lindstrom talks to us from London	Zoom
Sunday 28 Feb	2.00pm Special event to celebrate 40 years since Wagner lovers met in Bayreuth and agreed to start a Wagner Society in Australia.	Mosman Art Gallery
Sunday 21 March	4.00pm Heath Lees talks to us from NZ about <i>Wagnerism after Alex Ross</i>	Zoom
Sunday 18 April	12.30pm DVD TBC 2.00pm Prof Thea Brejzek talks about revolutionary Swiss stage designer Adolphe Appia	Goethe Institut
Sunday 23 May	1.00pm AGM 2.00pm Concert with Bradley Cooper 3.30pm Wagner's birthday drinks	Mosman Art Gallery

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.

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).
For Zoom events members will be requested to register and donate \$10

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

Patron:

Ms Simone Young AM

Honorary Life Members:

Mr Richard King

Prof Michael Ewans

Mr Horst Hoffman

Mr Roger Cruickshank

Dr Terence Watson

Dr Dennis Mather

Dr Colleen Chesterman

Ms Leona Geeves

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The upside of this upside down time has been, paradoxically, the opening up of the world via online platforms and formats. We can now have talks from people on the other side of the world. Of course a live event is preferred but the alternative hasn't turned out too badly and it has offered the opportunity for some dear friends from afar to join in the talks. So when we can get back to the beloved Goethe we hope to be able to zoom future events for those members that cannot come in person.

As you will read in the Quarterly, beautifully put together by Mike Day (thank you Mike), we have curated events for the first half of 2021 some of which we hope to be live events. We are casting our themes wider next year with talks on Wagnerism, from the best selling book by Alex Ross, and scenography as well as some well known Valkyres to kick the year off in style. Our 40th anniversary celebrations, whilst deferred to late February, still fall within the establishment period of the Society. That should be quite an afternoon and I look forward to meeting some of the founding members at that event. With greater certainty of conditions through the course of 2021 we will be able to plan with more confidence and hopefully for greater numbers.

By the time you read this you will have received a number of email communications from the Committee on opportunities to support FARA and Melbourne Opera's *Das Rheingold*. We are particularly pleased to get behind *Das Rheingold* because it will be Warwick Fyfe's first *Rheingold* Wotan (carrying the flag for NSW) and the first step in a new Ring production (hopefully to be staged in its entirety in 2023) but also because it is the first independent production of the Ring since 1913. Melbourne Opera has championed Wagner and they need our support both with money and with our presence in the theatre. Similarly with FARA. We need to help the singers that have been affected by mass cancellations. I urge all members to consider helping if you can.

Looking forward into 2021 I am optimistic that culture will emerge from this dark interruption with vigour. There is some Wagner to be enjoyed on Australian stages in 2021, not least OA's deferred Brisbane Ring. However, we must not be complacent that The Arts will survive. As has been seen earlier this year several key institutions came within a hair's breadth of being lost. Hence our call for support and vigilance.

Being the final communication for 2020 I now take this opportunity to thank your Committee for their hard work and dedication to the cause. In particular I'd like to single out Lis Bergmann who has turned our communications and website into a thing of beauty, and Leona Geeves without whose knowledge, connections and tenacity we would have a much poorer programme of young singers to sponsor and promote via our recitals. Thank you both.

Finally, on behalf of your Committee, I wish you all a safe and healthy end of 2020 and look forward to seeing you at our many events and in the theatre through 2021.

Esteban Insausti

President

Wagner Society in NSW Inc.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I trust readers will agree that this December issue is particularly interesting and varied, thanks to the contributions of the committee, our members and our sponsored singers. As usual I encourage everyone to submit articles for publication. I hope you enjoy the colourful illustrations and paintings by Wagner inspired late 18th century and early 19th century artists. The selection relates to David Larkin's talk on 18 October. Not all of them escape being called kitsch to modern tastes. I love them.

Special thanks to Peter Bassett for his stimulating piece on *The Ring* and to Minnie Biggs for her regular witty articles. Thanks also to Elizabeth Gordon-Werner for allowing reproduction of her charming sketches. I hope you all have a wonderful, safe and healthy 2021.

Mike Day

michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Members will receive advice in January about renewing their membership for 2021 and details will be available on our website.

WE WARMLY WELCOME A NEW MEMBER WHO JOINED SINCE SEPTEMBER 2020:

Danny May [1244]

THE RAVEN'S REPORTING, COMPILED BY CAMRON DYER

There is a regularly updated list of upcoming performances worldwide of Wagner's works on the Society's web page: wagner.org.au/ravens-reporting that takes the list to 2024

WAGNER SOCIETY NEWSLETTERS AND QUARTERLIES ONLINE

The online library of Wagner Society Newsletters and Quarterlies is now complete. Every publication, from the first Newsletter dated February 1981 to the latest December 2020 Quarterly, is now on the Society's web page: wagner.org.au/society-newsletter. Please note that, as this web page is accessible only to members of the Society, members will need to log in.

FUTURE WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

THURSDAY 28 JANUARY - ZOOM AT 8.00PM SUSAN BULLOCK TALKS TO US FROM LONDON



Susan Bullock thrilled Melbourne audiences with her feisty Brünnhilde 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, Brünnhilde 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).

THURSDAY 11 FEBRUARY - ZOOM AT 8.00PM LISE LINDSTROM TALKS TO US FROM LONDON

American dramatic soprano Lise Lindstrom has dazzled the world with compelling performances that are “truly world-class”. Her unique vocal power combined with her expansive range, extensive palette of vocal colours, and unrivalled stagecraft, makes her one of the most sought-after talents of her generation. In roles that range from Turandot to Senta, Elektra and Brünnhilde, Lindstrom's distinguished career has taken her to the world's leading opera houses, including the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Wiener Staatsoper, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, and Teatro alla Scala.

In 2016 Lindstrom performed Brünnhilde in her first-ever full *Ring Cycle* for Opera Australia in Melbourne for which she was awarded the Green Room Award and Helpmann Award. The critics went wild as “Lindstrom, a tremendous Brünnhilde throughout...ended the Ring in a blaze of glory literally and metaphorically”. A leading interpreter of Wagner's heroines, Lindstrom has also portrayed Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* with San Francisco Opera, Polish National Opera and New Orleans Opera, both Elisabeth and Venus in *Tannhäuser* with Greek National Opera.



SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY AT 2.00PM AT THE MOSMAN ART GALLERY 40th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION PARTY, WITH CONCERT BY YOUNG SINGERS, PLUS SPECIAL GUESTS – PAST PRESIDENTS AND LIFE MEMBERS

Join us for bubbles, nibbles and sparking song and catch up with old friends to reminisce about past trips and performances and celebrate the achievements of the Society over the past 40 years. Founding Member, Past President and Life Member Richard King will talk about the initial impetus to form the Society.

At the time of going to press COVID restrictions allow only 60 guests but this may improve. Booking will be necessary. Details will be emailed closer to the date. If you don't have email call Mike Day for further information. 0413 807 533

ULTERIOR MOTIVES - THEMES AND IDEAS BENEATH THE SURFACE OF *THE RING*

by Peter Bassett



The death of Siegfried

Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* grew out of a single narrative idea: the circumstances leading to and surrounding the death of Siegfried. Its form is allegorical and deliberately so. Unlike Tolkien, who emphatically rejected any such dimension to his *Lord of the Rings*, declaring "It is neither allegorical nor topical.... I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence", Wagner embraced the concept enthusiastically. We might reasonably assume that a single allegorical thread runs through the four parts of the *Ring*. Bernard Shaw - playwright, critic, Perfect Wagnerite and Fabian Socialist - certainly hoped so but was irritated to discover that in fact the *Ring* embraces not one but two or more quite unrelated allegories. It is to this multi-layering of ideas that we can ascribe much of the work's richness and complexity and also opportunities for stage directors to offer wildly divergent interpretations.

This multi-layering was undoubtedly an incentive for Wagner's complex use of *Leitmotiven* – musical motives or ground-themes associated with characters, objects, events and emotions to convey reminiscences or expectations in the course of the drama. The technique is used simply and directly in the preliminary evening, *Das Rheingold*, not only because the themes are being introduced there for the first time and need to be unambiguous, but also because the allegory is straightforward at that point. However, by the time we reach *Götterdämmerung*, the issues and references have become so complex that only the most sophisticated handling of the musical material can do it justice. As a result, in this the final part of the *Ring*, western polyphonic music reached a level of complexity never achieved before and rarely since. In the process, Wagner's intention of according text and music equal dramatic weight was abandoned as the music, and especially the orchestral music, became the primary vehicle for the drama.

In Shaw's opinion, the political allegory recognizable in *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and the first two acts of *Siegfried*, could not be applied to the final parts of the cycle. He was convinced, rightly I think, that the widespread political

unrest in Europe in the 1830s and '40s, and especially the failed Dresden uprising of May 1849 in which Wagner had been involved, had been catalysts for the composition of the *Ring*. With his socialist hat on he also identified Siegfried as an anarchistic hero and destroyer of the power of the *Ancien Régime*, including the power of religion. He equated Siegfried with the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, a close associate of Wagner in Dresden in the 1840s, and in this he was echoing Friedrich Nietzsche who, in his 1888 essay *The Case of Wagner*, wrote: "Wagner had believed in the Revolution all his life ... So he searched through all the mythic runes and believed that in Siegfried he had found his perfect revolutionary."

Shaw's problem with *Götterdämmerung* arose partly because he detected in its text and music an 'operatic' quality that seemed to him regressive. More importantly, the death of Siegfried/Bakunin in the final drama, and the pre-eminent, redeeming role given to Brünnhilde were hardly compatible with his notion of the heroic destroyer of the old order and herald of the new. Shaw tried to explain why Wagner had seemingly abandoned Siegfried, but his explanations do not ring true.

No one could doubt Wagner's revolutionary credentials, demonstrated on several occasions before he began work on the *Ring*. In 1830 for instance, he had sympathised with the Polish uprising against Imperial Russia and was later inspired to write the overture *Polonia*, modelled on Beethoven's *Egmont*. He began but did not finish two works with themes relating to the French Revolution and its aftermath. He had escaped arrest in 1849 by fleeing to Switzerland, but his involvement in the Dresden revolution had on-going repercussions which continued after 1864 at the Bavarian court of Ludwig II. The young King was besotted with Wagner but his Prime Minister Ludwig von der Pfordten had been a minister in the Saxon government in 1849 and regarded the composer with the greatest suspicion. Pfordten's fears had some justification. In 1851 Wagner had told his friend Kietz: "I am now giving much thought to America. ... My entire politics consists of nothing but the bloodiest hatred for our whole civilisation, contempt for all things deriving from it, and a longing for nature ... It all stems from our servile attitude ... In all Europe I prefer dogs



Bernard Shaw at the Bayreuth Festival

to those doglike men [of the failed revolution] ... Only the most terrific and destructive Revolution could make our civilised beasts 'human' again."

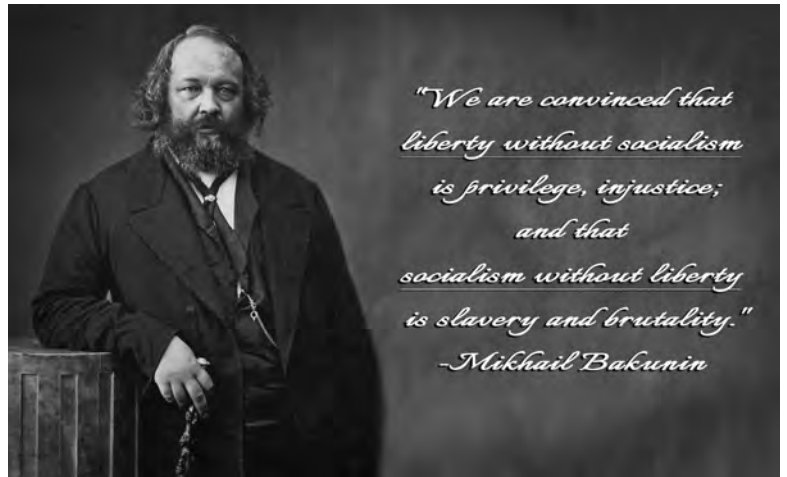
What Pfordten and others did not know was that after the mid-1850s, the composer's philosophical outlook had undergone a profound change. The effects of this can be seen in his handling of the *Ring* after 1854 and, particularly, in his approach to the character of Wotan. One practical consequence was the need to recast the ending of the entire work to bring its diverse and sometimes conflicting themes together in a convincing way.

Wagner's revolutionary inclinations were not confined to the political sphere. The ripples from his most radical work, *Tristan und Isolde* would be felt in symphonic music as well as opera, and indeed other art forms, half a century after its completion in 1859. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, completed in 1874 after decades of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, broke new ground in almost every sphere of operatic practice, and the composer personally supervised the building of an equally revolutionary theatre in which to stage it.

At first glance, the *Ring* appears to be a mythical story about a golden ring that is made, lost, cursed and coveted by Alberich the Nibelung. However, the work is much more than a mythical tale. It combines allegories of politics and power, of love and vengeance, of humanity's struggle for a better world, and of the psychological forces that shape our goals and determine our actions. It seems incredible that anyone would attempt to put all of this on stage, let alone set it to music.

It is difficult to separate the origins of the *Ring* from events in post-Napoleonic Europe when rival forces were attempting, on the one hand, to restore reactionary systems of government (think of them as the gods) and, on the other, to establish new systems of capital ushered in by the industrial revolution (think of them as Alberich and his ilk). The result was a chain of political uprisings and the publication of radical ideas by 'Utopian Socialists' like Proudhon, 'Scientific Socialists' like Marx and Engels, and 'Collective Anarchists' like Bakunin. In modern jargon, we would call the young Wagner a left-wing radical, but one of a rather impractical kind. Bakunin summed it up well when he said: "I immediately recognized Wagner as an impractical dreamer, and although I talked with him about politics...I never committed myself to any joint action with him."

As a young radical, Wagner argued that the basic goodness of human beings had been subverted by the property-owning classes and the selfish interests of the state. In this he was echoing the ideas of the French philosopher and socialist Proudhon who famously asserted that property is theft. And "what a thief steals you steal from the thief", advises Loge in scene two of *Das Rheingold*. But whereas Marx and Engels saw the future of human society in terms of the emancipation of the proletariat, Wagner saw it in terms of the redeeming power of love. This was a view of the world that owed much to the writings of the contemporary German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom Wagner dedicated his important essay of 1849 *The Artwork of the Future*.



People who knew the young Wagner in his Dresden years were impressed by his lively intellect and high-mindedness. In March 1849, the actor Edward Devrient made the following entry in his diary: "Met Kapellmeister Wagner on the Terrace; another discussion about his theories for changing the world. He still thinks that only by destroying property is it possible to civilize mankind. ... He thinks of putting an end to all deficiencies, believes in the absolute and original perfection of the human race - a perfection lost only as a result of the state.... Finally he had to agree with me that only moral amelioration can put an end to our misery and that this would produce the right types of state, based on the law of love."

In one sense therefore, the *Ring* can be understood as an extended love story. Love is the thread that binds the whole work together - not love confined to a single pair of individuals but love as the alternative to hatred and revenge,



The philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 – 1872)



Brünnhilde Sleeps by Anselm Kiefer 1980

power and property, greed and envy. The story begins with love's renunciation and ends with its triumph as the one irreplaceable, transforming ingredient in a new world order. The supremacy of love over the law became Wagner's motto in his early sketches for the *Ring*, and he never entirely abandoned it. It provided the rationale for the union of Siegmund and Sieglinde in the first act of *Die Walküre* and the confrontation between Fricka and Wotan in the scene that follows. Wagner once told Franz Liszt: "The state of lovelessness is the state of suffering for the human race...we recognize the glorious necessity of love...and so, in this way we acquire a strength of which natural man had no inkling,

The unprecedented social transformation brought about by the industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century had had a Dickensian dark side (Dickens was just a year older than Wagner): the mind-numbing toiling of men and the servitude of women and children in the workhouses, factories and mines. And behind everything stood, as it were, Alberich, who was prepared to renounce love in order to acquire power and wealth. Wagner's despair at the apparent triumph of the forces of greed, materialism and artistic shallowness caused him to write to Liszt in 1854: "Let us treat the world only with contempt, for it deserves no better; but let no hope be placed in it, so that our hearts be not deluded! It is evil, evil, *fundamentally evil*... It belongs to Alberich: no one else!! Away with it!"

George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes a world founded on hatred, fear and the intoxication of power. He wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948, exactly a hundred years after Wagner's first sketch for what became *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In the oppressive world of 'Big Brother' we recognize the world of Alberich, the Nibelung. A century before Orwell, Wagner was warning of the rise of totalitarianism and the pursuit of power at the expense of love. We know this from several sources, and especially from his essay *The Artwork of the Future* in which he expressed the view that the earliest societies arose naturally out of humanity's instinctive need for mutual love and fellowship. But later, he said, authoritarian states arose unnaturally, out of none of humanity's instinctive needs, being imposed by the few on the many. The authoritarian state was, he said, a crime against human nature, and therefore against nature itself. "A crime against nature" - the starting point for *Das Rheingold*.

In September 1854 Wagner was introduced to a book that became vastly important to him: *The World as Will and Representation* by the contemporary German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Up to that time, his philosophical outlook had been what he described as the "cheerful Greek view" of the world, but Schopenhauer's thesis was that the world as we recognize it is merely a representation - a perception assembled by our senses. To put it another way, we perceive the world as a presentation of objects in the theatre of our own mind. Schopenhauer's writings made a huge impression on Wagner and they continued to influence his thinking for the rest of his life. In many respects he had been trying, in his own way, to explain quite similar ideas. One can see this in his writings and his music. Now at last he had

found a coherent, theoretical explanation of what he had recognized intuitively. Schopenhauer called the essential, metaphysical nature of each thing, its 'Will'. In the case of human beings, this 'Will' manifested itself in our perpetual wanting, striving, and yearning - a process leading inevitably to disappointment because the things that we strive for belong to the world of phenomena and are ephemeral. The only possible remedy for our unhappiness is to cease wanting, to stop desiring; in other words, to renounce the world of phenomena. Wagner noted the relevance of these ideas to his Nibelung dramas and particularly to the character of Wotan. Never before had opera explored such issues. This was no longer opera as entertainment; this was opera as revelation!

In his earliest drafts for *Siegfried's Death*, Wagner had intended to make the hero Siegfried the central character of his drama. But as the story evolved it became clear that the central character was really Wotan. All that happens in the *Ring* can, in a sense, be linked to Wotan's needs, his ambitions, his weaknesses and, eventually, his willingness to bring about his own end. Wagner described him as embodying "the sum of the intelligence of the present". Yet, for all his hard-heartedness and suppressed emotion, Wotan undergoes a strange and moving process of self-discovery in the second act of *Die Walküre*. Trapped in a political and moral quagmire, he begins to accept the inevitability of his demise and the end of the gods. Ultimately, it is only by extinguishing the craving for power and wealth and other worldly desires that humanity can be transformed. But to reach that philosophical point, Wagner had to move a long way from the rather straightforward political allegory of 1848, and he did. It was this shift that Shaw found so difficult to reconcile with his notions of what had motivated Wagner to write the *Ring*.

In the third act of *Siegfried*, Wotan, now merely observing events in the guise of the Wanderer, welcomes the end of the gods and bequeaths the future to the young Siegfried who does not know him but is destined to awaken Brünnhilde. She in turn will save the world. We know what Shaw had made of Siegfried, but what should we make of him in this day and age? Modern opinion is inclined to regard heroic figures with cynicism - a reaction perhaps to the disastrous

consequences of political hero-worship in the twentieth century. As a result, many stage directors are inclined to transform such characters into anti-heroes. This is not difficult in the case of Siegfried, given that he is a naïve boy (and later, naïve man) raised in ignorance of other human beings, has no interest in the cursed ring other than as a love token, and is deceived, drugged, betrayed and eventually murdered.

Wagner's knowledge of heroes derived from two sources: the myths of ancient Greece, and the sagas and poetry of Northern Europe. In both traditions, heroes exhibited god-like attributes which set them apart from non-heroic mortals and reinforced the view that they were superhuman. They often had gods as parents or grandparents. But Wagner came to the conclusion that the Northern European myths were in advance of the Greek because in them the heroes (whom he described as fully developed human beings) were increasingly displacing the gods. That is why we witness Wotan giving way to Siegfried in the third act of *Siegfried*, and why the gods play no role at all in *Götterdämmerung*, being merely figments of memory and imagination.

Wagner described Siegfried as "a fearless human being, one who never ceases to love". This is not how heroes are usually seen, and the description is a long way from the manipulated image of Siegfried as a symbol of national and racial superiority! Again, it reflected Wagner's attachment to the ideas of Feuerbach who maintained that the gods were the creations of men, not the other way around. If the gods counted for nothing then so too did the god-like attributes of heroes. In a new humanistic world, the quality that would render heroes 'heroic' was *their humanity*.

Shaw's misguided expectation that the *Ring* can be interpreted from a single perspective left him dissatisfied, as modern stage directors invariably are when they attempt a 'one idea fits all' approach. Shaw regretted that Wagner had not clarified his revolutionary inspiration by demanding contemporary costumes and settings: a tall hat for the Tarnhelm, factories for Nibelheim, villas for Valhalla, and so on. His description of the Tarnhelm, the magic helmet of transformation and invisibility is especially memorable: "This helmet is a very common article in our streets" he wrote, "where it generally takes the form of a tall hat. It makes a man invisible as a shareholder, and changes him into various shapes, such as a pious Christian, a subscriber to hospitals, a benefactor of the poor, a model husband and father, a shrewd, practical independent Englishman, and what not, when he is really a pitiful parasite on the commonwealth, consuming a great deal, and producing nothing, feeling nothing, knowing nothing, believing nothing, and doing nothing except what all the rest do, and that only because he is afraid not to do it, or at least pretend to do it."

When, in 1898, he made his observations about using contemporary costumes and settings, productions of the *Ring* were still firmly under the thumb of Bayreuth-centred arbiters of taste and design styles. The thought then of putting Wotan in a nineteenth century frock coat or Brünnhilde in a Victorian riding habit would have been preposterous, but a century later such updating had become

commonplace. Hagen and Gunther as captains of industry or Wall Street bankers; the giants as factory foremen; Loge as a spiv, are all familiar to modern audiences. It seems though that, as far as staged performances are concerned, we have passed the point where directors invariably think they can make sense of the *Ring*. As Patrick Carnegy has observed: "Many have since come to think that this is simply no longer possible, and even that it has never been possible, so great is the discrepancy between Wagner's aim of creating a unified work of art and the fault lines in the completed work itself." Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach means that, sooner or later, what happens on stage will have no connection at all with what is happening in the music. The Bayreuth Festival may already have reached that point.

With some operas this might not matter too much, but the dilemma for admirers of *The Ring* is that, like the Woodbird in *Siegfried*, the orchestra plays an active role in contributing information. How can an audience marry what is heard with what is seen if the content of each bears no relationship to the other? The answer is that we shall then be experiencing something entirely different which might or might not deserve the appellation 'Wagnerian'. Did Wagner anticipate this, I wonder; when, in a moment of frustration during the first *Ring* rehearsals, he joked that having invented the invisible orchestra for his new festival theatre, he wished he could now invent the invisible stage? Had he lived long enough to hear high fidelity, stereophonic sound recordings of his work's supremely expressive score, he might very well think that he had.



Siegfried follows the Woodbird by Peter Doig, based on Fritz Lang's 1924 film *Die Nibelungen*

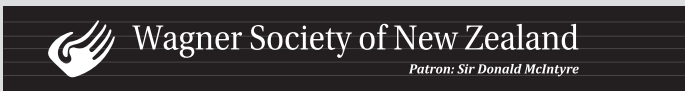


CELEBRATING 40 YEARS 1980 - 2020

In the September, December and March issues we are featuring a variety of articles, photos, letters and anecdotes from members to celebrate the founding and achievements of the Wagner Society in NSW.

MESSAGE FROM THE WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

“The Wagner Society of New Zealand extends to, our cousins, the Wagner Society in New South Wales its warmest greetings and congratulations on its fortieth anniversary. Indeed, when one stops to consider the achievement of keeping a society active over that period of time, one obviously has to credit Richard Wagner for providing a wealth of subject matter that keeps the meetings interesting. However, these meetings do not spontaneously happen on their own but require the work of dedicated committee members. From all of us, on this side of the Tasman, we raise our glasses to toast the Wagner Society in New South Wales and, in particular, to all the members who, over the years, have contributed to your society's wonderful achievement.



Christopher Brodrick

Past President of the Wagner Society of New Zealand

Part One of *The Ring of the Nibelung*
Wagner's
DAS RHEINGOLD
 Regent Theatre February 3, 5, 7 2021
 CONDUCTED BY
 ANTHONY NEGUS & DAVID KRAM

melbourne opera

Melbourne Opera proudly presents a brand new production of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* - Part One of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The first independent production of *The Ring* in Australia since 1913.

Eminent international Wagnerian Maestro **Anthony Negus** returns to conduct, after his great successes of *Tristan and Isolde* (for which he won the 2018 Green Room Conducting Award) and *The Flying Dutchman*, leading a superb all-Australian cast. MO's recent productions of *Norma*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Rossini's Otello*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Rienzi* have

all received critical and popular acclaim. This new production is directed by **Suzanne Chaundy** and designed by **Andrew Bailey**, the acclaimed designer of the *The Flying Dutchman*. **Starring:** Warwick Fyfe, Simon Meadows, James Egglestone, Michael Lapina, Lee Abrahmsen, Roxane Hislop, Steven Gallop and Eddie Muliaumaseali'i.

MINNIE BIGGS' REVIEW OF THE REVIEWS OF WAGNERISM: ART AND POLITICS IN THE SHADOW OF MUSIC BY ALEX ROSS

A very short review of the lengthy reviews of the lengthy book by Alex Ross. In case everyone/anyone has not (yet) read this book, seven hundred and eighty four pages, with more than seventy pages of footnotes, there are more than a dozen reviews which caught my eye. Most of them as prolix as Ross. Word count is often between two and three thousand words. There is just about nothing the reviewers, and Ross, do not touch on relating to Wagner. Encyclopaedic is the word. And heavily detailed.

Ross, and his reviewers, write about Wagner's influence on writers, novelists, poets, philosophers, mythologists, architects, painters, gays - have I left anyone out? Oh yes, there is less on composers and musicians, little about the music itself. Assuming there is already much written about the music? Or already enough? Is anything about Wagner enough? One of the more long-winded reviewers says that he has 'scarcely touched on' the richness of the book. In three thousand words?

As one who enjoys the *recherché* and detail, between 1901 and 1910 Wagner's music was performed more than seventeen thousand times in Germany alone. We can imagine that today no serious artist, not to mention a classical composer, could begin to achieve that notoriety. Even with the help of the World Wide Web.

His music has been included in more than one thousand films. (many of them listed.) Not even John Williams comes close.

James Joyce is not one of my carefully read authors but it is nevertheless interesting to note that there are one hundred and seventy eight allusions to the *Ring* and two hundred and forty two references to *Tristan und Isolde* in *Finnegans Wake*. (A friend who knows Finnegans very well was delighted to hear those numbers!)

Much discussed are the famous people who loved and then came to dislike Wagner, as well as those who remained faithful to the end. People who expressed their reactions and connections in all different ways, from imitation to inspiration and much more. Among those famous people, who are mentioned by every reviewer, are W.E. B. DuBois and Theodor Hertzl -because of their disparity? Just going show no one and nothing is left out.

A serious Wagnerian friend replied, when asked if he was going to read the book, 'Probably not. I love the music, not the insanity.' Is this book the insanity? With its overarching deep diving - yes, both - into all people and reactions and



opinions and influences and styles andmakes me feel a little insane just writing this.

My favourite quote from one of the reviews was from Woody Allen: "I cant listen to too much Wagner, it makes me want to invade Poland."

"Ross's achievement has been not to beat the drum for a particular way of interpreting Wagner, but to show how many drums have been beaten." Simon Williams.

See, many drums.

He also says, "Ross writes, first and foremost, because he loves to tell stories and there can be no grander reason for writing than that. Above all else, this book is a true pleasure to read."

Then along comes Heath Lees who was a reader of the ms and worked with Ross on the book (and is mentioned in it twice) and had an interview with him. He describes the book as 'breathtaking, magnificent'. This hour long excellent conversation is available to hear online. (For your diary - Heath will be talking to us on Zoom on 21 March) Also there is a zoom interview between Stephen Fry and Alex Ross which provides an extra overview of the book, in personal terms, adding yet more to the vast panorama of the work , worth a look and listen.

Your Christmas list?

Done.

Your summer reading list?

Handled.

**Minnie Biggs
November 27, 2020**

THE OPERA FOUNDATION FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

2020 WINNERS CONCERT

Report by Leona Geeves

I attended the concert given by the Opera Foundation for Young Australians on Sunday 15 November at the Art Gallery of NSW.

The Wagner Society has in the past funded the air fare for an award given by this Foundation which provides several awards for young Australian singers, such as the Berlin Music Opera Award (formerly the Bayreuth Scholarship Award). The concert was compèred with great style by iconic baritone, **Peter Coleman-Wright** AO, Artistic Director of Pacific Opera, and his own new company, National Opera, Canberra.

The Foundation in the past has had an annual competition with finalists announced on the night. But this year the presentation differed, and it featured prizewinners from previous years. Strict Covid procedures were in place – no food served, only champagne, which had to be consumed sitting down, and socially distanced seating, as well as the regulation hand sanitiser.

The three singers were soprano, **Eleanor Lyons**, formerly of Sydney and now based in Europe with her husband and small daughter, Winner of the 2018 Vienna State Opera Award, Sydney soprano (formerly mezzo), **Bronwyn Douglass**, winner of the 2017 Lady Fairfax New York Scholarship, and Sydney bass, **David Parkin**, winner of the 2019 Lady Fairfax New York Scholarship and 2013 Vienna State Opera Award, who first came to notice when he won Operatunity Oz. Also scheduled to sing, but unable to because of the closing of Queensland borders, mezzo, **Xenia Puskarz Thomas**, Winner of the 2018 Lady Fairfax New York Scholarship.

Bronwyn and David are two budding Wagnerian singers, with wonderful voices. Bronwyn, just moving into the dramatic soprano repertoire, was to have sung in Melbourne Opera's *Das Rheingold*, and David is covering Hagen, Fafner and Fasolt in Opera Australia's *Ring Cycle* in Brisbane.

Program

One

- **Ah! Guarda sorella, *Così fan tutte* Mozart.**
Eleanor Lyons & Bronwyn Douglass
- **In diesen heil'gen Hallen, *The Magic Flute* Mozart.**
David Parkin
- **Soave sia il vento, *Così fan tutte* Mozart.**
Eleanor Lyons, Bronwyn Douglass & David Parkin

In the break a message of thanks was given by Elia Bosshard, design and visual artist, and winner of the *Berlin Music Opera Award*, whose time in Berlin was cut short by Covid.

Two

- **Dich, teure Halle, *Tannhäuser* Wagner.**
Bronwyn Douglass
- **Marfa's Aria, *The Tsar's Bride* Rimsky-Korsakov.**
Eleanor Lyons



Leona Geeves and David Parkin

- **Hier sitz ich zur Wacht, *Götterdämmerung* Wagner.**
David Parkin
- **Mira, o Norma Norma Bellini.**
Eleanor Lyons & Bronwyn Douglass
- **I won't send Roses, *Mack & Mabel* Herman.**
David Parkin

Associate Artist - Alan Hicks

The talented team closed the evening by singing a chorus, *Some Other Time*, from Leonard Bernstein's *On the Town*, with Peter filling in the mezzo line, which would have been sung by Xenia Puskarz Thomas. Leona Geeves and David Parkin

It was a marvelous evening after such a vocal drought and we look forward to hearing these young singers in some Wagner events soon.

The Opera Foundation for *young Australians* is a non-profit organisation, founded by Lady Fairfax AC OBE and is celebrating some 60 years of providing international opportunities for young Australians in the field of opera. The Foundation bridges the professional gap for young singers and artists in order to commence an international career.

SOMERSET MAUGHAM AND WAGNER

by Minnie Biggs

Among the great composers, Wagner is by far the most often encountered name among Somerset Maugham's writings. Indeed, a first person narrator in a Maugham's short story (see below) once said that he visited a Wagner festival in Germany, which was most probably true and it must have been the Bayreuth festival. In *Strictly personal* (1942), a vastly underrated book, Maugham dedicates a whole page or so to his dachshunds in Villa Mauresque. All of them were named after heroes and heroines from Wagner's operas and it is entirely characteristic of Maugham to call the saintly Elsa from *Lohengrin* «exasperating».



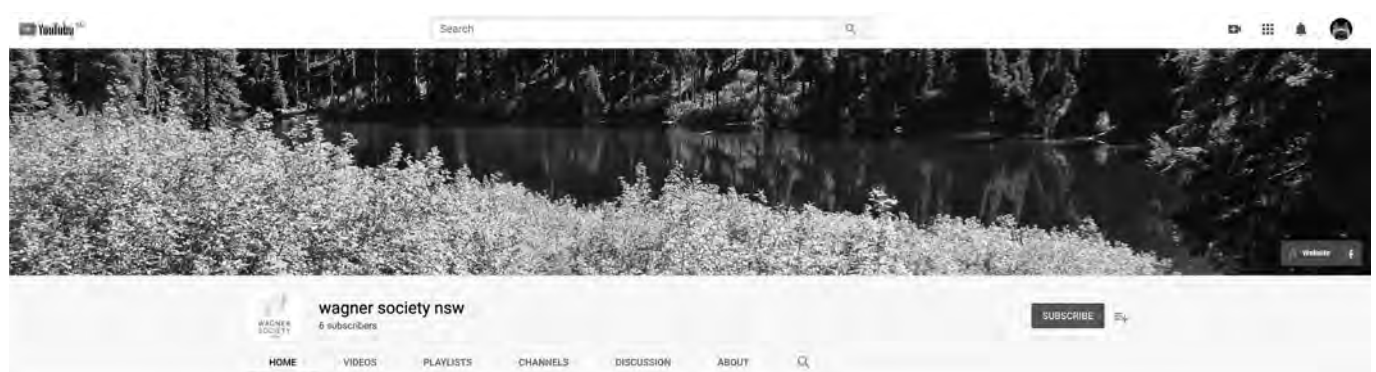
Then there is the short story *The Voice of the Turtle* from the collection *The Mixture as Before* (1940). Not one of Maugham's best short stories, certainly, but it has one of the most haunting endings I have ever read. It is also the most explicit Wagnerian reference in all of Maugham, with a two line quotation from the original German text:

The prima donna was standing in the window, with her back to the lighted room, and she looked out at the darkly shining sea. The cedar made a lovely pattern against the sky. The night was soft and balmy. Miss Glaser played a couple of bars. A cold shiver ran down my spine. La Falterona gave a little start as she recognized the music, and I felt her gather herself together.

Mild und leise wie er lächelt
Wie das Auge hold er öffnet.

It was Isolde's death song. ... It did not matter now that instead of an orchestral accompaniment she had only the thin tinkle of a piano. The notes of the heavenly melody fell upon the still air and travelled over the water. In that too-romantic scene, in that lovely night, the effect was shattering. La Falterona's voice, even now, was exquisite in its quality, mellow and crystalline; and she sang with wonderful emotion, so tenderly, with such tragic, beautiful anguish that my heart melted within me. I had a most awkward lump in my throat when she finished, and looking at her I saw that tears were streaming down her face. I did not want to speak. She stood quite still, looking out at the ageless sea.

I often read this short story only because of these final lines. Afterwards I usually listen to *Isoldes Liebestod* - one of the most shattering pieces of music ever composed - and find it even more incredibly affecting than usual.



WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW YOUTUBE CHANNEL

This is a plea for more people to visit our YouTube channel: the many fascinating early recordings and illustrations have been a labour of love for Lis Bergmann and deserve wide viewing.

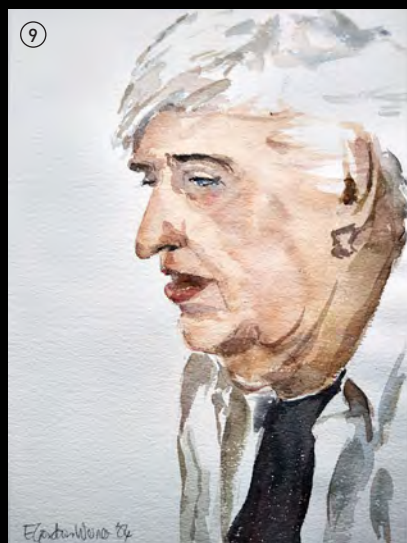
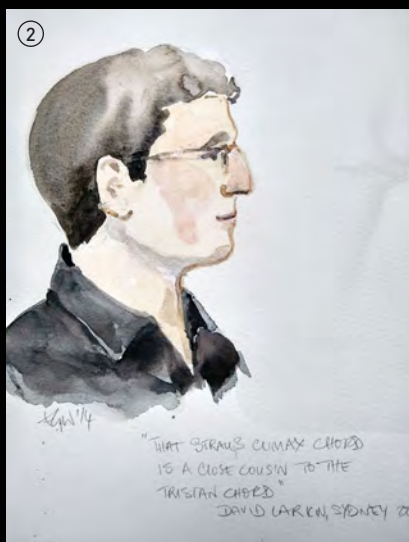
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CELEBRATING 40 YEARS 1980 - 2020

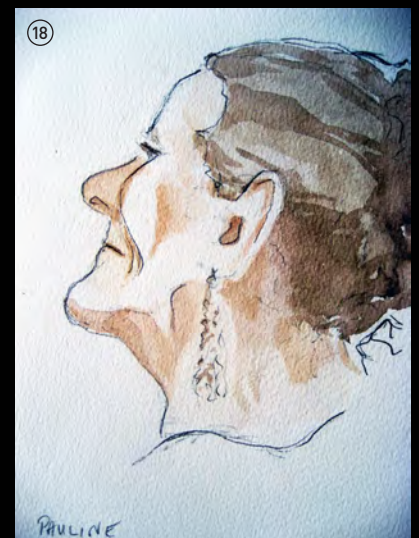
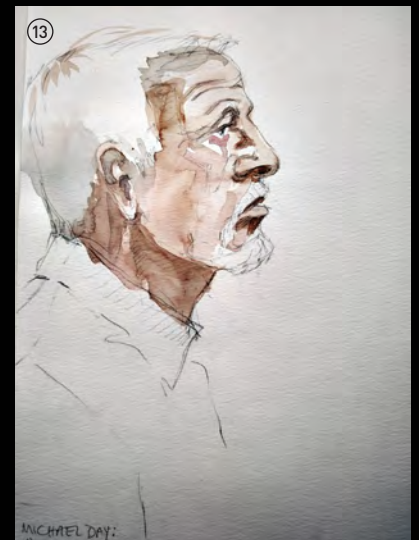
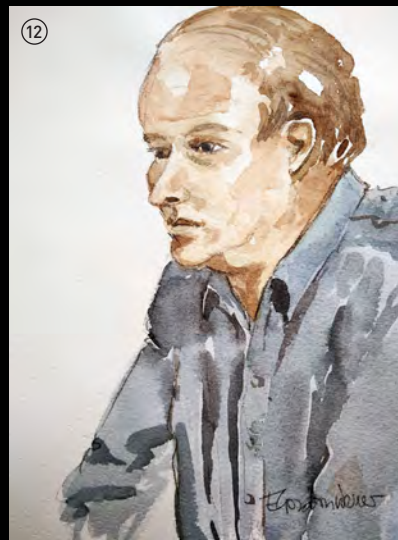
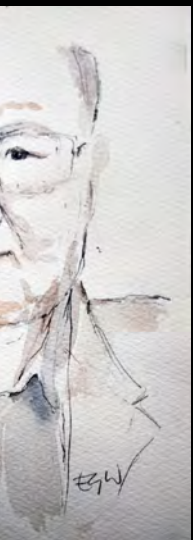
SKETCHES BY ELIZABETH GORDON-WERNER

For several years Elizabeth was our 'resident artist' – attending our meetings and concerts. More can be seen on her website www.artsmiten.com



- 1. Bradley Gilchrist 2. David Larkin
- 3. Kim Walker 4. Dr David Schwarz
- 5. Miriam Gordon-Stewart 6. Antony Ernst
- 7. Nigel Butterley 8. Jane Matthews AO
- 9. Margaret Whitlam AO 10. Peter Basset
- 11. June Donsworth 12. Michael Ewans
- 13. Michael Day 14. Terence Watson
- 15. Program Cover 16. Roger Cruikshank
- 17. Program Cover 18. Pauline Holgerson

... and sketching our speakers, performers and attendees. Here is a selection.



REPORTS ON RECENT MEETINGS

27 SEPTEMBER - TABATHA MCFADYEN

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 Calesso. 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 "MuseumWorld", 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.



Deutsche Oper *Das Rheingold* in the carpark



Götterdämmerung in Würzburg

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/>

(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)

22 NOVEMBER - WARWICK FYFE

On Sunday 22 November Warwick Fyfe, "Australia's Favourite Alberich", Wagner Society member and Sponsorship recipient, enthralled 49 members and guests on Zoom with reflections on performing his first Wotan in Singapore plus observations on different directors' approaches to staging Wagner's music dramas. Warwick was in turn hilarious, with tales of various backstage incidents and mishaps, and then serious, with profound insights into the needs of performers and how to best convey the messages of Wagner's stories.

Warwick was full of praise for the ambition and enthusiasm of the young but generally inexperienced team that presented the semi-staged *Die Walküre* in Singapore in January 2020. Though by no means perfect - there were costume and acoustic problems - the team 'conjured something out of nothing', partly due to the very collaborative and supportive approach of the conductor Tzelair Chan.

Warwick has sung in and seen many Wagner productions in Australia and overseas and expressed criticism of the approach of many directors new to the works – often too academic or intellectual without understanding of the need for the essential sense of theatrical wonder. Directors who choose to focus on just one aspect of the work but failed to give the layered richness of meaning and depth that these cultural icons deserve. Alternately some directors had enthusiasm and ambition but lacked real directorial talent and insight.

Warwick gave some teasing insights into his future performances – Wotan in *Das Rheingold* in Melbourne in February and Alberich in the Brisbane *Ring* in November. He observed that the Melbourne Opera team is a very close-knit and experienced



community determined to honour the work and he expects great things from the production, despite limited resources. The generously funded OA Brisbane *Ring* will have a huge WOW! Factor with a timeless universal myth approach.

Warwick finished his talk by sharing his thoughts on the need for theatre artists to have a broad education, with an interest in the other arts and literature. He revealed that he is writing a novel. If he writes the way he speaks (without too much filtering) it will be fabulous.

Robert Mitchell expressed appreciation of Warwick's insights and suggested that 'A singer's lot is not a happy one' (Paraphrasing G&S Policemen)

We were very pleased to welcome overseas Zoomers including Verband VP Andrea Buchanan from UK and Past President and Lifetime Member Roger Cruickshank from NZ.

The talk will be available through a link on our website.

18 OCTOBER - DAVID LARKIN

On Sunday 18 October 39 members and friends joined Dr David Larkin on Zoom to hear his presentation:

Beyond the opera house: CS Lewis & Wagner Reception in Edwardian Britain.

This was a fascinating talk and an illustration of how an academic can, through curiosity, rigorous research and passion, discover new sources and facts to bring to life a somewhat obscure topic.

Starting with a little-known unpublished essay about Wagner written by a teenage C S Lewis around 1910, David was interested in finding out how such a young person could have become interested in Wagner, especially since Lewis didn't attend an actual performance until 1918.



"...the Ride^[1] came like a thunderbolt. From that moment Wagnerian records ... became the chief drain on my pocket money and the presents I invariably asked for... 'Music' was one thing, 'Wagnerian music' quite another, and there was no common measure between them; it was not a new pleasure but a new kind of pleasure, if indeed 'pleasure' is the right word, rather than trouble, ecstasy, astonishment, 'a conflict of sensations without name.' "

David described Lewis' probable sources of knowledge about Wagner, apart from performance, in the early 20th century. Plenty of material was available: printed scores, libretti and articles; paintings and illustrations; and gramophone recordings. Wagner performances were frequent in London at the start of the century and his work was a source of inspiration to novelists, poets and painters. We know that in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* Lewis says he was inspired by an Arthur Rackham illustration of Siegfried. David suggested that Lewis saw Wagner's world through Rackham's eyes. Other notable Wagner inspired artists included Willy Pogany and Aubrey Beardsley

Lewis would have read G B Shaw's 'The Perfect Wagnerite' published in 1898, the year of Lewis' birth, and would no doubt have been aware of the interest in Wagner expressed by such luminaries as Ford Maddox Ford, E M Forster (who attended a *Tristan* when aged 11), Aleister Crowley and Virginia Woolf.



Arthur Rackham Siegfried 1911



David's primary interest was musical and his exhaustive research revealed that in Britain and Europe in the period 1900 -1920 over 3,000 different recordings of excerpts from Wagner were released. David explained that most of these were 'translations' – freely using a variety of languages, orchestration, instruments and size of orchestra. (Much more freedom than is currently 'acceptable'). David played several excerpts from these early recordings, including Nellie Melba singing Elsa's *Dream* in 1912, with surprisingly beautiful and clear vocals but generally 'tinny' orchestra and piano accompaniments.

At the conclusion of his paper David answered chat questions from the participants and all agreed that it had been an extremely interesting and entertaining afternoon. President Esteban Insausti expressed our appreciation and the hope that we can hear him in person once gathering restrictions are lifted. David's talk is available through our website: <https://youtu.be/ysbv5yU6AWA>.

For more about David visit <https://www.sydney.edu.au/.../academ.../david-larkin.html>



Book cover illustration by Aubrey Beardsley



Willy Pogany *Tannhäuser*

WHEN A DOZEN WAGNERS IN A QUARTER (FEBRUARY – MAY 2019) IS BARELY ENOUGH (RUMINATIONS ON ALMOST A FULL CYCLE OF THE OEUVRE)

by Esteban Insausti and Agnes Brejzek

I am writing this almost a year to the day when I completed the 12th production of a Wagner music drama in a calendar year – a quarter of a year to be precise. It was Frankfurt and the production was the wonderful *Die Walküre* by director Vera Nemirova. And very lucky to have seen it as the news is that we may never see that “*Ring*” production again - a shame.

What prompted a concentrated and self-indulgent attempt at (almost) the complete oeuvre of Richard Wagner in a short space of time? After the Bayreuth *Ring* in 2016 (Castorf – loved it), three productions (*Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Der fliegende Holländer*) around the Wieland Wagner symposium held at the Deutsche Oper Berlin to mark the centenary of his birth in 2017 and a sole *Meistersinger* in Melbourne in 2018, Agnes and me had hankering for more. Specifically a *Ring*. So we started “shopping” for a *Ring* in the European Spring of 2019.

We flirted with the Dusseldorf/Duisburg production (dates too extended), Chemnitz (clashing with some offerings in nearby Berlin) but quickly settled on Leipzig because of the lure of the Gewandhaus orchestra in the pit and an opportunity to spend time in the city of Bach and Wagner. After locking that into our diaries we (or rather obsessive me) started looking to see what else was on offer, particularly Wagner or Wagner related. To our surprise there was quite a lot. Add to that the two Melbourne productions of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Parsifal* in February and lo and behold an idea to attempt all the music dramas quickly became a challenge. With the assistance of Dr Google it didn't take long to piece together what became a challenging schedule. The tickets were purchased, the timetable locked in, all that was left to organise was accommodation and transportation.

I set a special challenge for myself as Agnes rested in her hometown of Stuttgart between *Ring* weekends. This was to travel from Leipzig (after *Die Walküre*) to Stuttgart (rest) then onto Amsterdam (*Tannhäuser*), Munich (MPO under Gergiev with Anja Harteros) back to Stuttgart (*Nixon in China*) and onto Leipzig again (*Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* to round out the *Ring*). 4 events in 4 days across 4 cities. I think it was a way to test whether I still had the stamina to sustain the crazy travel and event endurance from my 20s. I did.....at some cost.

So the schedule for the self-organised Wagnerfest, including some parallel events related to Wagner and the *Ring*, ended up looking like this:

- February 7 Melbourne – *Der fliegende Holländer* (1)
- February 22 Melbourne – *Parsifal* (2)
- April 6 Leipzig – *Das Rheingold* (3)
- April 7 Leipzig - *Die Walküre* (4)
- April 10 Amsterdam – *Tannhäuser* (5)
- April 11 Munich – Münchner Philharmoniker under Valery Gergiev (Bruckner 5) with Anja Harteros (Mahler Rückert Lieder)
- April 12 Stuttgart – *Nixon in China*
- April 13 Leipzig – *Siegfried* (6)
- April 14 Leipzig – *Götterdämmerung* (7)
- April 18 Berlin (Deutsche Oper) – *Rienzi* (8)



Die Walküre Frankfurt, 1 May 2019

- April 19 “Good Friday” Berlin (Deutsche Oper) – *Parsifal* (9)
- April 20 Berlin (Volksbühne) – *Die Edda*
- April 21 Berlin (Staatsoper) – *Meistersinger* (10)
- April 22 Berlin (Berliner Ensemble) – *Dreigroschenoper*
- April 24 Munich – *Turandot* (birthday present)
- April 25 Munich – *Der fliegende Holländer* (11)
- May 1 Frankfurt - *Die Walküre* (12)

And that is just the part that covers sitting in a theatre. The parallel joys that take the experience in the theatre into the realm of the memorable are the meetings with friends or colleagues or making new friends, the meals in wonderful establishments, exploring places for the first time or rediscovering/reassessing ones that are familiar. This is the privilege of chasing Wagner (amongst other things) around the world.

I won't go into a review of each production but rather give an overall impression of experiencing all of the Wagnerian output with the exception of *Lohengrin* (a favourite) and *Tristan und Isolde* (not so keen on it) in a short space of time. The first thing that becomes obvious is the consistent quality of the work, from the music to the dramaturgy. I will include *Rienzi* in this as well,



Interval talk at Die Edda, Volksbühne Berlin 20 April 2019

although an early work it has the imprint of the mature Wagner in the making all over it. Each music drama is set in its own sound world which influences the way a director and designer respond to the work. For me the biggest quality, one that Wagner shares with that other genius of the stage, Shakespeare, is the depth and breadth of the characters and the scenario. He allows for a multitude of interpretations, there is room for different points of view, conjectures and suppositions, as well as historical and political polemics. Which is why we can withstand good, bad and indifferent Ring productions but always come away with some new insight or discovery.

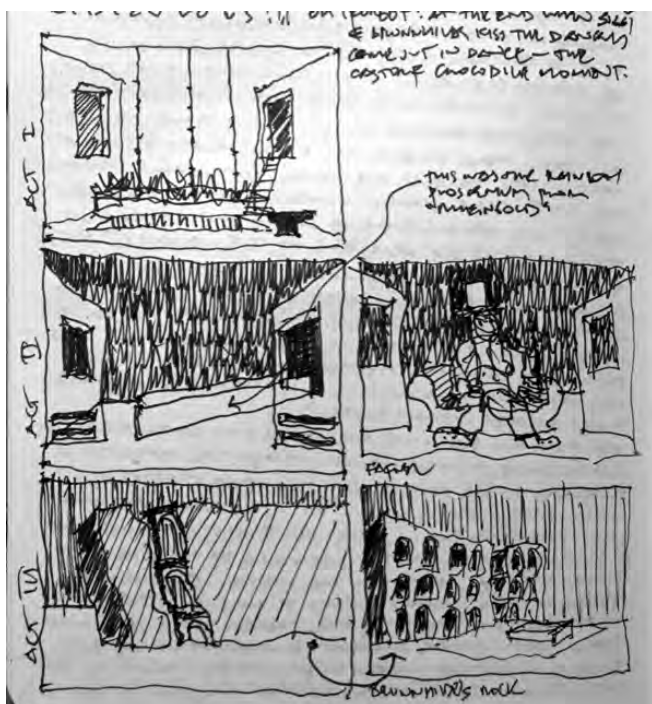
It was interesting to have expectations turned on their heads as well. Productions that on paper seem to be rolled gold turned out to be disappointing whilst others surprised with their ingenuity and sheer quality. On the disappointing side was the Deutsche Oper's *Parsifal*. The production set out to antagonise from the Prelude with a vivid reproduction of the crucifixion complete with a laughing Kundry in what looked like a Hollywood sound stage. Anachronisms together with odd scenic choices made for an unsatisfactory time. However, the singing and in particular the playing from the pit under Donald Runnicles was just divine. And we got to experience a *Parsifal* on Good Friday – that's special. For my taste Victorian Opera's *Parsifal* in February was far more enjoyable and the playing from the Australian Youth Orchestra under Richard Mills more than matched the Berliners. Humility, attention to ritual and modest means with superb musicianship went much further than a big budget mainstage production from a major company. Similarly Melbourne Opera's *Der fliegende Holländer* was a surprise because of the fiery committed playing engendered by Anthony Negus whilst the Bayerische Staatsoper production, full of contradictions, was only saved for me by the star power of Bryn Terfel and Anja Kampe.

I am not advocating that we stop travelling overseas to see quality productions of Wagner. Rather we shouldn't be surprised that our local artists can conjure with more modest means magical experiences that match and sometimes surpass what

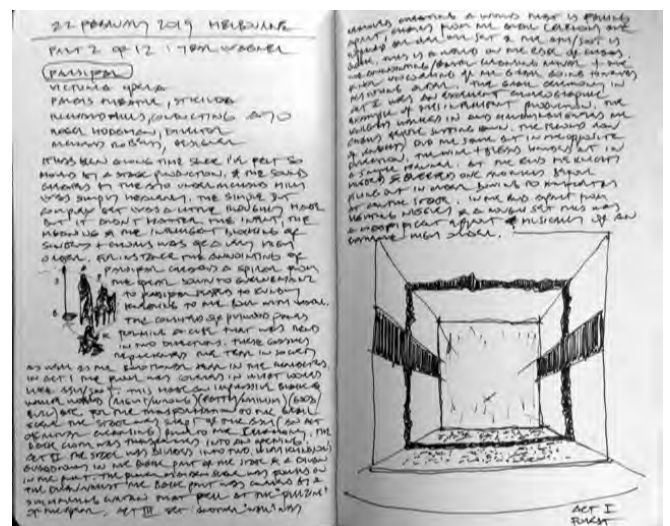
you can see on foreign stages. However, where else but in Leipzig can you lunch in the space where Goethe's *Mephistoteles* first takes Faust on their travels (Auerbachs Keller*) and follow up with *Götterdämmerung* later that afternoon? Or dine at Berlin's Augustiner am Gendarmenmarkt* after a monumental *Meistersinger* at the Staatsoper and have Siegfried Jerusalem, who just sang Zorn, being feted by a group of young fans a couple of tables away? Or have the privilege to see something like *Die Edda* at the Volksbühne, three and a half hours of magical superb theatre from the Schauspiel Hannover directed and conceived by a rising star Thorleifur Örn Arnarsson (from Iceland), bringing an insight to the *Ring* we had just concluded a few days before. Pre theatre dinner with friends for the *Die Edda* was at Cafe Sauers* opposite the theatre and afterwards crossed the street to the Volkscafe* for a debrief over drinks. Where else but in Berlin can you see, hear and wallow in the artistry of living legends of the stage – the meisters in the *Meistersingers* included the 95 year old Franz Mazura (in his final appearance on stage). Whilst Robert Wilson's *Dreigroschenoper* was a star studded affair (we concluded the luxury of that performance with a fine dinner at Ganymed Brasserie* around the corner from the Berliner Ensemble).

It was a privilege and very rewarding to experience all that. To meet members of the Wagner Society in Leipzig and Andy Rombakis of the Northern California Chapter at the Amsterdam *Tannhäuser*. 12 productions in three months. Done. 2020 was going to be a more modest and spread out 11 productions including the Chicago and Brisbane *Rings* and the beginnings of a new cycle in Melbourne under Anthony Negus. Alas Covid-19 smashed that plan. The recent spike of Covid cases in Brisbane will put Queensland Opera's *Tristan und Isolde* on ice. Hopefully the current pandemic crisis will abate and life will normalise, as best it can, so that once again we can go to the theatre and companies plan, rehearse and present work. I am already plotting a Wagner feast for 2021 and even 2022. See you at the theatre.

*The subject and enjoyment of food and drink after attending the theatre is something I would like to encourage our members to write in to share their experiences. We have mentioned some iconic establishments in this article and in future Quarterlies we may expand on this as a regular culinary/gastronomic aside to all things Wagner/theatrical.



Notes: Siegfried Leipzig 13 April



Typical page of notes Parsifal Melbourne 22 February

CAMERON MENZIES – REFLECTIONS

CONTINUED FROM SEPTEMBER QUARTERLY

As a young director starting out and getting work with companies you usually have to find a mix of assistant directing on larger main stage productions and directing youth or education productions along with directing independent company main stage works. I enjoy working on youth and education programs and productions. I have been so fortunate to have maintained this area of my work. I have now directed many youth operas and a lot of these have been newly commissioned works such as *The Grumpiest Boy in the World* (2015) by Finegan Kruckemeyer and Joe Twist which I was nominated for a Helpmann Award for Best Direction of an Opera, *The Magic Pudding* (2013 & 2018) based on the Norman Lindsay book by Anna Goldsworthy and Calvin Bowman which won the Green Room Award for Best Ensemble and most recently *The Selfish Giant* (2019) by Emma Muir-Smith and Simon Bruckard based on the Oscar Wilde short story which won the 2019 Green Room Award for Best New Opera - all productions I created for Victorian Opera.

As part of my role as the Associate Artist for Diva Opera in London we also run an extremely rewarding program in conjunction with the Lord Laidlaw Trust that is facilitated in Newcastle Upon Tyne UK. It is so wonderful to run opera workshops with children across three schools in that area. We have our professional opera singers with us and over the course of a few days we work with the students to incorporate them into a show which we then perform for their school and their parents. Interestingly enough I often find that the students have taught me more sometimes than I think I have taught them. But the enjoyment I get from directing youth and education work is wonderful and working with children, contrary to the popular saying, can be magical and I find informs and improves my way of working immensely and is also a beautiful reminder to never lose our child-like outlook on seeing the world.

I have been working in London with Diva Opera now since 2014. I was lucky enough to meet the General Director of this highly accomplished company, Anne Marabini Young, while I was on my Berlin New Music Award in 2011. Since then I have had the opportunity to direct and become their Associate Artist. The company tours predominantly around the UK and France but has also toured to South Africa, The Chanel Islands, Switzerland, Italy and to Japan with the La Folle Journee Festival. The company has played in venues such as Royal Albert Hall and La Fenice Opera House but it also performs in some of the most beautiful houses in



Cameron Menzies. Directing on the film set creating footage for the 2016 production of Pecan Summer]

London and France. My productions have been seen in such venues as Holkham Hall, the residence of Lord and Lady Leicester, Syon Park the London residence of the Duke of Northumberland, through to the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in France. I have been so lucky to direct a lot of wonderful repertoire with this company such as *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La Boheme*, *Die Fledermaus* and *Don Giovanni*. Diva established itself over nearly 25 years of operating as Britain's foremost chamber opera company and working with Anne and Music Director Bryan Evans MBE has included some of the most memorable times in my career.

"A GREAT SUCCESS RIGHT UP TO THE FINAL CURTAIN... For La Bohème director Cameron Menzies successfully evolves with an effortless naturalism...the delivery seduced with its freshness, its passion, and its believability."

Opera Magazine, France Aug 2017

"Diva Opera's Lucia di Lammermoor and Le nozze di Figaro In both operas Menzies sensitive direction concentrates the audience's attentions on every detail and nuance in a way rarely achieved in much larger houses..."

Michael Proudfoot – Opera Magazine, Dec 2015

"Triumph of Don Giovanni...it had a lot of freshness, life and authenticity. It was truly a communion with the lyrical art... it was precise and chiseled in a setting that was serious and well articulated. The realization of the characters was real and the musical world and the theatrical world echoed each other."

Théâtre à l'Italienne, Cherbourg France, 2015

"The staging of Cameron Menzies uses few resources in his interpretation, yet he finds the climax in the final confrontation between the Don and the Commendatore. It is a marvel of emotion and grandeur."

Classic Toulouse: Festival de la Vézère - Don Giovanni, August 2014

Branching out and away from Opera every now and then or "running away to the circus" as I have heard it described, has taken me to some fascinating realms into the worlds of cabaret. A real highlight was directing the Weill/Brecht *Die Sieben Todsünden* performed by the Post Post Modern Diva, Meow Meow. Creating a production of this iconic work with what I consider to be one of the world greatest exponents of the Weill/Brecht canon as both Anna 1 and Anna 2 was quite a thrilling ride. The piece originally created for singer Lotte Lenya (Anna 1) and dancer Tilly Losch (Anna II) each portraying a version of the two sisters both called Anna. As a

production we decided to combine these two Anna's into one and Meow Meow played both roles. To distance Die Familie from the two Anna's I had a huge wooden 1930's wooden photo frame made which encased the male quartet and the mother who is sung by a Bass was all dressed up in a white chiffon flowing gown, with his full beard still on display. Our mother, Jeremy Kleeman, looked spectacular and seemed to really relish his bearded motherly appearance. My association with Meow Meow has very thankfully continued and it has also taken me all over the world from London working with the London Philharmonic Orchestra on South Bank, to the prestigious Shakespeare's Globe in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and to Liverpool and the Sgt Peppers 50th Anniversary Festival.

" a mesmerizing display of inspired Theatricality"

Classic Melbourne

"Die Sieben Todsünden was just Divine"

Man in a Chair

"an Orwellian sleight of hand by director Cameron Menzies that enabled a fascistic scrutiny of Anna's every move"

The Australian

Cabaret is also hopefully taking me back to Berlin in 2021 with all my fingers crossed. Fluid starring Courtney Act which I mentioned earlier on is hopefully going on tour in April next year. We are touring all through the north of the UK, Amsterdam, Paris, the London Palladium and also back to my beloved Berlin. I really find that Berlin is a place where you can go to recharge artistically and fill up again on such wonderful art and performance. We will be appearing at the Admiralpalast, a beautiful variety and operetta venue which housed the Berlin Staatsoper just after WWII as it suffered very little damage in the war.

I have been working as a director now for nearly 15 years and with all the travelling around the world which I have been so very lucky to have done, I have always wanted to be a working director in Australia. Making work for Australian audiences has been a major focus of mine. My work in Australia is very special to me both professionally and personally. Having worked with companies like Opera Australia, City of Stonnington, with my commercial work directing productions like HAIR The musical for the 50th Australian Anniversary production, my community based work with All the Queens Men and The Coming Back Out BALL and in particularly my long association with Victorian Opera all mean the world to me and it certainly keeps me on my toes. However, there is one company in Australia which always leaves a lasting impression and that is my work with Short Black Opera Company – The National Indigenous Opera Company led by Yorta Yorta Soprano, Composer, Librettist and Artistic Director, Deborah Cheetham AO and Company Manager Toni Lalich OAM. Deborah and I over the years have worked on a number of pieces - one being her composition called

Redfern, which is a musical setting of Paul Keating's 1992 speech in Redfern Park in Sydney. This was created as part of the Indigenous Festival at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne. Our biggest collaboration to date is the award winning opera Pecan Summer, composed by Deborah it tells of the historic 1939 walk off from Cummeragunja in which Deborah's grandparents were involved, it also moves through different time periods from dreamtime to 2008 in Federation Square in Melbourne to hear Kevin Rudd's apology. Coming on board first as an associate director and then after much learning, research and talking and being taken by Deborah on country to stand in the real locations where the opera was set. For example standing on the banks of the Dhungala (The Murray River) and seeing the original buildings and to walk through Cummeragunja and feel the earth there and hear the speed of the river water passing me was extraordinary. In 2016 I had the great honour to be asked by Deborah to take the lead of director on what was to be the premiere of *Pecan Summer* in Sydney at the Sydney Opera House. It was also to be my directorial debut at the House as well. It was an extremely emotional night and an absolute joy to be a part of this truly Indigenous led artistic experience. The production went on to be broadcast on SBS and win 9 Broadway Awards including one for Best Direction of an Opera.

While I am yet to direct a Wagner Opera, my time at the Deutsche Oper and in Berlin was certainly a catalyst for where my career has taken me since 2008. I have a real passion for his works and spending the time in Berlin purely to learn about Wagner and his operas has certainly had an ongoing impact on my work. My love of the German language and of German composition will continue and even though it sometimes looks like it all should be at odds with itself as my love of Wagner to Strauss to Weill maybe doesn't make a lot of sense to some. I can't help but surrender to it all. I do know that a Wagner work will come my way when I am ready for it and when the time for me to direct it is right. When it happens I can't wait to show you all what I can do with it.

I would like to thank the Wagner Society in NSW for allowing me to reflect on my time and remember some really defining moments in my professional life. I hope that you enjoyed a little insight into my professional career and what is possible when artists are afforded time to gather experience and knowledge through the support of philanthropic means. If this time in lockdown and isolation has shown me anything, it is that it has served to strengthen my resolve and my reasons I have pursued this crazy industry and while I will continue to pursue it beyond lockdown. I very much look forward to what will be possible and what comes my way in 2021. I believe it will be a vastly different landscape and maybe how we navigate the new order will be different. But I hope that I will be able to still work across the wide varieties of genre and that I continue to get the opportunity to create exciting performances for live audiences to attend very soon. I hope to see you in a foyer somewhere, sometime soon and if our paths cross please say hello as I feel like we will need as much connection as possible once we are able to move beyond this lockdown period.

NEWS FROM SINGERS SUPPORTED BY THE SOCIETY

UPDATE FROM THE STATES CHRISTOPHER CURCURUTO BASS-BARITONE

This is just a quick update to fill you in on some COVID-safe performance activities that I have had the opportunity to participate in and to give you some news.

Firstly with **Fort Worth Opera**: Back in September I participated in a green screen production of a brand new children's opera, **Stone Soup**. Singing the role of Max, and also stage managing, the production was rehearsed over Zoom and performed individually in front of a green screen to a collaborative backing track that was piped into discreet headphones. Video and audio engineers have been working their magic, and I've been told that the finished product will soon be complete and rolled out to schools in the area. Should a public viewing be planned, I'll be sure to forward you all the link! This is proving one of the pros of virtual performances: borders and timezones are no longer any impediment!

Secondly, with **UNT Opera**: The school decided to proceed with an in-person production of **Lucia di Lammermoor**, implementing various safety protocols in an effort to protect the health and wellbeing of all involved. The event was a great success. Although fully masked, we were able to film four socially-distanced performances that were given at the school to audiences limited to 15 people. I sang the role of Raimondo in this production.



And finally, with **The Dallas Opera** (TDO): I am very excited to announce that I have been cast as an Education Artist with TDO for 2021. In a project much like Fort Worth Opera's Stone Soup, I will be singing the role of the Giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk* with music by Sir Arthur Sullivan. The opera will be filmed with a green screen in January, before I hit the road for Nashville Opera who, at this stage, are determined to creatively, and safely, proceed with their season.

In other news, as mentioned, I will be heading to Nashville to join **Nashville Opera** on January 31 to start the Emerging Artist program. This includes children's opera performances which are likely to be pre-recorded, a gala performance, and mainstage performances. I don't believe I announced my roles in my last email so I can now share that I will be singing Marullo and covering Sparafucile in Verdi's **Rigoletto**, and singing Alidoro and covering Don Magnifico in Rossini's **La Cenerentola**. These are all great roles for me and I can't wait to get them on stage!

We are now well and truly in the throes of audition season here in the US. Auditions have proceeded in a virtual format and I am excited to have been called back for the second round for a number of high profile companies. I am also about to complete the first semester of my Doctorate which has been very rewarding. I will continue my studies remotely while I am Nashville.

Stay positive, stay safe, stay healthy, and best wishes.

Christopher Curcuruto



Lucia di Lammermoor

GREAT SOUTHERN NIGHTS



Bradley Gilchrist, Sitiveni Talei, Kent McIntosh and Laura Scandizzo

On Wednesday 25 November **Leona Geeves**, our Artists Liaison, organised a concert at the request of long-standing Wagner Society member, **Dr Lourdes St George**, held at her husband, **Spencer White's Gallery W** in Woolloomooloo. The concert was part of **Great Southern Nights**, a Destination NSW initiative to get people back into venues post Covid.

Performers included two of our favourite Wagner Society sponsored singers, Opera Australia's soprano, **Laura Scandizzo**, and baritone **Sitiveni Talei**, along with popular

Sydney tenor, **Kent McIntosh**. One of our Wagner regulars, accompanist **Bradley Gilchrist**, currently Music Director of Pacific Opera, played a concert grand lent by Kawai Australia. This fitted nicely into the socially distanced venue. The evening was rounded out by an exhibition of drawings from Spencer's life drawing students from the National Art School accompanied by some pleasant tipples.

Works performed were by Tchaikovsky, Catalani, Bizet, Verdi, Cilea, Donizetti, Lehar and Listz.

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CAMILLE SAINT-SAENS ATTENDED THE SECOND CYCLE OF THE RING AT BAYREUTH IN 1876 AS A NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENT

By way of preface I would like to give some details of Wagnerians and anti-Wagnerians which will not be out of place.

I myself have studied the works of Richard Wagner for a long time. I have given myself completely to this study and all the performances I have attended have left me with a profound impression that all the theories in the world will never succeed in making me forget. Because of this I have been accused of being a Wagnerian. Indeed, for a while, I believed myself to be one. What a mistake, and how far from the truth. I had only to meet some true Wagnerians to realise that I was not one of them and never could be!

For the Wagnerian, music did not exist before Wagner, or rather it was still in embryo - Wagner raised it to the level of Art. Bach, Beethoven and occasionally Weber, announced that the Messiah would come and thus have their importances as prophets. The rest are of no importance. Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Mendelssohn, none has written a single bearable note. The French school and the Italian school have never existed. If a Wagnerian should hear music other than Wagner's his face shows only disdain. Any of the Master's works, even the ballet music from Rienzi, plunges him into an indescribable state of ecstasy.

I once witnessed a very curious scene between Wagner and a charming young lady, who was a writer, and Wagnerian of the first rank. This lady was imploring Wagner to play her on the piano this unparalleled, indescribable chord she had discovered in the score of Siegfried.

"Oh Master, this chord!"

"But my dear child," says the master "it is simply the chord of E minor, you can play it quite as well as I can."

"Oh Master, Master, please... this chord!"

The Master, in the end, went to the piano and played E G B - whereupon the lady fell back on a couch with a sigh. It was more than she could bear.

Quote from <https://www.talkclassical.com/31684-famous-not-so-famous.html>



Camille Saint-Saens 1835 - 1921

REMEMBER US IN A BEQUEST

Members may like to consider supporting the Society by making a bequest in their will, either on their own behalf or as a remembrance of someone else. A suggested clause that can be used is set out below. Should you wish to discuss the matter further, please do not hesitate to contact any member of your Committee.

I GIVE the sum of \$XXX to the WAGNER SOCIETY NEW SOUTH WALES INCORPORATED for the aims and purposes set out in the Constitution of that organization and the receipt of the Treasurer for the time being shall be sufficient discharge to my Executors.

DONATIONS TO HELP THE SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

We encourage members to donate to the Society to help with our regular support for artists.

SPECIAL DONATION OPPORTUNITIES

Two current initiatives worthy of your support are the new **Melbourne Opera's** production of **Das Rheingold** and **FREELANCE ARTIST RELIEF AUSTRALIA (FARA)**, assisting struggling artists overseas.

The Society has pledged \$15,000 for *Das Rheingold* and in return all our members will receive discounted tickets, whether they donated or not. Details of how to book tickets are on our website and the special code has been provided to members by email.

We have pledged \$5,000 for FARA. In return they will arrange a special event for our members in 2021

Please make sure that donations reach us by 31 December 2020. Donations are tax deductible.

Please include your name and note 'donation for Rheingold or FARA' (as applicable) on your donation. Further payment details are on our website

EMAIL ADDRESSES FOR EASY CONTACT AND ADVICE ON FUNCTIONS AND DEALS!

Regular emails are sent to those members of the Society whose email addresses we have on file. If you have not been receiving these emails, please ensure we have your current email address by filling in the form on the Society's contact web page: www.wagner.org.au/contact-us.

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R
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Tours



Weekend at the Sydney Opera House

Verdi's *Ernani* and an opera recital
with Damien Beaumont
05–07 February 2021 (3 days)

Attend Opera Australia's first full-scale production of Verdi's *Ernani* at the Sydney Opera House, along with a recital of arias.



Canberra International Music Festival

The Idea of Vienna
with Genevieve Jacobs
30 April – 04 May 2021 (5 days)

Spend five days at the Canberra International Music Festival with fine performances by leading musicians in iconic settings.



Coriole Music Festival

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with Phillip Sametz
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(All website addresses used in this Newsletter are reproduced in the PDF version of the Quarterly on the Wagner Society's website in the relevant article – For Members Only, members will need to log in)

SEASONS GREETINGS

from the President and Committee of the Wagner Society in NSW



Bayreuth Christmas Market

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY FUNCTIONS

(unless otherwise advised in Coming Events)
Goethe Institut, 90 Ocean Street Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)

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