



WAGNER
SOCIETY
nsw

ISSUE NO 39

166

SEPTEMBER 2022

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY



Georg Unger as Siegfried, Bayreuth, 1876



Siegfried costume design by Doepler, Bayreuth, 1876

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.

PHOTOS OF RECENT EVENTS



Rebecca and Arthur



Bayreuth 2022 Cycle III. From left: James Poole (WS Singapore), Garry Richards (WSNSW-ACT), John Meyer (WSWA), Esteban Insausti (WSNSW), Simon Whitaker (WSNSW), Gavin Crank (WSNSW) & Ross Whitelaw (WSNSW)



July 31 concert at St Columba. From left: Bradley Gilchrist, Rebecca MacCallion, Nathan Bryon and Daniel Macey



WSNSW Members at Wagner22, Leipzig. From left: Jenny Ferns, Robert Thurling, Pauline Holgerson, Ira Kowalski, Terence Watson, Barbara Brady, Julie Clarke, John Hughes, Ursula Armstrong, Terry Clarke, Dr Lourdes St George, John Barrer, Martin Armstrong

FOR YOUR DIARY

2022

25 Sept 2022	Siegfried Part 3 of the Melbourne Opera Ring Cycle	Melbourne Recital Centre
24 March - 1 May 2023	Complete Melbourne Opera Ring Cycle	Bendigo

COMING SOCIETY EVENTS 2022

DAYS AND STARTING TIMES MAY VARY - PLEASE CHECK ONLINE FOR DETAILS

DATE	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
Sun 18 Sept	2.00 Robert Gay continues his talk on French Grand Opera	Goethe Institut
Sun 6 Nov	2.00 Concert Jessica Harper Soprano and Joseph Eisinger Cello	St Columba
Sun 27 Nov	2.00 Christmas party and Wagner Reiseberichte	Robert Mitchell's residence, Newtown

Advice about changes to the Program will be emailed in our e-news to people who have given their email addresses to the Society's Membership Secretary; the latest updates will also be available on the Society's website: www.wagner.org.au.
Admission to each event will be \$25 a Member, and \$35 each non-Member, \$10 (Full-time students); Seminar/Concert \$40 (m), \$50 (n-m), \$20 (fts).
For Zoom events members will be requested to register; admission is \$10.

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

WE WARMLY WELCOME NEW MEMBERS WHO JOINED SINCE JUNE 2022:

Felicity Carter 1266, Simon Whitaker 1267, Anita Crawford 1268, Suzanne Gregory 1269

DONATIONS TO HELP THE SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

We encourage members to donate to the Society to help with our regular support for artists. We also have a number of special projects for which we encourage your contribution.

GENEROUS DONATIONS WERE RECEIVED SINCE JUNE 2022 FROM THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS:

Sue Kelly, June Donsworth, John Studdert

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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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Dear members and friends,

It seems from the activity in the last quarter that we are almost back to normal. Almost, but not quite. Concerts, opera and theatre seasons are well under way with masks for attendees. The Sydney Opera House Concert Hall has finally been unveiled with an opening season of concerts by the SSO under new Chief Conductor, and our Patron, Simone Young – all sounding world class, something that can now be said with confidence. The sound of the hall was further confirmed by a fantastic concert of Richard Strauss by the AWO under Zubin Mehta. The WSNSW showed the documentary on Marjorie Lawrence “The World at her Feet” in June and hosted a recital in July, with a last-minute cast change as a reminder that Covid is still causing havoc amongst us (read Leona’s report inside). Coming up in mid-September, Robert Gay concludes his talk about French Grand Opera and its influence on the terrible twins of 1813, Verdi and Wagner. And on the subject of twins, a rather clunky segue for those that have been reading about the new Bayreuth “Ring” from Valentin Schwarz, many of our members are travelling overseas again after nearly three years. There was Leipzig 22 where all 13 Wagner operas were performed in order (see reports and photos inside). And I’ve just returned from the Bayreuth Festival, where several of our members attended, together with colleagues from Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and our new Indo-Pacific friend, Singapore. I believe reports on Bayreuth will be made in the next instalment of the Quarterly, although there are a few teasers in this issue.

This issue is dedicated to “Siegfried” which is about to be presented by Melbourne Opera in late September, conducted by Maestro Anthony Negus with the participation of our own Warwick Fyfe, singing his first Wanderer, Deborah Humble as Erda, and Brad Daley as the “hero” himself. If I include

the Stuttgart “Siegfried” I will see on the way to the Berlin Staatsoper “Ring”, that will make four “Siegfrieds” in a calendar year. I think that is a record for me. You can never have enough Wagner.

On a rather sad note, our Membership Secretary Lis Bergmann, has resigned as she needs to step back her time commitment. I am personally devastated by this as Lis has singlehandedly improved our archives now available on the website (including a complete set of Quarterlies), as well as taken the e-news to a very high level of information, amongst a host of other “projects” and innovations that have carried us through the pandemic and lockdowns. Whilst Lis will continue to contribute to the WSNSW we nevertheless require some committed hands to take charge of the e-news so that we can continue communicating with our membership in between Quarterlies. So, I am asking for help from the membership and beyond: interested persons or volunteers? But in the meantime, a huge THANK YOU to Lis for a wonderful contribution to the WSNSW at a time when we really needed it.

Given all the travels and productions we have enjoyed, or not, through this year (and some still to come), we are reintroducing the session where our members tell us all what they have seen and heard, liked or disliked. This will take place during our end of year (Christmas) event, with much food, drink, prizes and book/CD/DVD sales. So, if you want to partake in a mini presentation (nothing formal, just honest thoughts and impressions) please let me know so that I can compile a list of participants and order. I particularly encourage members who have seen works or been to either Leipzig, Bayreuth or Berlin, for the first time to tell us what it was like.

Stay safe and happy listening.

Esteban Insausti

President, Wagner Society in NSW Inc



NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

This issue includes an eclectic mix of articles gleaned from the web including some insights into Siegfried and Brünnhilde, in preparation for the new Melbourne Opera production.

Members have at last been able to travel overseas again to attend Wagner performances and I look forward to hearing from members sharing their experiences with all us at our Christmas party on 27 November.

Many thanks to Terence Watson for his insightful report on Leipzig (and his review of the MO Lohengrin) and to Jenny Ferns for her Berlin report. And thanks, as always, to Leona for her forensic proof-reading.

Mike Day, michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com



WAGNER SOCIETY YOUTUBE CHANNEL

We encourage members to visit our YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/wagnersocietynsw>

In addition to including many fascinating early recordings and illustrations, there are clips from earlier and recent Wagner Society concerts and talks.

FUTURE WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

SUNDAY 18 SEPTEMBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

2.00PM **ROBERT GAY** CONTINUES HIS TALK ON FRENCH GRAND OPERA

By popular demand, following his very successful talk earlier in the year, music educator and favorite tour-guide **Robert Gay** returns to entertain us with the second part of his talk about how Verdi and Wagner were influenced by the earlier composers writing for the Paris Opera.

SUNDAY 6 NOVEMBER AT ST COLUMBA

2.00PM **SPECIAL EXTRA CONCERT** WITH JESSICA HARPER, SOPRANO, JOSEPH EISINGER, CELLO AND BRADLEY GILCHRIST, PIANO



Jessica is an artist supported by the Society. We published an update on her career in the December 2021 Quarterly. Since then, she has moved to Antwerp for further studies. In early September she made her debut at Semperoper Dresden. For more details of her career go to jessicaharpersoprano.com.

Jessica's husband, Joseph Eisinger, has studied in Canberra, Sydney and Dresden, and is currently finishing his Masters degree at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp under the tutelage of Olsi Leka.

Before relocating to Europe Joseph finished his Bachelor of Music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and enjoyed working with the Opera Australia Orchestra, Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, Canberra Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Philharmonia. He currently works as a casual member of the Belgian National Orchestra.

Jessica's article about Joseph's parents Alec and Aviva Cohen was published in the September 2021 Quarterly.

They will be performing a wonderful selection of Germanic repertoire, Wagner, Strauss, Humperdinck and Liszt plus Wagner cello transcriptions.

SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER AT 2.00PM

CHRISTMAS PARTY AND WAGNER REISEBERICHTE

Come along for Beer, Bubbles and Bratwurst and join in with members discussing recent travels attending Wagner performances in Leipzig, Bayreuth and Berlin. There will be our usual raffle and book sale.

Venue: Robert Mitchell's residence, 47 Station St, Newtown, corner of Don St - note: Station St is divided into 3 sections, including one on the other side of the railway line. If you get into the wrong part it takes local knowledge to find your way out. Because of the Enmore theatre especially, parking can sometimes be a problem. It's an easy walk from Newtown station via Enmore Rd. The station is also the best place to alight from the bus.



SIEGFRIED IN MELBOURNE ON 25 SEPTEMBER

International Wagner expert Maestro **Anthony Negus** returns to Melbourne in September to conduct a concert performance of *Siegfried*, in preparation for the fully staged premiere in Bendigo next April, as part of the Bendigo *Ring*. Negus recently conducted *Siegfried* at his Longborough Festival in England. The production featured Bradley Daley in the title role, a character he will reprise in Melbourne and Bendigo under Negus. The 90-piece M.O. Orchestra supports a superb Australian cast: Warwick Fyfe as Wotan, Lee Abrahmsen as Brünnhilde, Simon Meadows as Alberich, Deborah Humble as Erda and Robert Macfarlane as Mime.

Ticket sales for the four-opera Wagner spectacular in Bendigo continue to go through the roof, so if you haven't yet booked your Bendigo experience do so now before it sells out!

REPORTS ON RECENT MEETINGS

SUNDAY 31 JULY AT ST COLUMBA

2.00PM CONCERT WITH REBECCA MACCALLION, NATHAN BRYON AND DANIEL MACEY ACCOMPANIED BY BRADLEY GILCHRIST.

Some time ago I heard that Valda Wilson, one of our Germany-based sponsored singers, was coming. I approached her with the offer of a concert, which she was delighted to accept. But since it was her summer holiday (in the Northern hemisphere) she didn't want to sing the whole concert. This would involve a lot of work for her and the accompanist, and perhaps learning new repertoire. Totally understandable.

I managed to obtain young tenor, Nathan Bryon, just before he headed to San Francisco on a 2-year scholarship at the Conservatory, and baritone Daniel Macey, both of whom had sung for us before. The trio came up with a stunning concert program involving on Valda's part lots of Wagner and Strauss. As usual our President, Esteban designed a stunning printed program.

Early on the day before the concert I received the call which no one ever wants to receive; Valda had voice problems (which later morphed into Covid). The voice is a very delicate instrument and is subject to all manner of things.

In fact, very few of our concerts have ever gone ahead as originally planned, but I think this was possibly the shortest time I had ever had to replace a singer, although I do recall one time when I was being wheeled into an operating theatre trying to find a replacement singer for a recital! This time names were suggested and our wonderful pianist, Bradley Gilchrist, was consulted of course. His suggestion was a winner. Soprano, Rebecca MacCallion had sung delightfully for us earlier in the year. She and her husband, Bradley Kunda, had moved to Berlin, but had returned home during the pandemic, and I was relieved to find she was still in Australia. I sent her the program selections and she and Brad came up with a wonderful program, juggling what she felt her voice could handle post baby, and importantly, including duets with both our other singers.

At the same time, I had to find a replacement speaker (Covid-19 again) for the Sydney Opera Society (an opera study group) which I run.

Some **eight** hours later – all was settled - phone calls, emails, text messages, Facebook personal messages, even WhatsApp! But we

SUNDAY 26 JUNE AT 2.00PM AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

DVD MARJORIE LAWRENCE: THE WORLD AT HER FEET

Members enthusiastically acclaimed this delightful, big-hearted film about the remarkable Australian soprano Marjorie Lawrence. For an extra special movie-going experience members were welcomed with choc-tops, popcorn and Minties. After the film's premiere in late 2021 South Australian filmmakers Wayne Groom and Dr Carolyn Bilsborow sent a copy to Windsor Castle after an official request from the Queen and it was favourably reviewed by critic David Stratton, who gave it four out of five stars and included the documentary in his list of best films of 2021.

emerged with a singer and a delightful concert, which members have later commented on. Rebecca sang beautifully showing off her pre-loved Barbara Bonney frock (acquired from Ms Bonney's Salzburg boutique – **Bonney und Kleid!**) and afterwards her new baby, Arthur, attending his first concert.

Rebecca sang some lovely French repertoire and Schumann's gorgeous *Widmung*, Nathan sang the wonderful *Adelaide*, and some Mozart, including the *Magic Flute* duet with Daniel, and the *Boheme* duet with Nathan, whose other Lied was Liszt's *Freudvoll und leidvoll*. Daniel sang *O du, mein holder Abendstern*, and some Russian songs. Bradley, as usual, accompanied very sympathetically.

It was a very special afternoon and thank you everyone who contributed to the planning, the added planning and the final event. We are eternally grateful to Rebecca MacCallion for slotting in so seamlessly, and wish her, husband Bradley and baby Arthur a speedy settling into their new home in Berlin. We wish Valda Wilson *Gute Besserung* with no lasting effects, and look forward to hearing her sing when she returns home again. She kindly donated to the WSNWSW some CDs featuring her voice, so these will be available for sale at our next event. And I did find a speaker for my Sydney Opera Society; Soprano Jane Ide jumped in to speak about covering opera roles, which she has done quite often!

LEONA GEEVES 29 August 2022

PROGRAM

LUDWIG van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

- Adelaide Nathan Bryon

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

- La ci darem la mano from *Don Giovanni* Rebecca MacCallion and Daniel Macey
- Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön from *Die Zauberflöte* Nathan Bryon
- Bei Männern from *Die Zauberflöte* Rebecca MacCallion and Daniel Macey
- Ach ich fühls from *Die Zauberflöte* Rebecca MacCallion

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)

- O du, mein holder Abendstern from *Tannhäuser* Daniel Macey

CHARLES GOUNOD (1818-1893)

- Salut! Demeure chaste et pure from *Faust* Nathan Bryon

JULES MASSENET (1842-1912)

- Adieu, notre petite table from *Manon* Rebecca MacCallion

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901)

- Per me giunto è il di supreme and O Carlo, ascolta from *Don Carlos* Daniel Macey

GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845-1924)

- Après un rêve Rebecca MacCallion

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

- Widmung Rebecca MacCallion

SIEGFRIED

Wagner's Siegfried was the first typical adolescent of modern times: the music of Siegfried expressed for the first time that combination of (provisional) purity, physical strength, naturism, spontaneity and joie de vivre which was to make the adolescent the hero of our twentieth century, the century of adolescence.

Philippe Aries

In 1853 Wagner completed the libretto for the *Ring Cycle* and was at last ready to begin composing the music. For this he began at the beginning with *Das Rheingold*, now reduced from three acts to one. That work took him six months. *Die Walküre* was begun in the summer of 1854 and completed in the spring of 1856, when *Siegfried* was started. The first two acts took him from September that year until July 1857. Then came the big break during which he wrote *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*, before he resumed work on *Siegfried* in March 1869. *Götterdämmerung* was begun in the autumn of that year and completed on 21 November 1874."

Siegfried has been called the scherzo of the Ring cycle, because of the burgeoning youth that pervades the score. Act I is dominated by the exciting rhythms of hammer, bellows and blazing forge, as Siegfried reforges his father's sword. The great forest of Act II mingles the haunted gloom of Weber's *Freischütz* with the sunlight and bird calls of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, and in Act III Siegfried makes an epic passage through storm and fire on the mountainside to Brünnhilde's idyllic pastures.

It is the story of a hero and how he grows into manhood to discover fear and love. Raised by the Nibelung Mime, Siegfried is young, innocent and cocky. With the help of a mysterious Wanderer (who is really Wotan in disguise), Siegfried finds the pieces of his father's sword, Notung, reforges them and uses the instrument to kill the dragon Fafner who guards the hoard of Nibelung gold that formerly belonged to the Rhinemaidens. As a result of his killing of Fafner, Siegfried comes into possession of Alberich's cursed ring. But Siegfried faces his ultimate challenge when he follows a birdsong to find the sleeping Brünnhilde whom fate has destined Siegfried to awaken and fall in love with. At the end of the opera, Siegfried gives the Ring to Brünnhilde to prove and symbolize his oath of love and fidelity to her.

In Siegfried, the son of Siegmund and Sieglinde, Wagner created a much-misunderstood hero; some producers even make him a Hitler Youth-style bullyboy. They haven't read the libretto closely enough. Raised as a mere weapon by the dwarf Mime, Siegfried becomes a loveless, bitterly lonely and frustrated young man, sharp-tongued and impatient, but far less violent than he threatens to be. When mortally provoked,



Alois Burgstaller, Bayreuth 1896

by Mime and the Dragon, Siegfried strikes back only when he must, and takes no great delight in killing, becoming gravely reflective. By himself, we see Siegfried as good-humoured, nature-loving and not unthoughtful.

<https://www.classical-music.com/features/works/guide-wagners-siegfried/>

DER WALDVOGEL

The Woodbird is a small but crucial role in Act II of Siegfried. Many sopranos have had their first experience of singing Wagner with this role; notable antipodean performers have included **Dame Joan Sutherland** (ROH 1954 and on the famous 1961 Solti Decca recording) and **Dame Kiri Te Kanawa** (ROH 1991). In 1916 the lovely late **Taryn Fiebig** sang (and danced) the role in the OA Melbourne Ring. In the recent Deutsche Oper production the role was sung by a boy soprano, as Wagner had originally intended. Sometimes the role is sung offstage with a small puppet taking the stage. (Chereau's centenary Ring) The Carstorf Bayreuth Woodbird had a spectacular carnival costume but suffered the indignity of being fed to the Alexanderplatz crocodiles and molested by Siegfried. In Carstorf's world all nature is infected by the corrupt human world.

In *The Wound That Will Never Heal* – An Allegorical Interpretation of Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung - **Paul Brian Heise** makes these observations about the Woodbird:

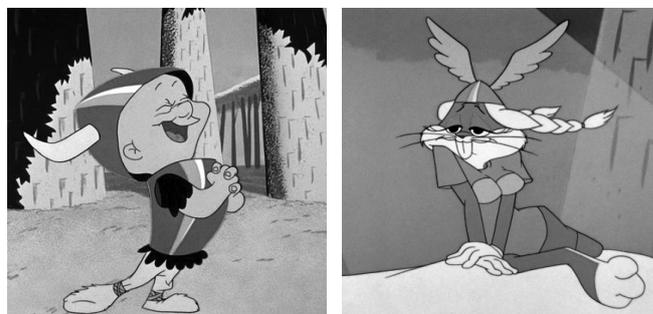
The most coherent thing I can think of at the moment to say about Siegfried's understanding of the Woodbird's song is first, on the simplest level, this indicates that Siegfried, like the inspired genius that he is, but unlike the run-of-the-mill types, the majority of human souls, who get through their socialization having lost (if they ever had it) the instinctive aesthetic response to experience of childhood, that Siegfried has never lost that aesthetic, instinctive response which doesn't reckon practical advantages and disadvantages. But looking deeper, Siegfried as an unconsciously inspired artist is in possession of dangerous, repressed knowledge to which he instinctively responds aesthetically, healing with music, as it were, what can't be contemplated conceptually through conscious knowledge, without damage. In other words, the great inspired artist takes the stuff of life, even at its most terrible, and instinctively sublimates it aesthetically into beauty, as in Greek Tragedy. And of course, the Woodbird's song, in my book, is Wagner's metaphor for the very special kind of music which he himself created for his music-dramas, which taps into these deep, unconscious, even dangerous roots. That the Woodbird's song is derived ultimately from Woglinde's Rhinedaughter Lullaby is testament to, among other things, Wagner's contention that music is what links us humans most closely and intimately to the life of feeling which preceded the evolution of thought. And yet, music, as Wagner himself said, is the last of the arts to evolve into a great art, and therefore in a sense the ultimate product of thinking man. It's a sort of restoration of innocence.

I've long noted Wagner's own remarks that the Woodbird was to have represented the spirit of the dead Sieglinde trying to communicate with her son Siegfried, and to give him advice and warnings. This could make sense both of the Woodbird's advice that Siegfried watch out for Mime's treachery (surely Sieglinde grasped Mime's true nature instinctively, or perhaps through direct observation, prior to her death), and of her advice to seek out Brünnhilde (she had, after all, predicted that her child Siegfried would smile on Brünnhilde someday. But there seems little reason to suppose Sieglinde would have had any motive to suggest Siegfried take possession of Alberich's Hoard, Tarnhelm, and Ring. Only Wotan would have been motivated to do so. But you'll recall that in my interpretation Brünnhilde is Wotan's own unconscious mind, and later Siegfried, by virtue of his unique ability to woo her as his muse, proves she is his unconscious mind as well (Siegfried in effect being the reincarnation of Wotan, minus consciousness of his original identity as Wotan).

And Brünnhilde is directly connected with the Woodbird in the sense I describe above, being Wotan's Will, which is sublimated into music, The Woodbird's music, which communicates Wotan's will to Siegfried subliminally, musically. The Woodbird's song represents ultimately Wagner's own musical motifs which, if interpreted, brought to consciousness, restore Wotan's confession to Brünnhilde to consciousness. This of course is the meaning of Siegfried's ultimate interpretation of the Woodbird's song for the Gibichungs, at Hagen's (the most conscious of men's) request. And this of course is Wagner's entire "Ring" in miniature, the play within the play which ends in Siegfried's death, a virtual death by suicide, for it is actually Siegfried who wakes himself up and restores his own memory.

<https://www.wagnerheim.com/forum/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?t=279>

WHAT'S OPERA, DOC?



Elmer Fudd as Siegfried and Bugs Bunny as Brunhilde

"What's Opera, Doc?" is a 1957 Looney Tunes cartoon animated by Chuck Jones and written by Michael Maltese. This timeless classic short has introduced opera to generation after generation of youngsters...and a very pretty Bugs has given inspiration to generations of drag queens. It not only borrows from Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, but also references Walt Disney's *Fantasia*.

It lampoons classic opera by using its elements to set up the latest chapter in Elmer Fudd's hapless pursuit of Bugs Bunny. We open with a silhouette of a mighty Viking arousing ferocious lightning storms ... only to find it's Elmer -- this time as the demigod Siegfried. Elmer admonishes the audience (in classical verse) to "be vewwy quiet, I'm hunting wabbits!" It's not long before Elmer comes upon Bugs' hole and sings out "Kill the wabbit!" not realizing that the hare has already climbed out and is viewing Elmer spearing fruitlessly in said hole. Bugs joins in the fun, querying his tagline in operatic verse and leaving Elmer in his dust (but not before "Siegfried" shows us an example of supposed "mighty powers" from his spear and magic helmet). Elmer goes after the wascally wabbit, but his pursuit is ended when he sets his eyes on the stunningly and awesomely beautiful Valkyrie Brunhilde (Bugs in disguise). After a "hard-to-get" pursuit (brought on by Elmer's eternally-misguided hormones) "Siegfried" and "Valkyrie" join in magnificent duet with "Return My Love." However, Bugs' scheme is exposed when his headdress falls off, enraging Elmer. The pseudo-Viking commands fierce lightning, rain, hail and wind storms (not to mention smog) to "kill the wabbit!" It works, but upon seeing the bunny's corpse, a woefully remorseful Elmer is reduced to tears as he sombrely carries the "dead" Bugs into the distance. But has Bugs really been struck dead? Brian Rathjen <briguy_52732@yahoo.com>

WAS BRYNHILD THE REAL SLEEPING BEAUTY?

Brynhild is well known character from Norse mythology (Volsunga saga) and her story has several similarities with the fairy tale of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

As with every saga, this one is pretty complicated, so I'll try to summarize only the main points, relevant for our comparison.

Brynhild is daughter of Budli, a Swedish king. She was chosen to decide the fight between two other kings: Agnar and Hjalmgunnar. While Odin, the main Norse god, preferred Hjalmgunnar, she gave a win to Agnar. Odin wasn't happy with her decision and imprisoned her in a castle where she must sleep surrounded with fire. She will stay there until a hero rescues her. We can say she was punished for thinking with her own head. From the position of the judge, she is demoted to the position of the prisoner.

It's easy to spot the elements of *Sleeping Beauty* already. King's daughter, curse of supreme being, girl in inaccessible castle, waiting for Mr. Right... Even the flames can be recognized as thorns in Grimms' *Briar Rose*. One more thing - she had a power to influence her own punishment, just like the last fairy had the power to change the curse at least a little bit.

Only a certain hero - **Siegfried** - can rescue her. Nobody else can ride through the flames.

After the fatal kiss a fairy tale quickly transforms into classic drama with jealousy, revenge, betrayal and other elements making life so interesting...

Wait, wait! There is more AFTER the kiss?

For everybody believing the kiss is only a cue for 'happily ever after' we must emphasize there are hundreds of versions of *Sleeping Beauty* with three major groups:

1. Most known today comes from the **Grimm Brothers'** *Household and Children's Tales*. Disney preferred this one too. It ends with a kiss followed only by a marriage.
2. Less known is **Charles Perrault's** *La Belle au bois dormant* (1695) where we find out prince has a mother who is man eating ogre and when the lucky pair move to his castle his mother tries to murder (and serve in sauce Robert) not only her daughter in law but also both grand kids. Yes, we have more characters in this version and children of *Sleeping Beauty* are pretty surprising fact (and realistic too). We have to deal with cannibalism, snakes and other creepy creatures by which the *Sleeping Beauty*, her children and the cook who didn't obey queen's orders should be killed but, in the end, the evil queen is their victim.

While this version sounds weird, it has several elements of the myth of Brynhild which are lost in Grimms' *Briar Rose*. I already mentioned elements from classic drama and we can add conspiracy, replacement of characters, scam and fair death.

3. Probably the most 'original' of the versions is **Giambattista Basile's** *Sun, Moon and Talia* from *Pentamerone* (1634), where *Talia* is of course the name of the *Sleeping Beauty*. Here we don't have a prince (who only later becomes a king), but a king who is already married! When his wife finds out about his extramarital adventures, she orders to bring the children to the court, cook them and serve them to her treacherous



Siegfried (Sigurðr) awakens Brunhild (Brynhildr), a scene from Wagner's *Siegfried* and Norse mythology 1892 Engraving by R. Bong (1880-1908). Original art by Otto Donner von Richter (1828-1911)

husband! After that she tries to throw *Talia* in fire but king saves her and orders to throw his wife instead.

O.k., maybe I should add we have astrologers instead of fairies at the beginning.

So - the elements in the stories about Brynhild and *Sleeping Beauty* are again: jealousy, revenge, deception, replacement, fire, murder...

Time to switch to myth about Brynhild and her sleep. I'll try to keep things simple as possible but I must add three more characters:

Siegfried (or Sigurd) - he is a hero with a magic sword, he kills a dragon named *Fafnir* and he bathes in dragon's blood to become invulnerable. Then he meets Brynhild who promised to become his wife but also foretells he will forget her and marry another woman.

Gudrun (In *Nibelung's* retelling *Kriemhild*) - she is 'the other woman', met by Siegfried soon after he had heard Brynhild's prophecy. Her mother made a special potion for Siegfried and he forgets Brynhild, so he can marry Gudrun. Gudrun has two kids with Siegfried: twins named *Sigmund* and *Svanhild*, a boy and a girl.

Gunnar - one of Gudrun's brothers who wants to marry Brynhild who is available after Siegfried's marriage. He just has to save her from the castle where she sleeps and the flames by which her body is surrounded. The problem is only Siegfried can go through the fire and he agrees to change shape and save Brynhild in the form of Gunnar.

Brynhild later discovers the scam and wants revenge. She organizes the murder of Sigurd, kills his son *Sigmund* and builds a tomb for herself...

Elements in this myth which can be found in the fairy tale: jealousy (a lot of it) | revenge | change of bodies | conspiracy murder | two kids of both genders | sleeping, dreaming and/or prophecy.

A few words about prophecy and curse which are present in all known variations of myth and the tale...



Heinrich Leutermann (1824-1905)
Carl Offterdinger (1829-1880) Briar Rose

We have prophets, witches, fairies and other supernatural beings able to see the future which is in many cases (not just in the story about the Brynhild) associated with - a spindle!

Remember? Fates, weaving, spinning...? And association with blood which can mark end of life or beginning of life or a very special moment in life... Spinning (and foretelling) is also associated with older people (in most cases women) with a lot of life experience who are willing to share some of their wisdom (knowledge) with younger people (like the main character in Sleeping Beauty was).

Still not enough?

O.k., let's meet the **real Brynhild!**

The lady, who served as the model of the mythological Brynhild could be Brunhilda of Austrasia. She lived in the 6th century (born around 543 to 613) in an area of today's Spain. Life is short and her was complicated too, so I'll try to stick only to the facts (some are not 100 percent sure) related to the myth and to the fairy tale.

Why?

Because both can be based on real people and real events which were only rearranged and exaggerated to serve better to narrating purposes in next centuries.

She was born princess. When she was around 14 or 15 years old, she married a king Sigbert of Austrasia (born around 535, died around 575). Apart from her name we already have two common details:

- the name of her spouse
- her age of marriage

Although the name starting with Sieg (meaning 'win') was pretty popular in those days and girls, especially princesses, were often married at this early age, we can say we have a good start. Myth

mentions Siegfried (Siegbert) and fairy tale mentions ages from thirteen to sixteen. Myth (in several variations) seriously deals with Brynhild's virginity (so she was probably very young and her actions are actions of teenager) and fairy tale in several versions present the prince as the winner among many others.

Siegfried had three brothers (all were kings, but all four kingdoms were relatively small) who were spending time with girls of lower classes (some were really of negotiable virtues) and this started kind of jealousy. Was his intention to present himself as better than others? Who knows...

His brother Chilperic wanted to show he is at least as good as he, so he married Brunhilda's older sister Galswintha. This was not very successful marriage. Especially Chilperic's mistress Fredegund wasn't happy with it. Galswintha was one morning found strangled in her bed and Chilperic soon married Fredegund.

Brunhilda blamed (probably rightfully) Fredegund for death of her sister and mutual hatred led to war among brothers.

See?

- one lady died in her bed (she sleeps for long long time)
- two ladies hating and wishing death to each other
- war

All three elements are present in several variations of the myth and the fairy tale.

Sigebert defeated Chilperic's army, but killers hired by Fredegund killed him. Siegfried was murdered by poisoned daggers.

- we have traitors, hired by a wicked lady in myth and fairy tale
- we have swords / thorns and poison too

Brunhilda was imprisoned. Fredegund planned death of children by her late husband who were born by other ladies.

- Brunhilda was isolated from the world just like Brynhild and Sleeping Beauty
- we already mentioned infanticide several times

Well, now we have a twist. Brunhilda managed to escape with a help of Fredegund's stepson Merovech whose life was in danger too. He was son of Chilperic's mistress or first wife Audovera and formally her nephew. This didn't stop them to get married (she had powerful patrons in church) but this marriage didn't last long.

It is not my intention to present whole story about Brunhilda of Austrasia who managed to rule two kingdoms (one occupying part of today's Spain and other part of today's France), implement several reforms, managed to stay in power for decades in shadows of her son, grandchildren and great grandchild had many more problems with Fredegund. With getting older she became more and more nasty. Eventually she was accused of being responsible of the death of ten (!) kings of Franks altogether and killed by being tied on horses (there is a chance these were actually camels) and torn apart but I hope we have already found enough similarities between Brunhilda, Brynhild and Sleeping Beauty.

By the way, the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty is the only one of so-called major fairy tales which can't be traced into oral tradition, but it is present in several novels without known authors from about 10th century on. It was surely written by skilled 'professionals'. It is believable the myth and the fairy tale are both based on real people, just like the tale of Rapunzel can be associated with myths, legends and historical personalities.

<https://reallycoolblog4you.blogspot.com/2013/12/was-brynhild-real-sleeping-beaty.html>

MONUMENTAL WAGNER

Members who attended *Wagner 22* in Leipzig would have visited the Wagner memorial in Goerdelerring Park. Following is an article published in *Monopol Magazin* at the time of its unveiling in 2013

THE SHADOW OVER WAGNER - THE DISPUTE OVER HIS LEIPZIG MONUMENT

What defines a “Nazi artist”? In the course of the discussion about the Richard Wagner monument in Leipzig, this question again polarized the art world. Reliefs from the Nazi era by the artist Emil Hipp were to be reused

In Leipzig, parts of a Richard Wagner monument that was once promoted by Hitler were recently purchased. The artist is Emil Hipp (1893-1965), the buyers were the Leipzig City History Museum and the local Richard Wagner Association. Both claim that the sculptor Emil Hipp was not a Nazi artist. This must be contradicted.

There is hardly a composer today that polarizes more than Richard Wagner. Some admire him as an artistic avant-gardist, others condemn him as an anti-Semite. Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813 and died in Venice in 1883. After his death, the Austrian satirical magazine “Kikeriki” joked that impetuous Wagner monuments would now be modelled in a number of cities. In Wagner’s birthplace of all places, however, it was to take a whole century before a monument was dedicated. It was unveiled in 2013 and designed by Stephan Balkenhol. The memorial still divides Wagner admirers in Leipzig to this day, but more on that later. The story of a Leipzig Richard Wagner monument is long and confused. It shows that Wagner also polarized within the circles of his admirers.

The first monument initiative for Wagner came in Leipzig in 1904. At that time, Max Klinger was entrusted with the execution of a monument. He designed a five-meter-tall marble Wagner figure to be placed on a three-meter-high plinth in the centre of Leipzig. His work on it was delayed, when Klinger died in 1920 only the base was finished. In 1931 monument efforts were resumed. The non-party mayor of Leipzig, Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, announced an open competition, and a park-like area on the Elster flood plain in Leipzig was chosen as the location.

When the 50th anniversary of Richard Wagner’s death was celebrated on February 13, 1933 in Leipzig’s Gewandhaus, Goerdeler announced the new memorial project to the public for the first time. The new Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler was the guest of honour in the first row of the audience. A few weeks later, the Leipzig Monuments Committee received more than 600 entries. The Stuttgart sculptor Emil Hipp emerged as the winner. His design envisaged a monumental block of natural stone (height: 4.5 meters, width: 10 meters), the sides of which were decorated with reliefs. Hipp described the motifs of the reliefs as fate, myth, redemption and bacchanalia. These were depictions of naked, muscular women and men. They were intended to symbolize the “atmosphere” of Wagner’s works.

Since the costs of the block were estimated to be quite high, Goerdeler turned to the Reich government, from which he hoped for financial support. In Berlin, he personally presented the design to Adolf Hitler. Hitler was so impressed that he had the memorial extended. From now on, the Richard Wagner National Monument of the German People was to be erected in Leipzig. Hipp had to change his draft according to Hitler’s wishes. After the revision, he hoped “terribly restlessly [...] for the greatness of the Führer,” says Hipp. Hitler agreed.



The design intended for execution now represented a combination of urban architecture and sculpture. The memorial block was to be installed in the middle of a square laid out with stone slabs, and the entire complex was also to be framed by a wall 430 meters long and 3 meters high. Hipp had to make further reliefs for this wall: Scenes from Wagner’s operas, represented primarily by muscular, male figures. The costs rose, but were now largely borne by the state. The client was no longer a Leipzig monument committee, but Hitler himself.

Instrumentalization for Nazi propaganda

On March 6, 1934, Hitler laid the foundation stone in a monumental ceremony. Present were SS and SA honour guards, NSDAP standard-bearers, and several thousand spectators. A choir of 1,600 singers sang, among other things, the Hallelujah Choir from George Frideric Handel’s oratorio “The Messiah”.

The laying of the foundation stone thus served Hitler as an ideal platform for his self-portrayal as a “Führer”. He will lay the foundation in the name of “countless top German men and women who see me as their spokesman and leader,” he announced in his speech. The Richard Wagner National Monument of the German People was no longer a regional matter, nor was it merely a monument to a composer. It was intended to invoke Nazi ideology. All the typical characteristics of Nazi art and Nazi monument ideology are represented in Hipp’s design. The large area could be used for mass gatherings. All figures are worked out in a unifying ideal-typical style.

After the foundation stone was laid, Hipp’s work process was repeatedly delayed. It was not until 1944 that he completed the individual parts in his studio near the marble factory in Kiefersfelden. At this point, due to the war, they could no longer be brought to Leipzig. So, the monument was never erected.

CONTINUED OVER >



Laying of the foundation stone of the "Richard Wagner National Monument of the German People"

In 1945 the components were still stored in Kiefersfelden. In 1947 the city of Leipzig terminated all existing contracts and sold the individual parts. Now, parts of this very monument have "appeared" again, as the chairman of the Leipzig Richard Wagner Association, Helmut Loos, puts it.

These are two reliefs for the surrounding wall. One shows the figure of the shoemaker Hans Sachs, the other Siegfried and the defeat of Brünnhilde, a scene from the *Valkyrie*. The purchase price is kept silent, but people are obviously happy about the purchase of the monumental reliefs, which Loos describes as "classicism typical of the time". In doing so, he is using an argument that is repeatedly used as a clean bill of health for Emil Hippi: Hippi designed his Wagner monument before the Nazi takeover, so his monument could not correspond to the Nazi ideology at all.

Relics of NS aesthetics

This has to be contradicted twice. First, Hippi had to change his design to meet Hitler's wishes, so the Wagner monument became a Nazi monument per se; Monuments are always inevitably tied to the intentions of their patrons. Second, artists like Hippi helped shape the Nazi ideal of art in the first place. "Typical of the time" around 1930 were also Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism - styles that the Nazi regime deeply defamed. The NS exhibition "Degenerate Art" combined works of this type with photos of physically handicapped people.

On the other hand, it was important to cultivate the strong, heroic body ideal, just as Hippi did in his reliefs for the Wagner monument. However, neither the Wagner Association nor the curator of the City History Museum, Kerstin Sieblist, nor the Richard Wagner Association even advocated the subsequent erection of the complete Hippi monument. The trigger was Richard Wagner's 200th birthday in May 2013 and the fact that there was still no monument in his native town at that time (apart from a bust behind the opera).

In 2009, the Leipzig city council decided to build a memorial, but a heated argument arose over what it should look like. It was not the Richard Wagner Association that was included in the monument committee, but the Wagner Monument eV, an association that advocated a critical reception of Wagner and a contemporary monument. In 2013, the Balkenhol draft mentioned at the beginning was unveiled.

In his memorial, Balkenhol uses the Klinger pedestal from 1904, on which he places a life-size Wagner figure. Behind Balkenhol's Wagner rises a symbolically charged shadow. This portrayal of

Wagner deeply displeased the Richard Wagner Association. As recently as 2010, they considered it "essential to turn to the uncompleted memorial projects of 1913 and 1938." According to the association, these stand for "a period of time in which Leipzig experienced its heyday both economically and culturally and can therefore have a particularly strong identity-forming effect." The association has not distanced itself from the highly questionable statement that the year 1938 (the year of the Reich pogrom night) was a cultural heyday.

Now the Leipzig Richard Wagner Association and the City History Museum are announcing their intention to put on an exhibition about the music city of Leipzig during the Nazi era. In two years they want to show the acquired reliefs in this frame. In the same breath, however, Emil Hippi's work as a Nazi artist is put into perspective. For Kerstin Sieblist, curator at the City History Museum, Hippi is "not considered a Nazi artist in that sense," although she seems to know that Hippi "probably also made things for Hitler's study."

"Adolf Hitler's first favourite sculptor"

That would not do Hippi's "work and his reputation any good." Hippi is portrayed as a sad loser of his time, as an artist who was apparently taken over by the Nazi regime without his will. A highly dangerous trivialization is taking place here, which is playing straight into the hands of right-wing populists. In 1990, the right-wing publicist Alain de Benoist published a monograph on Emil Hippi's Richard Wagner monument. It was published by the (now banned) right-wing extremist Grabert-Verlag. Benoist, too, spins the narrative of an unjustly forgotten artist who has just "fallen victim to the passage of time". After the end of the Second World War, Hippi mainly created war memorials, for example in the Spanish enclave of Melilla - a memorial for the Spaniards who fell on the Francoist side.

The art historian and former director of the Georg Kolbe Museum, Ursel Berger, rightly suggests that Hippi "probably [was] Adolf Hitler's first favourite sculptor before Josef Thorak and Arno Breker came into his field of vision." It was not without reason that Hippi was appointed art professor in Weimar in 1936. In 1937, among other things, one of the reliefs for the Wagner monument was depicted in Paul Schultze-Naumburg's monograph "Nordic Beauties". Hippi was thus awarded an artistic role model.

In 1941 Arno Breker and Albert Speer visited his studio in Kiefersfelden. Hippi created reliefs for the Hitler Youth Leadership Academy in Braunschweig, for Hitler's study in the Führerbau in Munich, and for the Nuremberg Opera House. Hitler had the interior completely redesigned in 1935. All Art Nouveau elements were removed, and Hitler got his own box in the audience room. From there he could see straight onto the stage, which was now framed by reliefs also created by Emil Hippi.

They can still be seen there today, and the Wagner opera that was used particularly often by the Nazi regime for propaganda purposes - the "Meistersinger von Nürnberg" - is still performed on this stage. With Hans Sachs, one of the two acquired reliefs now depicts a character from this opera of all things. It may be easy to be dazzled by the supposedly harmless motifs of the reliefs. When looking at them, however, one must not forget who the commissioner was, what program they served, and what perfidious ideal they had to embody. What defines a "Nazi artist"? It remains to be hoped that the buyers of the Hippi reliefs and future exhibition organizers will devote more time to answering this question.

<https://www.monopol-magazin.de/wagner-denkmal-leipzig-kontroverse>

REVIEWS

LOHENGRIN - OPERA AUSTRALIA - MELBOURNE - 21 & 24 MAY 2022

Review by Dr Terence Watson

Conductor: Tahu Matheson; Opera Australia Chorus; Orchestra Victoria; Director: Olivier Py; Revival Director: Shane Placentino; Set & Costume Designer: Pierre-André Weitz; Lighting Designer: Bertrand Killy.

Cast—Elsa: Emily Magee; Ortrud: Elena Gabouri; Lohengrin: Jonas Kaufmann; Telramund: Simon Meadows; King Heinrich: Daniel Sumegi; Herald: Warwick Fyfe; First Noble: Dean Bassett; Second Noble: Tomas Dalton; Third Noble: Nathan

I saw the performances on 21 and 24 May. This production of *Lohengrin* premiered in Brussels in 2018 as a co-production between Opera Australia and Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. I found the production a mixture of arresting images, very moving interactions between characters, puzzling stage images, actions and props, and some very silly moments (the silliest perhaps being the moment when Telramund tries to hang himself with a rope suspended improbably from the flies!).

Director Olivier Py set the opera in post-World War II Berlin, which proved to be a poignant and powerful reminder of the futility and devastation of war in the midst of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, the production opened about 4 years after Russia's invasion of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. The Melbourne production opened on the 88th day of the invasion.

The opening stage image was therefore arresting and disturbing. As the prelude to Act 1 began, a huge round glass and steel set began to revolve in time to the music. At first, I thought the set might represent a bombed-out office building, but it revealed itself as the remains of an opera house. This image became even more affecting with the announcement by King Heinrich that he was in town to raise troops for the renewal of the war after the ending of a 9-year truce. He also boasted that he had rebuilt fortifications, but clearly had not thought it necessary to rebuild the opera house. I could not but understand this as Py's political comment on the priorities of leaders in wartime.

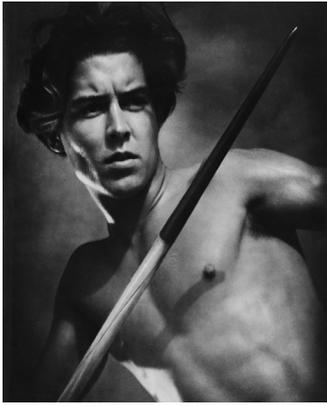
One of the faces of the revolving set reveals the tattered remains of the opera (upper) stage on which some action happens; most action, though, happens on the real (?-lower) stage. This made me wonder if there were some significance to the transitions between the stages, but I could not work out a consistent explanation. At times, there is a mobile, metal clothes hanger on the upper stage, presumably a reminder that this is an ad hoc performance in difficult times, or perhaps a touch of postmodern irony in the midst of an otherwise traditional interpretation? There were times when a character was left alone on the lower stage while the revolve took most of the cast away. Most memorably, Lohengrin was left alone as he sang "*In fernem Land...*" Kaufmann began singing this



aria and the farewell to the Swan aria in the softest *sotto voce* delivery I think I have ever heard—truly riveting; the audience was entranced, nary a breath was taken. Kaufmann increased his volume during both arias to deliver the climaxes in his characteristic burnished tones.

One of the bizarre aspects of the production was the decision to require many of the characters to leave or climb onto the upper stage by means of a kitchen chair. Another chair was placed at front of the stage where a prompt box is often located. Warwick Fyfe in his heraldic duties was required to mount the chair many times. For no apparent reason, so was the King etc. My OH&S background made me shudder at the prospects of falls and possible deaths. Fortunately, none happened. But why, what was this intended to convey? Warwick took what is a relatively small role in the opera and turned it into a vocal tour de force, as is his wont. His diction was so much easier to follow than Daniel Sumegi's; to me the latter's voice, and so his diction, tends to disappear into the nether regions of his vocal range. Warwick was also given the task of photographing important moments in the action. I guess this was another nod to the time in which the action is set, when photography—of the war itself, for instance—was making its mark on society. The Herald's occasional selfies also pointed towards the future in which nothing exists unless I have photographed myself in a scene and, almost by definition, excluded the historically significant from the record.

At the end of the Act 1 prelude, Ortrud elaborately hauls what looks like a small body wrapped in a shroud across the upper stage and deposit it through a trapdoor. It seems that this is intended to be a dead Gottfried, even though in Wagner's story he returns alive at the end of the work. As the prelude ends, characters slide on their back from under the upper stage!!!! I have no suggestions, except that, perhaps, they are the performers who have been hiding in the basement of the opera house until it was safe to emerge and play their parts. Shortly



1936 Olympics Photo Art Leni Riefenstahl

after, we see the figure of a young child—possibly Gottfried—playing around the upper and lower stages. Is he a ghost, a figment of someone’s imagination, the child of a performer? Just before Lohengrin is due to appear, we see him and the child playing aeroplanes on the upper stage as it slowly revolves into centre stage. The child then wanders away to leave Lohengrin to defend Elsa’s honour.

I was taken by surprise, and delighted, by Py’s decision to stage the fight between Lohengrin and Telramund as a chess game, with all the historical and cultural resonances that the game has. Chess competitions between representatives of the USSR and the rest of the world, especially the USA, during the Cold War were seen as proxies for real battles between the two powers. Py added some reality and extra excitement to the rather static game, by mirroring the battle with “thugs” in either black or white, to mimic the chess pieces, and building up to a donnybrook at the climax of the scene. It was both funny and disturbing at the same time, reminding me that even innocent looking games can turn nasty very quickly.

Act 2 opened with Ortrud raising the dramatic and musical tension to an impressive level. Her ringing mezzo-soprano voice and commanding stage presence stole the show from everyone, almost including Kaufmann. She presented as the real complement to Kaufmann, the only performer who truly inhabited her role and persuaded me that she had the intelligence for dealing with the unexpected challenge to her desire to reclaim the throne of Brabant. I had not realised before how cleverly Wagner has written Ortrud’s evolving arguments to undermine Elsa’s promise to Lohengrin. He seems to have learned his school day rhetorical lessons very well (rhetoric was a core subject in German schools of the time, intended to train future clerics in the art of argument). Ortrud both provokes Elsa to increasing doubt, then uses that doubt to modify her arguments to further undermine Elsa’s commitment. Py seems to have interpreted Ortrud’s paganness as including very explicit sexuality, as he has Ortrud and Telramund writhe around on the stage at various moments in direct contrast to Elsa and Lohengrin who barely kiss and never consummate their marriage. Meadows sang the role of this pathetic creature in the grasp of the manipulative Ortrud with considerable panache and conviction. Physically, he presented as an ideal knight, tall and lithe, with noble self-confidence—no wonder Ortrud fancied him. But even Telramund has moments when he realises that he is also being manipulated by his wife, moments also nicely captured by Meadows.

Magee’s portrayal of Elsa, by contrast, seemed to me to be far too pathetic and passive, making her even more childish than she need be. We can interpret Ortrud’s corrosive logic as a statement of Wagner’s antipathy to reflective understanding *Verstand* or reason *Vernunft* and preference for feeling *Gefühl* or emotion *Empfindsamkeit*. From this perspective, Elsa embodies Wagner’s ideal of genuine emotion. Yet the story he has chosen to extract from his mediaeval sources requires her to be betrayed by

Ortrud’s relentless rational attacks, while also displaying, I think intentionally on Wagner’s part, her inability, as a woman, to resist intellectually Ortrud’s attacks. Elsa is intended to be a paragon of female virtue, and Ortrud the monster who has mastered masculine rationality. Elsa is vulnerable to Ortrud’s attacks because she begins to question, which disposition, in Wagner’s ontology of the female, will lead to disaster. Questioning is, in short, the basis of *Aufklärung* rational philosophy and, for Wagner, one of the reasons his world is in a mess. *Lohengrin*, then, can be understood as a morality tale about the consequences of males and females acting outside their proper, natural roles. In Wagner’s ontology, Telramund represents the parallel diversion from proper, natural gender roles and behaviour because he allows himself to be manipulated by Ortrud, rather than taking the lead in the plot against Elsa.

The prelude to Act 3 is accompanied by a bare-chested athlete (who has also served in other capacities in previous acts) who treats us to a display of gymnastics. The ethos and his actions suggested Leni Riefenstahl was the source in a further reference to World War II, but I was not able to find an image of the athlete’s initial, iconic stance. This the closest I could find on the internet—especially the arms:

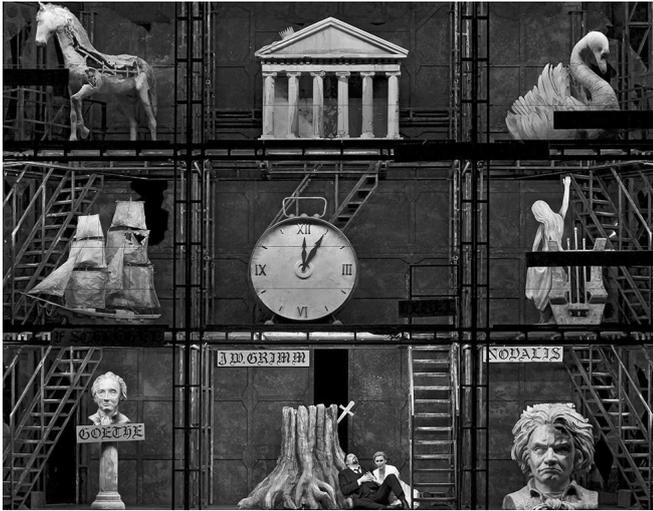
While entertaining, the display seemed intended to fill in a static moment in the opera, and to make a clever cultural reference, rather than to tell us much about how Wagner’s artwork could be interpreted as a step in the direction of National Socialist politics and aesthetics, if indeed it can be seen as such a step.

Act three begins with some chorus members crossing the lower stage carrying suitcases that they then deposit on front stage (other suitcases have been brought on earlier, so they are clearly intended to convey some significance). I presume that these are refugees, but why strew their luggage over the stage? I guess it might be to remind us of the consequences of war, but, if so, it might have helped (me at least) if there had been a consistent stage image of war, apart from the bombed opera house.

The scene in which Elsa finally demands Lohengrin tell her his name etc, takes place in a 3-level set with 3 box settings on each level, rather than their bedroom. Each box contains an image of an iconic person or object purported to be of significance to Wagner, but also, according to Py, to raise a question about the relationship between Wagner and National Socialism that has intrigued him since his first Wagner production:

By directing *Tristan und Isolde* first and then *Tannhäuser* and *Der fliegende Holländer*, I didn’t immediately need to address the question of whether German romanticism might have been the seed-bed for National Socialism. But the day came when I couldn’t avoid the question any longer.

Py does not explain what kind of “German romanticism” he has in mind—there are arguably as many kinds as there are of people who use the term in a vast variety of situations. I interpret Py as having in mind a very religious (mostly Roman Catholic), politically conservative variety of Romanticism, such as Wagner would have been exposed to through the works of the Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm, the Heidelberg school of poets (including Clemens Brentano, Achim von Arnim, and Joseph von Görres), Joseph Eichendorff, and the painter Philipp Otto Runge. The larger proposition that might be a direct link between that kind of Romanticism and National Socialism is a complex matter that has kept busy historians, cultural theorists, philosophers, and sociologists among other researchers.



Some of the icons Py selected are somewhat oblique, if they are meant to enlighten the audience about these matters. Two are immediately clear for other reason. The centre box bottom level contains a tree stump with a toy sword stuck in it. The box stage right contains a very bad bust of Goethe. The box stage left contains a better bust of a tousled and annoyed Beethoven. Another box contains a sailing ship with the jib sail in the shape of a face—a reference to Friedrich Schlegel, author of *The Memoirs of Mister von Schnabelewopski*, one of the sources of Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*. Other boxes refer to the painter Friedrich Caspar David, the poet and dramatist Friedrich von Schiller, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, and an ancient Greek temple. The centre box on the second level, dedicated to the philosopher Georg Hegel, features a large alarm clock. The hour hand of the clock becomes the weapon with which Telramund tries to kill Lohengrin, but Lohengrin kills him with the minute hand—his time has come! There might well be a meta-metaphor buried in this that seeks to link Hegel's philosophy of history with Wagner (who had read at least some of that work, but with derision and bemusement), and with World War II. One of Hegel's most quoted sentences says history is a "slaughter bench, upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed."

In among these props, Kaufmann managed to imbue his moment of truth with Elsa with deeply touching tenderness for the love of his life who is progressively betraying her promise and his trust of her devotion. He frequently embraced Elsa and stroked her shoulders in a mixture of love and exasperation as she anguished her way to demanding he reveal his secrets.

Whether it is Kaufmann's or Py's interpretation, these gestures helped reveal Lohengrin as a deeply compassionate, committed lover. After Lohengrin has answered her demand, and she has appeared through a hole in the back wall of the opera house and broken down in a paroxysm of regret, he takes his jacket off and drapes it over her shoulders. Perhaps the jacket will bring her comfort in later life.

In another stage action that confused me, out of one the suitcases (glowing from the inside) Lohengrin hands Elsa 3 paper crowns (the same kind as King Heinrich wears—post-war limits on exotic materials for crowns?) that he claims are the sword, hunting horn, and ring she is to pass on to Gottfried when he reappears. Even more confusing, in this production he reappears (?) as the body bag, presumably containing Gottfried's body, is pulled out of the trapdoor. So, is Gottfried alive or dead? I'm pretty sure that Wagner's ending is different, though not much more positive!

I had not experienced the conducting of Tahu Matheson before, but I found his interpretation of the score exciting and at time revelatory. His shaping of the many climaxes by bringing out both the brass lines, and getting a much sharper edge to their sound, added to the tension of the scene. At other times, he drew out a sensuous line to match the characters' emotions, or kept the sound low just to support the characters as they bared their souls or revealed their nefariousness. I look forward to him conducting other Wagner works. His job was made easier by the wonderful playing of Orchestra Victoria whose members gave one of the most confident and responsive performances of this music I've heard in a long time. Such playing demonstrates the value of building a tradition of playing Wagner's music, rather than performing his works occasionally, as had been our lot in Australia until relatively recently. The Opera Australia chorus was, as always, in fine voice, even though for much of the time they were confined to barracks, or rather the opera boxes behind the upper stage, or squeezed in on the sides of the lower stage.

I was very happy to see this production twice, despite the oddities of the staging, because of the quality of the music from the orchestra and most of the singers. The production, though, contained many more moments of wittiness, confusion, puzzlement, and affect than I have discussed, but perhaps it will make more sense if I see it in a revival soon? If you are interested in reading Py's own account of his motivation and interpretation, you can read it online at www.lamonnaiedemunt.be/en/mmm-online/928-for-me-the-aesthetization-of-politics-is-pivotal-in-this-work. For me, his comments about the politics of the opera produced as much confusion and puzzlement as his production—perhaps there is a link?

'I believe it was a true instinct that led me to guard against an excessive eagerness to make things too plain, for I have learned to feel that to make one's intentions too obvious risks impairing a proper understanding of the work in question; in drama – as in any work of art – it is a question of making an impression not by parading one's opinions but by setting forth what is instinctive.'

[Letter from Wagner to August Röckel, 25/26 January 1854.]

LEIPZIG'S WAGNER 22 FESTIVAL JUNE-JULY 2022

Report by Dr Terence Watson

All 13 of Wagner's artworks, counting each of The Ring Cycle works individually, are rarely performed together; most Wagner festivals perform the 10 works that Wagner considered his canon: he relegated the earlier works to the status of juvenilia. The program notes for *Die Feen*, the first completed opera, helpfully informed the audience that the world premiere of the opera was part of a full season of Wagner's artworks in 1888 at the Royal Opera House Munich. The opera was again performed as part of a "Wagner cycle" in Prague in 1893, as part of the celebrations for what would have been his 80th birthday, and commemorating 10 years since his death. The next performance of the full set of operas was in Leipzig's Neue Theatre in early to mid-1938, the 125th anniversary of his birth. On the 100th anniversary of Wagner's death in 1983, the Bavarian Opera in Munich presented the full set.

At the time of writing this overview, the details of the casts, creative teams, and many images of the productions are still available on Oper Leipzig's website: www.oper-leipzig.de/de/programm/20-06-2022/oper. If you just do a web search, the best way into the details is to pretend to buy a ticket to the operas you're interested in. Directors: Renaud Doucet—*Die Feen*; Aron Stiehl—*Das Liebesverbot*; Nicolas Joel—*Rienzi*; Michiel Dijkema—*Der fliegende Holländer*; Calixto Bieto—*Tannhäuser*; Patrick Bialdyga—*Lohengrin*; Enrico Lübke and Torsten Buß—*Tristan und Isolde*; David Pountney—*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*; Rosamund Gilmore—*The Ring Cycle*; and Roland Aeschlimann—*Parsifal*.

Die Feen

Seeing again the production of *Die Feen* I had seen in 2013, reminded me of the benefits of having an opera house with modern staging equipment. Many of these productions used the revolve stage frequently and, in some cases, had the revolve separate into sections that could move up and down independently, giving the Directors much scope in the scenic images they could create. For instance, the set is multi-level and multi-modular with a huge façade of the modern apartment

block (typical of the modern-historical look of parts of Leipzig) with a cut-away at stage level so we can see inside Arindal's apartment where he is apparently living with a contemporary wife (who may or may not be a hallucination of his or a memory of his fairy wife!!). Part way through the very melodious overture the windows of the building's façade light up and we see the fairy kingdom behind. Later in the first act, when the action moves to

fairy land the entire 30 metre or so high façade flies up and we see fairy land in all its Munchkinland prettiness with the fairies (male and female) in costumes from about the 1840s, when the opera was composed—and first staged in Magdeburg—and set in a lovely forest glade with a huge tree in the centre. A little later, the scene changes to the fairy queen's or Arindal's palace (since they are both royals) depending on the action. Again, this achieved elegantly and efficiently with parts of the sets flying up and new bits replacing them. At times there are elements of the three major sets evident, giving us a sense of all these times and locations co-existing in the "modern" Arindal's mind.

From here onwards, the scenes more or less alternate between contemporary and fairy/palace settings, depending on the course of the rather complicated plot that has elements of later operas already very evident (along with musical phrases and melodies that pre-figure later motifs). We later discovered a short documentary about the production in which the Director and set designer explained that they had conceived the production to take full advantage of the size of the Leipzig stage and the immense range of machinery and technical effects to give body to their vision of the opera. The opera concluded with a huge reconciliation scene culminating in Wagner himself, carrying a copy of the score, being lowered from the skies by a huge butterfly into the joyful throng!

Das Liebesverbot

Das Liebesverbot – The Ban on Love, very loosely based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Unlike Shakespeare's play, this work that is hard to take seriously on any level as it stands. Wagner called it a "Grand Komisches Oper," but it is hard to tell whether this later comment is to be taken seriously or ironically—probably the latter, as he distanced himself from many aspects of his early life. It seems that the Director was also of the view that it should not / cannot be taken seriously, since he chose to treat it largely as a mixture of *Singspiel* (like aspects of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*), Viennese operetta, and Dario Fo style farce, with the heroine Isabella and some other characters breaking the fourth wall and talking directly to the audience. The program notes attempt to make a case for Wagner having a serious political motive in writing the text, but this production clearly makes the point that this is the work of a young man (about 22 yo) giving a finger to the establishment, with little interest in a political ideology.

The work opens with a crowd of Carnival revellers in Palermo, dressed as rather 60ish countercultural hippies, dressed in a wide-range of non-conventional dress, including 18th century French court attire, the familiar leopard skin patterned dresses, nearly nothing loincloths, flowery headdresses, etc – very colourful, and the cast looked as if they were having fun dressing up like this. Rather more 2000s gender-bent and diverse than 60s hippies. Most of the chorus looked as if they were cross-dressed, and some of the main characters cross-dressed for the final scene that takes place on Carnival night. There was one striking looking young woman in the chorus who had one line in Act 1 that she delivered in a fine, ringing baritone, which gave me a frisson of surprise

and delight. She had a few more lines to sing in the finale. While such costuming could have appeared to be superficial hipness, the overall effect, along with young Wagner's plea for sexual freedom (a relative concept of course), offered a strong message of openness and acceptance. I found the overall impression very amusing and the Director's interpretation politically aware without being preachy. Once, I got, or thought I got, what the Director was doing with this bit of theatrical nonsense, I sat back and enjoyed the spectacle. And the music—there are some lovely numbers and lots of interesting counterpoint and colour in the orchestral writing, and in the multi-part choral writing, as Wagner tries out yet another style from the French Grand Opera style of *Die Feen*.

Rienzi



The set for *Rienzi* was composed of a basic grey 3-sided square with a very large revolve; the props consisted of such things as a number of unpadded wooden chairs in two lines (forming a V upstage) for a council meeting, or a series of small models (about chest height) of various Roman buildings of the time of Rienzi. Some of the short scenes (Wagner was still caught up in the French Grand Opera pattern of multi-scenes in a complicated narrative with many sub-plots) were played in front of a non-descript front wall. The opera ends with a battle between the Rienzi-supporters (the people) and the two noble families united for the time being against Rienzi in which Rome burns (foreshadowing the end of *Götterdämmerung*). In this production, the model of the Senate building bursts into flames, and a single representative of the noble families machine-guns Rienzi and the people to death. The production was set in some vaguely contemporary period with the noble families looking and acting like Mafiosi, although Rienzi, for much of the time, especially in his more megalomaniacal moments, dresses in Roman toga and breastplate.

Der fliegende Holländer



The production of *Der fliegende Holländer* was generally a hoot, which is not something one can often say about a Wagner opera. It was also, again, technically amazing, as they demonstrated what the stage is capable of doing. The revolve, I've mentioned before, now appeared with the central section a big hole representing the hold of the ship, and the two outer thirds the fore and aft of the deck – AND they rose up and down to represent the surging of the storm! Otherwise, the set was relatively simple, with rolled up rigging spars rising and falling at different times. The Director had chosen to emphasise the difference between the version of the legend reported by a character in one of Heinrich Heine stories and Wagner's version. Heine's 1835 unfinished novel *Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelewopski* ("From the Memoirs of Herr Schnabelewopski"), contains an episode where the narrator is watching a performance of a play about the Dutchman in theatre in Amsterdam, but is interrupted by a flirtatious Dutch woman with whom he leaves the theatre for a private room where they "kiss" a lot. Once satiated, he returns to the theatre to watch the final resolution of the story as Senta kills herself to save the Dutchman's soul. The narrator moralises: "...women should never marry a Flying Dutchman, while we men may learn from

the play that one can, through women, meet one's downfall and perish—under favourable circumstances." Quotations from the story are projected onto large screens over the stage at appropriate moments in the opera. The primary effect is, for me, to show how seriously Wagner took himself and the story.

The Director, though, seems to have sided with Heine because he injected lots of real, as opposed to fantasy, elements into the production. The sailors are all very credible, with them being very boyo at times, with some shaping up for a half-serious brawl, and drinking lots. At another point, the Steersman and his girlfriend are going for it on the bare stage when his sailor mates and their partners creep up on them and then burst out into the final sailor's merrymaking chorus. The steersman did a very credible job of leaping up in fright in *flagrante delicto*.

The first appearance of the Dutchman, Thomas J Mayer, was very surprising and credible. Since there is a reference in the text to his failed attempts to drown himself in the sea, which spits him out each time, the Director had him sprawled on a beach with 3 model whales around him. To make the point clear, he also had a sketch of beached whales somewhere in Holland from around the time of the legend. This Dutchman is still dressed in 16th century clothing, while the rest of the cast is dressed in costumes of around the time Wagner composed the opera, 1837-39.

The finale, where Senta is supposed to throw herself into the sea to follow the Dutchman and prove her worth to him and God, was also a satisfying surprise. Here, Senta climbs on one of the furled sail spars and is lifted into the flies, the shadow of a body then falls back down, another screen is lifted up and Senta's body is lying on the stage. We assumed that the person taking the sail lift up was a double. Just as we worked that out, at another climax, the figure we assumed was the Dutchman at front stage centre, collapsed – an empty suit of clothing, so he was gone too—to heaven with

Senta, we are to assume. Then there was the coup de théâtre of the production—the appearance of the ship and the Dutchman’s crew!!

The front of the ship not only came out over the first 7 or 8 rows, but also moved sideways over the audience. It was one of the most memorable stage images I’ve seen in a long time, and I felt a real surge of joy and delight at it. This is what live theatre can do, with a decent sized stage and modern machinery. Come on Sydney!!!!

If *Dutchman* was taking some of the mickey out of Wagner, Calixto Bieito’s production of *Tannhäuser* took a strong naturalistic view of the work. This shouldn’t have been surprising as Robert and I had seen his very brutal interpretation of *Der fliegende Holländer* in Stuttgart in 2013 in which Senta is shown as a young woman so trapped in a stultifying village with a mercenary father and controlling boyfriend that she takes to writing *Rette mich* (Rescue me) on the set! The opening scene and the Bacchanale featured the wonderful mezzo Kathrin Göring as Venus, but sadly she is not a dancer. She had to carry the whole overture and Bacchanale herself, as she cavorted and gambled among the foliage dangling into the grotto to which she has been banished by the Christian Fathers. So, for some 20 minutes she “danced,” but, I suspect, was just asked to improvise. The Bacchanale climaxed with her

masturbating herself on various dangly bits of foliage, perhaps as she dreamed of the halcyon days of pleasure on Mt Olympus.

Andreas Schager, a very fine heldentenor, appeared as a very modern minstrel in green fatigues. Rather, unbelievably, he claimed that he was tired of making love to the gorgeous Kathrin (sorry, Venus) and wanted to go home! When he is released into the meadow scene, he is greeted by yet another group of boyos, this time his noble singing mates who seem to be wandering aimlessly around the countryside, rather than having a civilised picnic. After some roughhousing among the boyos, they engage in a bizarre hazing ritual of smearing blood over each other’s bare torsos, which seemed to suggest some not very deeply buried homo-eroticism.

On a very sparse set for Act 2, consisting of columns that suggested the outside of some nameless, characterless business or government office, Elisabeth sang a very convincing “Dich teure Halle” to the hall in which the singing contest had been held until Tannhäuser disappeared.

Act 3 shows not only Elisabeth, but also Wolfram, and then *Tannhäuser descending into madness in scenes of great naturalism, and hence quite un-Wagnerian in their brutality and honesty* (see below).

Lohengrin



I was anticipating this production of *Lohengrin* because I had heard Klaus Florian Vogt in this role in Bayreuth. His voice seemed magical—light and supple when he was being intimate or quiet, but powerful and rich when needed. And he could act. Fortunately, though he has aged quite a bit, his voice, though a little darker, can still produce those light, floating moments. His Elsa was Simone Schneider, who sang and acted very well her role as another immature girl under great social and personal pressure.

The set is effectively a bare stage with pillared walls on 3 sides, suggesting the interior of a rather drab castle, and 3 large tables. At the start of Act 1 they are end to end across the stage, but in later scenes they are moved about in various

combinations, until they are placed side by side to form the bridal bed—no wonder they couldn’t consummate! Elsa spends quite a bit of time under the main table in Act 1, perhaps to suggest her very young age, and her sense of being out of her depth in front of the King. King Heinrich was sung by another blond, blue-eyed hunk Günther Groissböck who I first saw in this role in Bayreuth in a dreadful production. Why oh why was Telramund blind in this production? The answer could be that he is metaphorically blind to Ortrud’s manipulation of him, but that is blindingly obvious anyway! Interestingly, this production gave the Herald, usually just a walk on, deliver, walk off role, by making him Ortrud’s sex/love interest. Their affair could be carried on pretty much under Telramund’s nose, or in front of his blind eyes!, without discovery.

At the end of the wedding scenes, Ortrud arrives to push her one last time to put the question to Lohengrin, and then she beats Elsa with her own bouquet—very rude. Finally, Lohengrin and Elsa are alone in the bedroom with the 3 tabled bed, now strewn with petals. Although not as overtly political as the *Tannhäuser* production, this version of *Lohengrin* also suggested some feminist, and even broader social, ideas about the wisdom of betrothing women when they are too young to strangers who turn up and, on the spot, declare that they love them. On the other hand, this relatively straightforward production allowed us to focus on the singing, acting, and orchestral playing.

Tristan und Isolde



The set for this production of *Tristan und Isolde* was the most complicated and weird set we’d seen so far. It reminded me of the castle Gormenghast with its derelict brokenness. The Act 1 set suggested the wreck of the ship on which Isolde, Brangäne, Tristan, Kurnewal and the crew are sailing to Cornwall. I felt for

the OHS risks of the cast who had to clamber over broken stairs, through broken doors, etc all while the set was on about a 1:10 slope from stage left rear to stage right front. This set also revolved, so that the “stateroom” (which was in a state of decay) moved to show Tristan in his cabin, then back again. The inner proscenium had thin fluorescent tubes lining it, including across the stage floor, to form a frame of light, but looking at the stage caused us a little eye pain. In keeping with the possible feminist theme running through the productions, Tristan keeps Isolde waiting after she, his superior, has summoned him to her stateroom. More pointedly, while Isolde’s maid Brangäne is delivering the summons to Tristan, his crew crowd around Brangäne leering at her and trying to grope her, causing her great distress. I’ve not seen anything like this awareness of female servants’ vulnerability to assault and abuse in any other productions.

In Act 2, in the inner courtyard of King Marke's castle, there were again staircases, partial walls and doors that looked as if they had been bombed out or gone to wrack and ruin because Marke couldn't afford the upkeep. As Tristan sings his hallucination, he begins stepping over the fluorescent tube on the stage onto an apron of the stage, then back into the set proper. I hazard a guess that this is supposed to represent Tristan entering his transcendental world and moving back to "reality." The separation is reinforced by the, to me, strange lowering and raising of a scrim to, I guess again, further separate Tristan from the "real" world inside. It is from the apron side that he asks Isolde if she will follow him to the world of night, so perhaps she understands that he means for her to leave the "real" world with him. She then steps onto the apron, while two beautiful young actors mimic them inside the now very dark set. I take it that these are the *schöne Seelen*, beautiful souls, of the lovers, but I couldn't work out what they added to the production, except to give us aesthetic pleasure not greatly in evidence in Andreas Schager and Catherine Forster, but perhaps I'm too harsh?

Act 3 is set in Tristan's castle in Kareol and it also looks as if it has seen better days long ago. It too consists of broken walls, stairs,

doors, and Tristan, for some reason seems to be unconscious as he sits outside in an uncomfortable armchair in a snowstorm with no greatcoat or other protection. I guess, in that castle in that state of decay, there's probably nowhere dry and comfortable to lie dying! As he waits for Isolde to arrive by ship from Cornwall, he hallucinates again and this time 7 young maidens appear, all dressed to look like a much younger, more nubile version of Isolde—I couldn't blame him for his fantasy! She finally arrives so he can die in her arms. Tristan then walks (dead or alive, I'm not sure, perhaps we are to take this as his spiritual body) over the fluorescent tubes on the apron, while Isolde begins her *Verklärung*. She then joins him for the climax of her paean to her now dead lover, but is she also now dead, since she's standing on the apron? The scrim has also descended again, and the set is dark. However, as we hear the dying bars of the finale, the scrim rises, and they walk hand in hand into the now partially lit set to disappear somewhere in stage rear. Now, I tried hard to understand quite which realm they were inhabiting as their supposed spirits were now walking through the "real" world. I assume that practicality triumphed over logic and symbolism so that we didn't have Tristan and Isolde standing on the apron when the music ended, and the house lights came up.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg



Sunday evening was the performance of what used to be my 2nd least favourite Wagner opera after *Tannhäuser*, until Donald McIntyre in the German bicentennial gift of a production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, showed me that it was indeed a serious artwork. This night's performance couldn't have been more different from just about all the other performances I've seen. It was light-hearted, joyous, funny, moving, and serious in a very simple production that focused on people's interactions—another of the common themes of these Leipzig productions. I found myself crying with pleasure and anticipation when the golden-haired, blue-eyed Walther sang the first hints of his Prize song. The singer Magnus Vigilius also appeared very young in his tight hipster jeans, slimline shirt and jacket—all in white, but I suspect from his voice that he was a bit older. However, his appearance pointed toward the more or less contemporary take of the Director, with Eva Pogner sung by Elisabet Strid (for her third major role in just over a week!).

Hans Sachs was the English James Rutherford, about whom I knew nothing, but according to his bio in the program, he had sung this role and many other Wagner roles, including Wotan, many times. He looks like a big, cuddly teddy bear, so I immediately warmed to him, and his interpretation of the role just added to the joy of watching him sing and act. The Sextus Beckmesser Mathias Hausmann we had also seen a few times already, but I wasn't prepared for his presentation of the rather nasty character who is often taken to be a Jewish caricature (of a Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, who became a critic of Wagner), with the singers often affecting a nasal whine, presumed to

represent Jewish cantorial singing style. Hausmann, fortunately, sang with his full, rich tenor voice, while dressed in a drab, black official garment, which contrasted dramatically with the full mediaeval splendour of the Mastersingers' costume, carefully based on drawings and paintings from the 16th century. Despite Hausmann's singing, the character comes across as spiteful and pedantic, something of a blight on the traditions of openness and camaraderie of the Mastersingers, who claim to welcome everyone, regardless of class (but not gender or sexuality or colour, of course), to try out for membership by singing a great song.

The set was remarkably simple. A huge amphitheatre dominated the back 2/3rds of the set. On the small space stage front centre is a small reproduction of the town itself. Again, some of the cast face OHS problems in wending their way through that set, as if they were giant figures from Nuremberg's mythological past. Some parts of the set are taken apart and form seats that are placed on some of the steps of the amphitheatre for the Mastersingers to sit on. Other parts of the set are sat on by other characters during the first 2 acts. Act 3 opens with a new set. On the site of the small town set is now a small room representing Sachs's cobbling workroom. In this room happens Walther's dream song, Sachs's writing it down, and Beckmesser's appropriation of the text.

When the song competition is due to start, the room simply sinks into the floor and another section of set descends from the flies to form the podium on which the competition is to be held. On top of the podium is a model of a building I don't recognise as from Nuremberg. More wonders of the Leipzig opera house technical possibilities. The townspeople assemble on the steps of the amphitheatre. The various guild members dance and sing their way onto the stage and then the steps, with all of them having a jolly good time as they advance the claims of cobblers, bakers, and tailors to having the most heroic and important role in Nuremberg's fabled history.

By this time, I was snuffling quietly into my mask at the sheer joy in this finale and Vigilius's impressive delivery of the final version of the Prize song, despite the dubious ethics with which Wagner handles the character of Beckmesser, and the puzzlement about Eva's behaviour. Overall, I felt this to be one of the most humane and direct productions I've seen. Robert and I agreed that we would be very happy to sit through this production again.

To be continued in December Quarterly

DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG BERLIN OPER 2/7/22

Report by Jenny Ferns



Having spent the second half of June 2022 at the Leipzig Oper, (accompanied by the Gewandhaus Orchestra), I had been immersed in the first 7 Wagner operas of his oeuvre. It was possible for me to attend to the continuing sequence by attending *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at Deutsche Oper Berlin when I attended the 8th in the series in Berlin. Amazingly, this array of choice was possible during the period while the Opera Houses of Germany were still enjoying their fully available offerings before their summer recess. Leipzig Oper presented the whole oeuvre of Wagner's 13 opera compositions under the banner "Wagner 22". In Berlin *Die Meistersinger* was a stand-alone Wagner offering this season.

Deutsche Oper Berlin is housed, very conveniently with access to its own U-Bahn station, ("Deutsche Oper"), in Bismarckstrasse 35 10627 Berlin-Charlottenburg. It's Bornemann (1961) architecture, like that of the Leipzig Opera House (1960), are of Brutalist architecture design and construction, reconstructed on former Opera House sites. Therefore, from the external viewpoint, they are both functional rather than beautiful. Audience comfort in both theatres is assured, though the public facilities as well as the foyer arrangements, though spacious, are not particularly comfortable. (A strange and complicated arrangement, in both locations, applies to the pre-order process for interval drinks. It seems to be traditional but less efficient than it is worth.)

Having been warned, and therefore prepared, for a "different" slant on the Berlin 2022 *Meistersinger* context, the mental adjustment and preparation required, was necessary, and appreciated. Over the interim period since it was completed in 1867, in 2022 a contemporary setting is justified, but this production was an extreme jump from the intended original historic placement of events. Some may call it "innovation" in the current production, which may be necessary. But the new context, together with some of the extreme behaviours and actions required, (mostly by the new role-playing of the main characters, as well as some chorus activity behind the on-going front-stage singing and movement), was distracting and superfluous.

From the first notes of the overture the earworm from the earlier experience of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, alerted me to the difference in acoustics and orchestral sound in the Deutsche Oper auditorium. Nevertheless, the movement of the dazzling red velvet curtain set the expectation high. Pressingly quickly, a new

version of Wagner's famous story emerged. (A Saturday evening performance, commencing 16.00 Uhr, filled to only ¾ capacity was being filmed from the rear of the stalls.) The opening chorus included the placement of the choral voices (usually in an on-stage church setting) in the upstairs galleries on both sides of the auditorium.

The opera was first performed in Munich on 21 June 1868. It conveys in the plot, many well-entrenched customs to do with the art of singing in a Guild-managed community dominated by tradition. In the mean-time by the 21st century, for this production, the concept has been significantly revised. The Producers, Jossi Wieler and Anna Viebrock together with Sergio Morabito, have adjusted the 19th century "art of German singing" to be transposed to contemporary activities in a music school in Germany. (This context is based on a true recent "Me-Too" scandal at a Munich music school.) Their main intention is to show that the core of this opera is to do with the "vocation" of singers, including the training, pressures and discipline required for that profession.

The cast of singers of all ages, (students of the Institute), includes some very mature male voices and other choristers of diverse nationalities. They are all very casually dressed, continuously and athletically re-arranging the area of stackable furniture to suit the varying purposes of the scene. Here there are plenty of distracting opportunities to create humour. After-all, this opera is billed as Wagner's only "comedy".

Eva's father, Dr. Viet Pogner (Albert Passendorfer) in this 2022 version, is the imminently retiring Founder/Director of the Private Conservatorium where this event unfolds. On his retirement the institution is to become a public establishment. He has decreed that his successor should, not only be the successful candidate in a singing competition to be held on the forthcoming St Johannes' Day celebration, but also receive his daughter, Eva's, hand in marriage. Thereby Dr. Pogner hopes to retain some degree of control over his beloved Music Institute which has good standing in the community.

After the Overture, on curtain-up, the opening scene, normally set in a church during the Sunday service has been transferred into a lobby of a Music Conservatorium's campus corridor where students congregate and disburse during the Chorale. There is an immediate "surround-sound" gained by the chorus of off-stage choir members being placed in the upper loges of the minimally decorated and functional auditorium. On stage, the students are occupied with arranging and re-arranging furniture, as if in preparation for an orchestral presentation.

Though the whole musical presentation sticks closely to the original score and libretto (shown with supertitles in both German and English), the on-stage roles and activities deal much more with physical development and therapies, than with structure and delivery of songs at a competitive level. Hans Sachs, (Johan Reuter), is a masseuse or physical trainer as much as a music teacher. David, (Ya-Chung Huang) Hans Sachs' master student, here shown in a bright green track-suit as a very comical contribution, as well as an attendant in the logistics of the arrangement of musical furniture in the department (on stage), also as teacher of yoga and physical movement. Eva Pogner, (Heidi Stober), usually portrayed as a formal "correct" character, is here a very uninhibited, diminutive, active and vivacious music student. She is distracted from her studies by her interaction with Hans

Sachs and the already confident relationship with the Nobleman, Walther von Stolzing, (Klaus Florian Vogt). Magdalena, (Annika Schlicht) usually Eva's companion and girl-friend of David, is here a departmental administrator and supervisor.

David, as a senior tutor, as well as Hans Sachs' assistant; regales the other students whilst also being the recipient and teacher of physical therapies and massage techniques, purportedly being applied to release the stresses of his performing duties. Meanwhile, Walther von Stolzing and Eva are occupied in unabashed romantic actions. Magdalena, prevails in assisting and directing the behaviour of the couple as well as the other students in their various activities. On the revelation that von Stolzing needs to learn quickly the techniques of singing and the poetry of song composition in order to qualify for the song competition, Magdalena orders David to explain the necessary details.

Hans Sachs, usually a shoe-maker (cobbler), is redeployed here as a physical trainer, specializing in foot care, balance and deportment matters to help with voice production. He himself, wears no shoes. In this current format the Wagner composition converts to lessons in singing structure but also management of power and manipulation in the music training environment. The senior Faculty (formerly Guild members) considers the suitability of the new contestant.

From time-to-time, a large digital clock placed on the rear wall of the lobby, activates itself, backwards. Its relevance and significance being lost on this viewer.

The plot thickens when Dr Pogner reveals that there is already a prospective competitor who is well-versed in the singing techniques and rules relating to the up-coming competition, a member of the Faculty, Sixtus Beckmesser, (Philipp Jekal). He is also a brilliant pianist. A curious and quirky change from Beckmesser's usual instrument of choice, a lute. Beckmesser is a conservative member of staff who doesn't always see eye to eye with Hans Sachs who wants the faculty to be more Democratic. However, he still encourages Beckmesser to try to find a suitable song for the competition despite Beckmesser and Sachs being of similar age and less suited for marriage to Eva. Sachs has no intention of entering the competition. He is already a Meister as well as a widower with no interest in remarriage. His strength is in teaching.

Meanwhile Walter von Stolzing and Eva Pogner have been continuing their very active courtship including all the usual student freedoms. Eva, (Heidi Stober) the American Soprano, is

extremely confident of her position and keen to confirm Walther von Stolzing as her preferred candidate for the song competition. She has a delightfully bright clear well-controlled voice despite her very active physical requirements of the role and her slight, diminutive figure – a pleasant surprise for that role these days. A casting coup!

Singing Walther von Stolzing, Klaus Florian Vogt, was a co-operative consort enjoying the physical and musical partnership with Eva Pogner. Always looking a suitably pony-tailed, non-conservative, yet aristocratic, match for his socially well-placed and debonair companion.

After Hans Sachs' efforts to sort out the various colleagues and participants' personal issues and maintain his own self-control, he has his most significant monologue "Wahn! Wahn!" at the beginning of Act III. He tries to rationalize the various issues involved for the individuals and for the various levels of "management" of institutions, state and country, eventually deciding that there must be some kind of leadership to help manage these situations. This, and the concluding remarks, after Walther has been awarded, yet denies, the prize, are the highlights of the opera. Johan Reuter played the demands of the role with suitable aplomb despite the conflicting demands throughout the opera.

Some criticism can be raised about the possibly unwarranted distracting on-stage activities of the chorus of students (during the long monologue of Hans Sachs) which purports to be dancing but amounts to sexually suggestive gyrations at length. Audience distraction caused by this activity would certainly not form the intention of the libretto and score, let alone the stage-directions intended by Wagner. Such intended alterations are not always appropriate. As expected, there was a concerted booing by the audience at the conclusion of that Act.

From a production point-of-view it must be so difficult to create a complete variation of plot based on a very-well-known scenario but still to maintain synchronicity with the original score and libretto. Josi Weiler and his colleagues have been most innovative in the process and outcome. The challenge of the idea and its innovative execution make it worth pursuing. In future editions some adjustments may be appropriate.

A challenge arises for the Directors to devise a concept (without the original creator's input) to create a satisfactory result or; that the paradox of creativity is that the quality of the original idea must be maintained.

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AN INSIGHT INTO WHY OUR SUPPORTED SINGERS NEED TO GO TO GERMANY

Excerpts from New Yorker article, June 13, 2022

A GRAND TOUR OF GERMANY'S OPERA PARADISE

Even small German cities have fine companies—and they're all supported by the state.

Germany is, on statistical grounds, the most operatic country on earth. The Bundesrepublik has more than eighty permanent opera houses, which in a typical season present seven or eight thousand performances—about a third of the global total, according to the Web site Operabase. By contrast, Italy, the birthplace of the art, manages fewer than two thousand. As opportunities elsewhere dwindle, the German system has become a crucial mechanism by which opera careers are made. Countless younger singers from around the world have undergone the ritual of a *Festvertrag*—a fixed-term contract to sing a variety of roles at a single German house. With so many productions, directors feel free to try out new ideas, some outlandish and some revelatory. New works surface regularly; forgotten scores are given a second chance. Public funding makes this quasi-utopia possible: before the pandemic, federal, state, and local entities were spending 2.7 billion euros each year on theatre.

For years, I had read stories about the German opera industry without really having experienced it firsthand. I'd visited the celebrated companies of Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and Dresden but not the dozens of smaller houses that flesh out the network. So, on a recent trip to Germany, I ignored the metropolitan centers and took fresh exits off the Autobahn. The array of offerings available during a four-day stretch was staggering. Beyond the usual surfeit of Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini, I could have seen Martinů's "The Greek Passion," in Osnabrück; Auber's "La Muette de Portici," in Kassel; Glass's "In the Penal Colony," in Gera; or three different stagings of "Der Rosenkavalier," in Dessau, Nuremberg, and Trier. I settled on an itinerary in central and eastern Germany: "Aida" in Chemnitz, "The Marriage of Figaro" in Erfurt, and "Die Walküre" in Coburg. The combined population of the three cities adds up to half a million—less than Kansas City's.

What's most striking to an American opera tourist is how cheap tickets are. At the stops on my trip, prices ranged from fifteen to fifty-two euros, with further discounts for students. In many places, people with limited resources can get in for free. How long these lavish subsidies can persist is an open question: fears of cutbacks are always circulating, and studies indicate a gradual erosion of

interest in classical music. For now, though, the system seems secure, with the performing arts widely considered a form of *Lebensmittel*—basic nourishment. The German minister of culture, Claudia Roth, who once served as a dramaturge in Dortmund and also managed a rock band, recently announced a seven-per-cent increase in arts funding.

Coburg, with a population of forty-one thousand, is by far the smallest of the cities I visited. The Duchy of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha possessed inordinate influence in the nineteenth century, not least as a gene pool for the British Royal Family. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, and her mother, Princess Victoria, were both born in Coburg. The Landestheater, a handsome neoclassical pile with four hundred and ninety-one seats, was built at the behest of Ernst I, Albert's father. Schloss Ehrenburg, the ducal residence, is across the plaza. Beforehand, I made sure to sample the famous Coburger bratwurst, which is grilled over a pinecone fire.

The Coburg *Die Walküre*, directed by Alexander Müller-Elmau, is the second installment of a *Ring* cycle in progress. The concept mixes mythic and contemporary elements: fur garments over tank tops, punk Valkyries on swings, a television broadcasting the company's production of *Das Rheingold*. There are a few too many reminiscences of past *Rings*—the fateful pendulum from Patrice Chéreau's 1976 staging at Bayreuth makes a pointless appearance—but Wagner's sublime tangle of politics and emotion comes across. Because a full-sized Wagner orchestra wouldn't fit into Coburg's pit, the company made do with a reduced complement of fifty-eight players. The conductor was **Daniel Carter**, Coburg's young, **Australian-born**, Melbourne educated, music director. Although the ensemble sounded scrappy in places, I found it refreshing to hear Wagner on intimate terms, with psychology trumping spectacle. The vocal discovery of the night was the young Swedish soprano Åsa Jäger, who sang Brünnhilde with clarion tone, crisp diction, and infectious zest. This run of performances marks not only Jäger's German debut but also her debut in any Wagner role. I suspect that later in her career she will look back fondly on Coburg, where her ascent began. The ultimate appeal of operagoing in Germany is to see a venerable art form experiencing continuous rebirth.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/20/a-grand-tour-of-germanys-opera-paradise>

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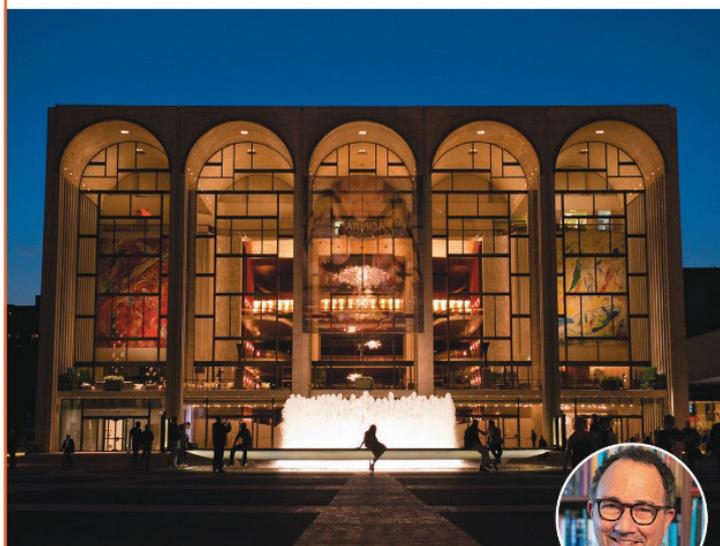
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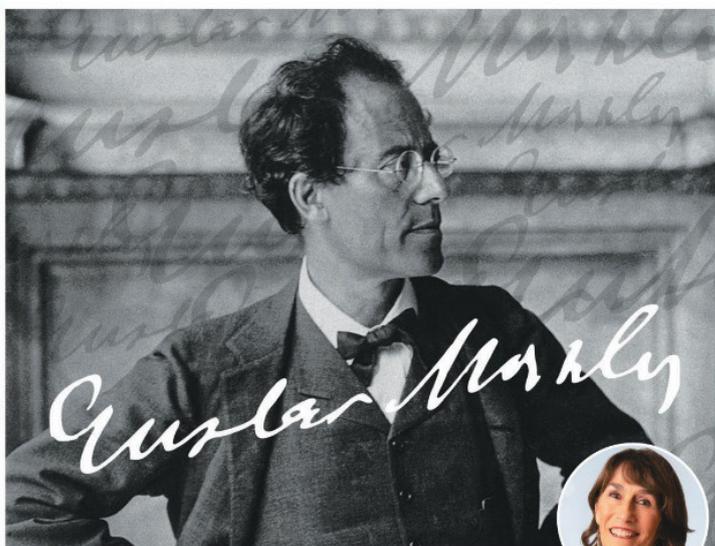
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Website: www.wagner.org.au | Website enquiries: webmaster@wagner.org.au

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The Richard Wagner Monument in Goerdelerring Park, Leipzig
(Refer to article on page 11)

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The Wagner Quarterly is designed, produced and distributed by MKR Productions
154 Matcham Road, Matcham NSW 2250 | Ph: 0402 834 419 | Email: michael@mkrproductions.com.au
