



CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY

ISSUE NO 40

167

DECEMBER 2022



Bayreuth 2022 *Siegfried* curtain call

SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

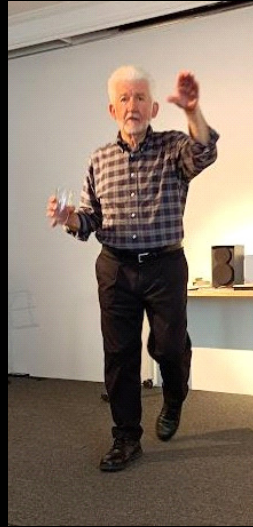
To promote the music of Richard Wagner and his contemporaries and to encourage a wider understanding of their work.
To support the training of young Wagnerian or potential Wagnerian performers from NSW.

PHOTOS OF RECENT EVENTS

Sunday 18 September at the Goethe Institut



Members enjoying champagne during interval



Robert Gay

Thank you! 27.11.2022



President Esteban Insausti thanking retiring committee member **Lis Bergmann** for her devoted work for the society

Sunday 13 November Concert at St Columba



Soprano Jessica Harper



Cellist Joseph Eisinger



Accompanist Bradley Gilchrist



Sunday 27 November Christmas Party at Robert Mitchell's



Terry Clarke, John Barrer, Julie Clarke



Robert Mitchell's concert salon



A winning raffle ticket

FOR YOUR DIARY

2023

24 Mar - 1 May 2023	Complete Melbourne Opera Ring Cycle	Bendigo
17, 20 May	OA Tannhäuser concert performance	Melbourne
18 July	Das Rheingold	Singapore
16, 18 Nov	SSO Das Rheingold in concert	Sydney Opera House
1 - 23 Dec	OA Ring Cycle	Brisbane

COMING SOCIETY EVENTS 2023

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

DATE	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
Sun 29 Jan	12.00 DVD Sing Faster - the Stagehands' Ring Cycle 2.00 A conversation with Suzanne Chaundy and Andrew Bailey , Director and Designer of the MO <i>Ring</i>	Goethe Institut + Zoom
Sun 26 Feb	12.00 DVD Global Wagner 2.00 A conversation with Maestro Anthony Negus and Carmen Jakobi	Goethe Institut + Zoom
Sun 12 March	12.00 DVD Richard Strauss - at the End of the Rainbow 2.00 Talk by Peter Bassett: A new look at the Ring	Goethe Institut + Zoom
April	No event because of the Bendigo <i>Ring</i>	
Sun 21 May	AGM, Concert , Wagner's Birthday celebration	St Columba

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)

QUARTERLY HIGHLIGHTS:

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,

As we approach the end of 2022 it is a good time to reflect on what has past and look forward to what's to come. This was the first year since 2020 when we were allowed to travel overseas. Some of us took advantage of this to partake of some much-needed Wagner, both interstate and overseas.

Melbourne was where it was all happening. We had a wonderful Melbourne Opera *Die Walküre* under Anthony Negus followed a few months later by OA's *Lohengrin* with Jonas Kaufmann. For the hardcore, there was Catherine Foster's Australian debut in *Elektra* – if you missed that you missed something special. Only a few weeks later a concert version of *Siegfried*, again under Negus, getting the company battle-ready for Bendigo. On overseas travels many members made their way to Leipzig for Wagner 22, Bayreuth for the first full Festival since Covid which included a new *Ring*, and to Berlin for the Staatsoper's new production of the *Ring*. There are reports on all these in the following pages.

The WSNSW delivered 14 events during the year which included 2 films, 3 Zoom talks, 5 lectures and 4 spectacular concerts and recitals. Many thanks to Michael Day for sourcing many of the speakers and films, Ross Whitelaw for sponsoring Christopher Cook's zoom and Leona Geeves for arranging and curating all of the singers and pianists. Despite technical issues I was very happy to have hosted Ralph Myers as part of a continuing series on scenography – it was an insightful and honest afternoon. In 2023 the event focus will be on the *Ring*, for obvious reasons. We will have two different productions in Australia in the one calendar year – something that may never happen again. We are arranging briefings on the Bendigo *Ring* and later in the year for Brisbane to supplement the wonderful series to be delivered by Peter Bassett in Queensland through the cycles. And to make things even more difficult there will be a concert performance of *Tannhäuser* in Melbourne by OA, and two *Das Rheingolds*, one in Singapore and two concert performances in Sydney with the SSO under our Patron Simone Young. I would also comment that members try Philip Glass' *Satyagraha* a week before the *Tannhäuser*. Glass still polarises but I think he is one of the important innovators of opera together with Monteverdi, Gluck and Wagner.

Sad news of the passing of long-term member and generous supporter, Ian Brady (380). Our condolences to Barbara at this difficult time. In other news, some of you may have seen Committee member June Donsworth dancing on the ABC. And congratulations to Leona Geeves for receiving a Senior Achievement Award for her incredible work with young singers.

At this year's Christmas/End of Year event, hosted by Robert Mitchell, we had a wonderful set of donated tickets from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Sydney Philharmonia, the Festival of Sydney, Bach Akademie Australia, Willoughby Symphony Orchestra and the Ku-ring-gai Philharmonic Orchestra. On behalf of the WSNSW I would like to acknowledge their support and friendship with heartfelt thanks. We hope to develop closer relationships with these institutions just as we have with Pacific Opera and Melbourne Opera.

Whilst on the subject of thanks, I would like to thank all our members for your continued engagement and support. Attendance at our events increased through the year which bodes well for 2023. A big thank you to the WSNSW Committee for your commitment and energy through the many things we do to keep our Society as one of the most active in the world. As a volunteer not for profit outfit I think we are doing very well. But as always we could do with more help – hint hint to any members out there that can help us with IT, communications or simply organising our wonderful catering, setting up, cleaning up. As Wagnerians we are always looking to set the bar higher.

That leaves me to say enjoy this last issue of the Quarterly for 2022 (thank you Mike). The Quarterly will be back in 2023 just as informative and sometimes cheeky in what will be a very big Wagner year. On behalf of the committee, I wish everyone a great end of the year and a wonderful new year full of music.

Stay safe and happy listening.

Esteban Insausti

President,
Wagner Society in NSW Inc

PS Being the Festive Season if you are thinking donations please consider us. We have a number of ongoing projects that would welcome your donations: the Jane Mathews AO Scholarship with Pacific Opera and ongoing support for young artists being two. I also have some Wagner Tuba pins left that are seeking new homes – the Melbourne Opera Ring project always welcomes our help. Tidings of comfort and joy!



NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to a bumper Christmas issue bursting with news of our supported artists, who, post Covid, are working again, plus passionate reviews by members who were, at last, able to travel again and attended Wagner performances in Leipzig, Bayreuth and Berlin. Thank you Terry, Julie, Ross, Robert and Esteban. I received rather more contributions than I expected so some reviews need to be held over until the March issue.

Thanks, as always, to Leona for her proofreading and constructive suggestions. A big thank you to Michael Ritchie from our printer, MKR Productions, for his professional expertise in formatting the Quarterly. This issue is the 20th that we have worked on together.

I wish all our readers a happy and healthy holiday season.

Mike

FUTURE WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

SUNDAY 29 JANUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT



12.00 DVD *SING FASTER - THE STAGEHANDS' RING CYCLE*

With its massive set designs and 16-hour running time, Richard Wagner's *RING CYCLE* is the most daunting production an opera house can stage. Jon Else's award-winning documentary *SING FASTER* chronicles the San Francisco Opera's undertaking of the epic masterpiece from the

unique perspective of the company's unionized stagehands. Utilizing time-lapse photography, Else documents the stage crew's efforts to bring the opera's mythical world of Rhinemaidens and Valkyries to life while spending their backstage time playing poker, watching baseball, knitting sweaters, and balancing chequebooks. And as they move half-ton scenery through darkened intermissions or gingerly operate a huge mechanical dragon, the stagehands' behind-the-scenes struggles uncannily echo the epic dramas playing out onstage—offering an apt meditation on the intersection of art and working life.

2.00 SPECIAL LIVE ZOOM *CONVERSATION*

Wagner Society NSW President **Esteban Insausti** in conversation with **Suzanne Chaundy** and **Andrew Bailey**, Director and Designer of the Melbourne Opera *Ring*.

Esteban will be live at the Goethe Institut and Suzanne and Andrew will be on Zoom from Melbourne. This should be a fascinating discussion about the creative ideas behind the staging of the complete *Ring* in Bendigo.

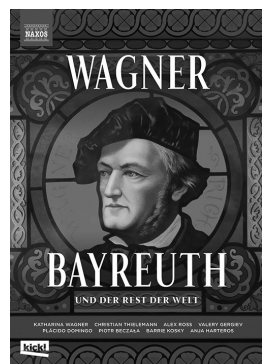


Suzanne Chaundy



Andrew Bailey

SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT



12.00 DVD *GLOBAL WAGNER - FROM BAYREUTH TO THE WORLD - A FILM BY AXEL BRÜGGEMANN*

Global Wagner – From Bayreuth to the World is not a biography of Richard Wagner, nor is it a musicological analysis of his work. This is a documentary dedicated solely to the world's

fascination with the man, and an exploration of the question as to how such massive hype and world-wide cult following developed around this highly controversial artist. The film is a revealing feature-length study of life with Wagner's legacy from one Bayreuth Festival to the next, and we travel the world to meet devoted Wagnerians and those most intimately involved in commenting on and producing his work today.

With Katharina Wagner, Christian Thielemann, Alex Ross, Valery Gergiev, Plácido Domingo, Piotr Beczala, Barrie Kosky and Anja Harteros.

2.00 SPECIAL LIVE ZOOM *CONVERSATION*

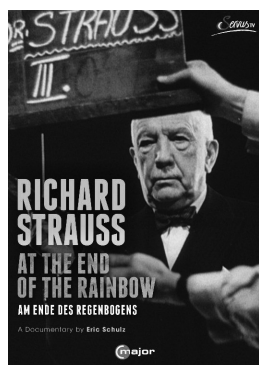
Distinguished veteran baritone **Robert Mitchell** in person at the Goethe Institut, in conversation with Maestro **Anthony Negus**, Conductor and Musical Director of the Melbourne Opera *Ring* and his wife, **Carmen Jakobi**, chief German language coach for the *Ring*, on Zoom from Melbourne.

This will be an illuminating insight into the massive effort that has gone into preparing the young musicians for MO's first complete *Ring Cycle*.



Anthony Negus and Carmen Jakobi

SUNDAY 12 MARCH AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT



12.00 DVD RICHARD STRAUSS - AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW - A FILM BY ERIC SCHULZ

This documentary shows a new perspective on the personality and oeuvre of Richard Strauss, who saw himself as the last great composer at the end of an era, at the end of the rainbow.

This carefully researched production presents spectacular hitherto unreleased pictures of Richard Strauss. Among others: a live recording of the premiere of the Olympic Anthem at the Berlin Olympic stadium in 1936. The very first performance of this piece ever to be heard, performed by the Berlin Philharmonic

and a choir of 1000 singers, conducted by Richard Strauss himself. These spectacular and rare pictures are embedded in interviews with relatives, famous musicians and Strauss experts, including Christian Strauss, Stefan Mickisch and Brigitte Fassbaender. Director Eric Schulz is an acclaimed documentary film maker whose first two films, *Carlos Kleiber Traces to Nowhere* and *Herbert von Karajan - The Second Life* both attracted worldwide attention and were rewarded with various prizes, including the ECHO Klassik and the Gramophone Award.

2.00 TALK BY PETER BASSETT: 'A NEW LOOK AT THE RING'

Peter has talked to the society several times over the last few years and we are always happy to hear his informed and original insights into Wagner's works.

BRISBANE RING DECEMBER 2023

We received the following note from **Peter Basset** about his preperformance talks

Dear Wagner Society Friends,

In August 2021, when Covid-19 was wreaking havoc on the travel scene (how can we forget it!) Opera Australia decided to postpone its Brisbane season of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to dates to be determined. Since then, the OA *Ring* performances have been rescheduled to December 2023, and *Symposia* planned for 2021 will now form part of the new *Ring* season. These *Symposia* will be held at the Queensland Museum Theatre on South Bank – located very close to the Lyric Theatre where the *Ring* will be staged. Please see the map, photos and booking arrangements on the attached Flyer. *Symposia* programs will be along the lines of the 2021 models (subject to necessary changes) and will be published early in the new year.

A new ancillary event during the *Ring* season will be a series of *Pre-Performance Talks* by me during the mornings of performance days. The venue for these talks will also be the Queensland Museum Theatre, and booking procedures are explained on the attached flyer. You are invited to register straight away for the *Talks* and *Symposia*. Invoices and tickets will be sent out in July 2023.

I would be most grateful if you could let your members know about the *Ring Symposia* and *Pre-Performance Talks*, and encourage them to book as soon as possible – or to contact me if they have any questions.

2023 is going to be an exciting Wagnerian year in this part of the world, and I'm looking forward to catching up with as many Wagnerian friends as possible at the time of Opera Australia's new, and quite extraordinary *Ring* in Brisbane conducted by Philippe Auguin and Directed/Designed by Chen Shi-Zheng.

With kind regards,

Peter

RING Pre-Performance Talks - Peter Bassett

CYCLE 1

- Friday 1 December 2023.** [7pm. *Das Rheingold*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Sunday 3 December 2023.** [1pm. *Die Walküre*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.00am – 11:30am.
- Tuesday 5 December 2023.** [5pm. *Siegfried*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Thursday 7 December 2023.** [4pm. *Götterdämmerung*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.

CYCLE 2

- Friday 8 December 2023.** [7pm. *Das Rheingold*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Sunday 10 December 2023.** [5pm. *Die Walküre*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Tuesday 12 December 2023.** [5pm. *Siegfried*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Thursday 14 December 2023.** [4pm. *Götterdämmerung*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.

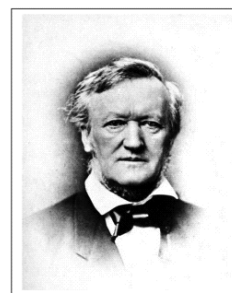
CYCLE 3

- Friday 15 December 2023.** [7pm. *Das Rheingold*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Sunday 17 December 2023.** [5pm. *Die Walküre*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Tuesday 19 December 2023.** [5pm. *Siegfried*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.30am – 12 noon.
- Thursday 21 December 2023.** [1pm. *Götterdämmerung*]
 - PRE-PERFORMANCE TALK 10.00 am – 11.30 am.

RING Symposia

- Saturday 2 December 2023**
 - SYMPOSIUM 1. 10.00am – 12.30pm.
- Saturday 9 December 2023**
 - SYMPOSIUM 2. 10:00am – 12:30pm.
- Saturday 16 December 2023**
 - SYMPOSIUM 3. 10:00am – 12:30pm.

Symposia programs will (subject to necessary changes) follow those planned for 2021, involving Wagner Scholars, the Conductor, the Director/Production Designer, the Costume Designer, Singers, and Orchestral Musicians.



TALKS
TICKET PRICES
Single Talks \$25 pp
Cycle of 4 Talks \$80 pp

SYMPOSIA
TICKET PRICES
Single Symposium \$40 pp
Multiple Symposia \$30 pp per symposium

OPEN PLAN SEATING

Book for these Talks & Symposia by emailing Peter Bassett at: pgbassett@outlook.com. Invoices and tickets will be sent to you after 1 July 2023. Reservations will be confirmed on a first-come-first-served basis.

If you booked for the 2021 *Ring Symposia* that were postponed in August 2021, and did not request a refund, your booking/s will be automatically transferred to equivalent Symposia (1, 2 or 3) in 2023 without further charges or refunds. Please advise Peter Bassett at: pgbassett@outlook.com if you wish to change to a different Symposium.

REPORTS ON RECENT MEETINGS

SUNDAY 18 SEPTEMBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

ROBERT GAY CONTINUED HIS TALK ON FRENCH GRAND OPERA

Robert Gay continued on from his talk to us in February and entertained a large audience once more with his witty and insightful ideas of how the conventions, themes, libretti and staging of Grand Opera in Paris in the 1820's and 30's influenced the works of Verdi and Wagner. He played many short sound clips to illustrate musical developments, including several pretty ballet divertissements which are not always included in modern productions but were such an essential part of contemporary performances in Paris. Of particular interest to Wagner lovers were the facts that while staying in Paris in 1840 and 1841 he worked on vocal scores for Donizetti and Halévy and made a special trip to Paris in 1849 to see Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*. Robert is a very animated speaker who enjoys interacting with his audience and gave us an impressive (and hilarious) demonstration of the skaters' techniques in the ballet of *Le Prophète*.

Features of French Grand Opera

- **Historical events** used as **scenarios** for dramas **in five acts**
- Themes of **religious intolerance** or **rebellion against oppression**
- **Historically** and **geographically accurate set and costume designs**
- **Massive choral groupings**, often of opposing **nationalities or beliefs**
- Scenes and acts ending with impressive **formal tableaux**
- Spectacularly staged **marches and processions** – also **rituals and ceremonies**. These processions were often **interrupted** for dramatic effect.
- **Obligatory ballet *divertissement*** in either the **second or third act**
- Action culminating in a **spectacular final scene** depicting a **major disaster or cataclysm**

SUNDAY 6 NOVEMBER AT ST COLUMBA

ALBUMBLÄTTER AUS DRESDEN. RECITAL WITH JESSICA HARPER (SOPRANO), JOSEPH EISINGER (CELLO) AND BRADLEY GILCHRIST (PIANO).

This was a wonderful concert – terrific young artists performing great works from the Romantic repertoire to a rapt audience. Jessica is just at the beginning of her Wagner singing career and she performed with impressive power and conviction combined with sweetness and nuance. She embodied the music, living the roles and engaging with the

audience. Her husband Joseph was a passionate interpreter of some beautiful transcriptions – his cello movingly capturing Isolde's lament and ecstasy. Brad was much more than an accompanist – his sensitive touch and subtle timing added greatly to the experience. A memorable afternoon.

Programme

RICHARD WAGNER(1813-1883)

Dich teure Halle from **Tannhäuser**

Jessica Harper

RICHARD WAGNER(1813-1883)

arr **FIDELIO FRIEDRICH FINKE** (1891-1968)

and **CLEMENS SCHULTZE-BIESANTZ** (1876-1935)

Prelude (Vorspiel) from **Tristan und Isolde** WWV 90 (1856-9)

Joseph Eisinger

RICHARD WAGNER(1813-1883)

arr **CARL ARMBRUSTER** (1846-1917)

Closing scene (Isoldes Liebestod) from **Tristan und Isolde**

Joseph Eisinger

CARL MARIA von WEBER (1786-1826)

Wie nahte mir der Schlummer...Leise, leise, fromme Weise

from **Der Freischütz**

Jessica Harper

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

La lugubre gondola (The funeral gondola) S.200 (1883)

Joseph Eisinger

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Vier letzte Lieder, AV 150:

Frühling

September

Beim Schlafengehen

Im Abendrot

Jessica Harper

RICHARD WAGNER(1813-1883)

arr **DAVID POPPER** (1843-1913)

In das Album der Fürstin Metternich WWV 94 (1861)

Joseph Eisinger

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949) with

transcription for cello by **BART DUNN**

Morgen, Op. 27, No 4

Jessica Harper and Joseph Eisinger

SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER AT ROBERT MITCHELL'S HOUSE

CHRISTMAS PARTY

Our final event of the year was very well attended and had a delightful mix of music, talk, food and drink, held in Robert Mitchell's atmospheric and comfortable private concert salon in Newtown. President Esteban Insausti opened the proceedings with a brief summary of the past year's activities and a teaser of what is to come in 2023. We were very pleased to welcome some young singers to the event, including: mezzo Margaret Plummer, who thanked the society for our recent assistance; soprano Ellen McNeal, recipient of our Jane Mathews Scholarship; mezzo Cassandra Doyle; baritone Jeremy Bolton and tenor Sam Elmi.

Robert Mitchell provided musical entertainment on his piano roll player – historic records from the late Dennis Condon's

collection of performances of excerpts from the *Ring*. This was followed by several members sharing their thoughts on productions seen over the past year. Julie and Terry Clarke, with John Barrer, talked about the Leipzig Festival and the Deutsche Oper Berlin's *Die Meistersinger* and Esteban talked about the Bayreuth Festival and the Berlin *Ring*. Written reports are included in this Quarterly. Robert Mitchell shared some thoughtful insights about the seeming irrelevance of many of the Bayreuth productions – actions on stage having little to do with the libretto or music. Most members would agree with his thoughts. Everyone did agree on the generally excellent standard of singers and orchestras. The afternoon ended with a splendid spread of food supplied by members and the drawing of some wonderful raffle prizes.

MELBOURNE OPERA'S *SIEGFRIED* IN CONCERT

ELISABETH MURDOCH HALL, 27 SEPTEMBER 2022

A selection from some of the reviews, praising Wagner Society NSW supported artists

Coalescing marvellously under the learned command of English conductor and Wagner specialist **Anthony Negus** – having now become a much-loved fixture at Melbourne Opera – the transcendent beauty, dramatic colours and heaving intensity of Wagner's music resonated superbly.

In the punishingly demanding title role, **Bradley Daley** shaped Siegfried's journey compellingly from naive and insolent young man to the blooming hero and love-awakened man Siegfried becomes. Daley planted himself confidently and at ease without the score. In Siegfried's pursuit to learn what fear is, Daley closed an all-round astonishing Act 2 with a blistering performance, shooting forth powerful chesty top notes as Siegfried wonders if he can learn it from the woman atop the mountain as he follows the Woodbird.

As a key figure in the epic's overall arc, **Warwick Fyfe** effortlessly imparted substance to Wotan's bruised soul and deep reasoning. Fyfe's imposing portrayal created several highlights in every paired episode – including with world-class-reaching and unfaltering muscular baritone Simon Meadows' utterly possessed Alberich in Act 2 and plush mezzo-soprano **Deborah Humble's** assured and calmly poised earth goddess, Erda, as Fyfe works himself to a frenzy.

Arts review

Daley's ringing power impressed, his clarion heldentenor never flagging throughout the epic opera. He achieved lovely tenderness when Siegfried expressed his longing for the dear mother he never met. Daley additionally impressed by being off book, allowing his open facial expression to be shared directly with the audience at all times.

Returning as Wotan, **Warwick Fyfe** carried his character's commanding authority in his powerful stance, backed by potent vocal power, a strength which surged ever voluminously in moments of Wotan's rage.

Simon Parris,
Man in chair

Deborah Humble's beautifully sung Erda was majestic, wise, and utterly convincing.

'The best part of him is the stupid boy,' Wagner said of Siegfried. 'The man is awful.' The composer might have reconsidered, had he seen **Daley's** thoughtful and beguiling performance. Siegfried is as notoriously difficult a role to dramatise as it is to sing: Daley achieved both with remarkable ease, combining boyish charm (his genial grin helped) with supple, never over-forced singing that ensured he lasted the distance – to that point where one great Siegfried of the past lamented, 'In comes this bloody woman who hasn't sung a note all night, and she sings you off the stage.' No such fears for Daley who, by the end, still looked and sounded as if he could do it all over again.

Australian book review



EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW BY LUC ROGER WITH VALENTIN SCHWARZ, DIRECTOR OF THE NEW BAYREUTH RING

This interview was conducted in German. This is a translation. The original text of the interview is on <https://luc-henri-roger.blogspot.com/20> Luc-Henri Roger is a writer with a great interest in and knowledge about King Ludwig II, Richard Wagner and Alpine architecture and scenery.

Luc Roger (LR) Valentin Schwarz, thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. In 2019, Katharina Wagner announced that she had approached you to direct *the Ring of the Nibelung* at the Bayreuth Festival in 2020, in a team with the scenographer Andrea Cozzi, with whom you have already staged several operas and with whom you also won the Ring Award in Graz in 2017. The Tetralogy could not be presented in 2020 due to the pandemic. In 2019, you had just turned 30, which probably makes you the youngest director in the history of the Bayreuth Ring. Could you describe the circumstances of this prestigious commission and tell us how you felt when you learned about it?



Photo credit © David Sünderhof

Valentin Schwarz (VS) First of all, it is of course a great honour to be offered to direct the *Ring* on the Green Hill, especially since I have been passionate about the Wagner *Ring* for decades. Such a chance only comes once in the life of every director and until now I have not regretted for a moment that I accepted. The *Ring* is incredibly rewarding and here in Bayreuth the skills of every orchestral musician and singer are immense. We are therefore very proud to be able to participate.

LR You studied musical theatre directing and philosophy. What sparked your vocation? When did you know this was what you wanted to do? Is it your family or those around you who gave you the taste for opera? Have you had any musical training?

VS I do indeed come from a family of musicians where it was natural to go to the opera or to a concert on Saturdays, to learn to play an instrument (in my case, the violin since the age of 7 years) or to dive into the library and take out a piano reduction of *L'Or du Rhin* and to sing along at nine years old to the Solti recording. At the same time, I have always been enthusiastic about the freedom, the pleasure of acting and the capacity for utopia that the theatre offers to a society. And bringing together these two passions: music and theatre to study musical and theatrical directing was a coherent approach.

LR When did you have your first contact with the work and figure of Richard Wagner? How did you become familiar with his work? Has your approach to Wagner's operas evolved over time?

VS I seem to remember that I was able to accompany my parents to a performance of *The Flying Dutchman* at the age of nine. For children, the plastic and magical decorations are

incredibly fascinating, both captivating and overwhelming. Later, in adolescence, one becomes sensitive to the great emotion and the multidimensionality of this music, to the astonishing use of leitmotifs, etc. Unfortunately, we also discover what Wagner has that is repulsive, his unforgivable anti-Semitism, and we begin to distance ourselves by developing a critical eye. As a director, you register all these impressions at the same time and I am amazed at how powerful and practical Wagner's ideas were for the theatre. The *Ring* rightly shows that Wagner is an incredibly precise observer of human relations.

LR We read in the press that your project was to play the *Ring* in the style of a Netflix series, to stage an epic or a family saga? Would you like to discuss your point of view on the work? What do you think is the weight of the prologue compared to the three days?

VS It's surprising how few characters Wagner gets away with in those 15 hours, and it's no secret that nearly all of the characters are related to one another. So, you really have to be blind to NOT see in the *Ring* a family drama, with all the fields of intra-family conflicts that can serve as potential identification. Often, the *Ring* is understood as a model for explaining the world, the characters are reduced to bearers of ideas and in this context we forget the purely human aspect, the interpersonal aspect. We wanted to look again at these characters who accompany us for a whole week through the generations and we were amazed to see how much they resemble us, for better or for worse, and especially in all possible and imaginable nuances of grey between these two extremes.

LR Regarding the relationship between music and staging: how do you imagine their interdependence; how do they interact? How do they feed each other? Does your staging reflect, for example, the leitmotifs and rhythms of the work?

VS Wagner created this system of leitmotifs with an immense zeal and a will to create, to somehow maintain the musical cohesion of this prose structure which he wildly stuck together. Ignoring this fact simply or deliberately would already be committing a great structural mistake. What is more interesting than the search for congruences between image and sound is the undisguised accentuation of divergences, where the content of the words and the auctorial narrator - the orchestra - do not coincide. more and where semantic abysses open up. It was a lot of fun to be able to talk about them afterwards in a psychological way.

LR Let's come to the question of time. Apart from the prologue, the three days are often perceived as extremely long by non-Wagnerians or less informed audiences, many are frightened by the length of the show. How do you deal with this phenomenon?

VS The immersion in a world, the comprehension and the penetration of the characters do not happen in an afternoon. As we have become accustomed to from novels and series as epic media, the first impression we have of a character or a situation is often misleading: the seemingly evil one suddenly has good reason for acting in this way, the hero ends up showing cracks in his glorious appearance, and the supposedly perfect marriage is already broken for a long time. These developments and these realizations are not erroneous approximations, but define us as human beings with all the nuances that this may entail. And that's where, even after a long Valkyrie, one may want, at least one may hope, to know at all costs, when leaving the Festspielhaus, what will happen with this Brünnhilde, with this Wotan.

LR Could you lift a corner of the veil on the place(s) of the action? Did you design a single space with Andrea Cozzi or did you differentiate the places of action?

VS The family as a nucleus is also to be considered from a geographical point of view. From the point of view of aesthetics and content, we started from a large space, a "Ring", a circle where, over the decades, the members of this great family and their uninvited visitors meet. The tension comes from the transformation of spaces which, like the characters, are delivered to the implacable passage of time and give us a glimpse of living conditions from ever new perspectives.

WE WARMLY WELCOME NEW MEMBERS WHO JOINED SINCE SEPTEMBER 2022:

Melanie and Sarah Penicka-Smith,
joint members 1270.

We apologize to **Suzanne Gerozisis [1269]** for misspelling her name in the last issue.

LR Did your dual training as a philosopher and director bring you closer to the vision of the world contained in the master's work? The work of total art is also philosophical? Does the Ring have transformative power?

VS As is known, Wagner wanted to trigger a social transformation with his total work of art, he was politically active for a long time and expressed himself sufficiently on this subject in his writings, the intellectual perspectives of which are nourished by many sources. . The essential qualities of Wagner reside, however, in his stage works, whose tradition of representation through the ages proves that, in addition to the musical aspect, the value lies essentially in their robustness at the level of the history of the mind: as in other great works in the history of art, each era tries to find or interpret in Wagner's work truths about the here and now, with varying degrees of success. The Ring is a mythical carte blanche that we are always approaching anew, especially in Bayreuth, where the intensive study of a few eternally identical works forces us to take new approaches. This potential for change, this capacity for permanent self-correction, makes the Ring, in its myth, a potential guiding medium of a (critique of) society, which must be re-established in the genre of the musical theatre.

LR Finally, between 2020 and today, has your staging of the Ring evolved?

VS The Ring changes you and continues to work on you in depth. Just as the big whole, the concept and the invented world remain as an anchor, there are thousands of details in each staging that we continue to refine. Every little detail, every mosaic piece in the painting which only shines with dull lustre instead of golden lustre, can tarnish the whole painting. The work on the Ring is a work on ourselves — just as the premiere does not represent an end point, and we will continue to work in the Bayreuth studio in the following years - we are always curious about what lies ahead.

LR Thank you very much, Valentin Schwarz, for taking the time to provide our readers with these valuable insights.

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. These include the Jane Matthews AO Scholarship. Please refer to our website for details.

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

Alasdair Beck, Danny May and Ross Whitelaw, who gave a very generous donation to the Jane Mathews AO fund.

MEMBERS' REPORTS

WAGNER PERFORMANCES IN EUROPE 2022

NOTE: Part II of Terence Watson's review of the Leipzig Wagner Festival will be in the March Quarterly

THE LEIPZIG WAGNER FESTIVAL JUNE 20TH TO JULY 14TH 2022

Reflections by Terry and Julie Clarke

Over 24 days from the third week in June there occurred a unique experience for lovers of Wagner's music. For the first time in known memory an opera company performed all the operas completed by Richard Wagner in chronological order of performance. This magnificent achievement was produced by the Leipzig Oper under the direction and inspiration of their chief conductor Ulf Schirmer. We were fortunate enough to attend all the performances being part of a group organised by Hayllar Tours. This was exceptionally well organised and enhanced by the lectures delivered before each performance by Heath Lees, a most eminent Wagnerian scholar.

This extravaganza opened with *Die Feen*, Wagner's grand opera in the French style with a strange mish-mash of ideas; a woman half mortal, half fairy in love with a mortal, a 'do not ask my name or a curse will happen', a mad scene and a happy ending out of nowhere. Nonetheless, there were some jolly tunes and the production itself was clever and lavish. Sadly, Covid laid its ugly hand on this performance and both the principals and the conductor had to be replaced that day. Fortunately, the New Zealand soprano, Kirstin Sharpin, lives in Berlin, knew the part although not the production, so she raced to Leipzig and was superb at such short notice. Sadly, for her, she tested positive for Covid two days afterwards having escaped the virus for the last two years. (Kirstin sang Fidelio for Melbourne Opera in 2020)

Covid struck again the next night for *Das Liebesverbot*. This time we were informed that twenty-one members of the chorus were unable to perform but at least the principals were fit. In the event they put on a vigorous performance of this piece with lots of choruses, carnivals, cross-dressing and Donizetti-like duets. At the age of 22, Wagner's dabble into comedy.

Two days later we had *Rienzi*, a definite change of the Wagner composing style. Stefan Vinke, a familiar singer in Australia, sang the title role with his customary vigour. The costumes were largely tailcoats for the men and 30's dresses for the female chorus with a few nuns and drab workers. There was a revolving stage and models of Roman buildings which caught fire at the end.



The opera we most enjoyed came next. A superb rendering of *Der fliegende Holländer* which could not be faulted for quality of the singing and direction of the drama. Elisabet Strid, who played a number of major roles during the festival, was outstanding as Senta and Thomas J. Mayer was fine as the Dutchman. At one moment the Dutchman's ship complete with red sails emerged above the orchestra and over our heads in the front rows of the stalls. A stunning effect.

After four operas which were straight productions, we finally had a shocker - *Tannhäuser*. The director, Calixto Bieito, is well known as an enfant terrible of the opera world with a penchant for orgiastic scenes in the simplest of operas. In this instance he completely ignored the Venusberg orgy opting for Venus, Kathrin Goering, to wander dancing through a leafy forest. The first act ended with the Tannhäuser and the knights stripping off and smearing themselves with blood. There was plenty of applause for the singers and orchestra but little enthusiasm for this dire production. Katarina Wagner was supposed to be the director for *Lohengrin* but she had pulled out quite late so the production was the responsibility of the house director. The presiding personality of this production was Ortrud who loomed menacingly over the whole set-up and at one point had sexual relations with the Herald. Telramund was played as a blind man and Elsa spent much of her time under a table. Klaus Florian Vogt arrived in a tracksuit with a swan in a plastic bubble. He sang reliably.

Tristan und Isolde. Our Isolde called in sick at the last moment and, to our joy, was replaced by Catherine Foster who arrived in haste from Bayreuth rehearsals. She was in superb voice and significantly helped out her Tristan, Andreas Schager, when he lost his way during the second act duet. René Pape was luxury casting as King Marke, and the final Liebestod was especially moving.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg was another fine performance. The director, David Pountney, had covered the stage with models of old Nuremberg which the poor singers had to negotiate with some care. Nonetheless James Rutherford was a commanding Hans Sachs and the ever-present Elisabet Strid was a fine Eva. Kathrin Goering, as Magdalene, deserves special mention. The finale presented an unusual approach. After Walter had rejected the offer to join the Meistersingers, he was given the usual talking to by Sachs, whereupon he quickly turned round and started to embrace the masters. Seeing this Eva began to walk up stage to the top and as Walther engaged more and more with the masters, she finally ran off the stage in her wedding dress as it became clear that he had become one of the old men himself and embraced the guild rather than go with her. The patriarchy won out.

The Ring was performed on four consecutive nights which meant that we had two Wotans, three Brünnhildes and two Siegfrieds. The performances were relatively straightforward although a troupe of ten dancers in unisex, grey body socks who writhed around the stage causing a distraction and very little benefit. Lise Lindstrom and Stefan Vinke were superb in *Götterdämmerung*

Finally, **Parsifal**. Sadly, this whole performance was conducted behind a scrim which always seems to distance the action from the audience, so much so that one hardly noticed there was no swan. The singing of René Pape as Gurnemanz and the Parsifal of Andreas Schager was very fine.

We were treated to a talk with Heath Lees and Kirstin Sharpin after she recovered from Covid and a party after *Götterdämmerung* with Stefan Vinke and Lise Lindstrom.

It really was a unique experience to see the whole set of operas and great credit is due to the staff of the Leipzig Oper for this massive undertaking. The Gewandhaus Orchestra played superbly throughout, and Ulf Schirmer, the retiring musical director, conducted most of the performances superbly. We consider ourselves very fortunate to have been present at this once in a lifetime festival.



Mark Coure MP, Leona Geeves, Felicity Wilson MP

Congratulations to our Artists' Liaison, **Leona Geeves**, who recently received a Senior Achievement Award from Felicity Wilson MP, Member for North Shore, for "her tireless volunteer work and passion for history, heritage preservation, music, and the artistic life of our local community".

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BAYREUTH 2022

Ross Whitelaw's Notes, Made Immediately After Each Performance

Lohengrin 21 August, 2022

Tonight's performance was the last of the run of the current *Lohengrin* directed by Rosa Loy and Neo Rauch. After Bayreuth's month-long absence of rain was broken over the weekend, today dawned bright and blue – almost matching the colour scheme of the opera. Although the contrasting orange in the production was reflected somewhat in the Not Quite Green Hill.

The switch to the new caterers seemed to go smoothly with reasonable queues and a good range of options available. The sausage man may have to work a bit harder though.

It was a very enjoyable performance, with Klaus Florian Vogt taking the title role in fine voice, although his is an acquired taste. High and ringing though it is, it can be a bit one dimensional, to my ear, especially when compared to Piotr Beczala's interpretation as essayed here in 2019. And of course, we have been spoiled by Jonas Kaufmann's bravura performance in Melbourne earlier this year.

Camilla Nylund's Elsa was excellent, but not a great interpretation. Petra Lang as Ortrud had none of the vocal or stage excitement of the 2019 interpreter, Russian Elena Patrakova who made the opera hers. Lang's performance was definitely the weakest link.

Georg Zeppenfeld as King Henry has this role well in his repertoire and was a joy to hear with solid, clear bass all the way through.

Australian Derek Welton as the Herald goes from strength and seems to have become a Bayreuth fixture. I'm sure he will go on to bigger roles for this company and others as the years progress.

The chorus under Chorusmaster Eberhard Friedrich reflects the care and attention paid to this aspect of operatic performance and they received warm applause.

The biggest ovation went to Christian Thielemann and the orchestra – it was well deserved from the shimmering first notes of the prelude to the final curtain. He was always in control and brought out some fine playing, made even more of a treat for operagoers by the acoustic of the theatre. I have yet to hear the new acoustic of the Sydney Opera House concert hall and I will be interested in the comparison.

In short, a good night at the opera.

Tannhäuser. 24 August 2022

Just before curtain-up, the dreaded announcer came on stage to groans from the audience and gave us the news that Manni Laudenbach was unwell and that Mick Morris Mehnert would be taking his place. So not so bad as of course it is not a singing role. Innovative and creative camera work and direction accompanied the overture – distracting or scene setting depending on your point of view. When first seen in 2019, I thought the latter but tonight I was more inclined to the former view as the *Tannhäuser* overture is one to be savoured when combined with the Festspielhaus acoustic. I would have liked to have it wash over me but couldn't take my eyes off the on stage and screen antics.

Wagner's artistic consideration of the divide between artistic, moral and emotional freedom and personal and traditional duty and obligation is clearly delineated for us in the first act, with even the theatre-goers (ourselves) being incorporated into the performance.

Tradition at Bayreuth anyone? Act two takes us into the nuts and bolts of the dilemma. Tannhäuser having to cope with the real world – a challenge he ultimately fails. Again, some might find that all that is going on on the stage and in video projection a distraction, however the main focus is on Elisabeth. Lise Davidsen's entry to sing "Dich teure Halle" is one of the operatic moments I will not forget. Her appearance in 2019 sent shivers up my spine for the power and clarity of her voice and I thought that this time, the effect would be muted for having been anticipated but I was wrong.

Act three brought a focused resolution with a bleak yet considered set and fine direction.

This production has as fine a set of singers as one could hope for. Stephen Gould was even better than in the 2019 iteration. Fully in command of the vocal and dramatic elements of the character of Tannhäuser. His male compatriots, Markus Eiche, as Wolfram von Eschenbach, is an outstanding baritone and the venerable Albert Dohmen, as the Landgraf, a venerable bass.

Ekaterina Gubanova as Venus gave a creditable performance, although to my mind, her stand-in from 2019 gave it more verve and a sharper edge. Still, no criticisms of her from me.

Chorus work was of the highest standards, although there was one loud boo from someone who I think had it in for the chorus as even when the chorusmaster, Eberhard Friedrich took a solo bow, the boo reappeared.

The orchestra under the baton of Axel Kober played admirably and was well received at curtain call.

Der fliegende Holländer 27 August 2022

I had much anticipated this performance, having seen it on DVD and Tcherniakov being one of my favourite directors. Georg Zeppenfeld as Daland and Elisabeth Tiede whom I liked as Freia in *Die Walküre* added to the anticipation.

All completely justified in this thoughtful, well-staged (who would have thought that buildings could dance) production. Zeppenfeld lived up to my expectations both in the vocal and acting departments – solid bass across his range. Elisabeth Tiede sang her troubled Senta in anguished yet clear tones and we will hear more of her in years to come. Eric Cutler as Eric sang with great beauty and his tone and phrasing reminded one that Wagner was struggling to get out of the grip that Italian opera had on his contemporaries but had not yet quite broken all ties.

The *Holländer* of Thomas J Meyer was menacing and dark and fit the role well. Only Nadine Weissmann as Mary disappointed. Having heard her sing Erda in the Castorf Ring some years ago, I felt she was not up to the quality of the rest of the cast.

Tcherniakov's direction was thoughtful, telling a somewhat different story from the classic interpretation with emphasis on the relationship between him and the townsfolk/society in general which shaped his interpersonal relationships. Much comment and discussion were generated by this approach.

The conducting of Oksana Lyniv was impeccable and she was able to realise a sound from the pit which has been seemingly beyond Cornelius Meister so far in the first two operas of the Ring. Her efforts were suitably rewarded with much applause from the audience. And finally, the chorus was as good as usual.

An interesting, thought provoking and musically satisfying performance.

THE BAYREUTH RING 2022

Reactions and Observations by Robert Mitchell

For those who read some of the press reviews for the first cycle of this production, initially I should report that the booing following the second performance of part one was not as vociferous as expected. It was mainly aimed at the production and, to this listener undeservedly, Cornelius Meister, the conductor. My Bayreuth companion and I cheekily canvassed one- or two-word opinions from overdressed diners in local hosteleries following the performance. None of them leapt to the production's defence yet they did not condemn it outright. 'Interesting', 'sometimes good'; 'disrespectful' of both Wagner and the audience. Banal is the first word that came to my mind. These articles were written the morning after each performance.

Das Rheingold, August 10



Alberich and children

In a theatre that can grant a director his/her most outrageous request, this *Rheingold* lacks any semblance of theatrical magic. As the musical journey begins, projected on a scrim are two foetuses that are obviously rivals, each attacking the other. One loses an eye. Is that Wotan? Once the images dissolve, the Rhine is revealed as a children's ankle-deep paddling pool; Wotan and Fricka's home modern bourgeois with a garage door opening directly into the living room; Nibelheim an open stage area in front of a glass-walled kindergarten room; and Walhalla apparently a second level extension of Wotan's current home.

Wotan (Egils Silins) appeared in gym gear in which he did a few desultory curls with a single weight. Later he donned a casual suit for the encounter with Alberich. Silins sang the role efficiently but with little tonal variation and, according to one of my interviewees, poor German diction. His most embarrassing moment came when, during the rainbow bridge music, he had to perform a kind of half-hearted Zorba the Greek dance on the new second level of his home, which he accessed by walking upstairs and removing the yellow 'danger, no entrance' cordon. Fricka and the others started up but change their minds. There is no attempt at a rainbow, just interest from the others in an illuminated pyramid in a Perspex box.

The nasty little brat (boy) wearing a yellow tee shirt, who, it seems, symbolises the gold, also wears an over-sized hoodie which helps facilitate the Tarnhelm scene. Later, so that Fasolt

and Fafner notice Wotan's ring when piling up the gold, the little boy jumps up to show off the fact that he has successfully completed the Rubik's Cube puzzle he was given to amuse himself while the adults bicker. As the inexplicable goings on piled into each scene I decided not to concentrate on trying to work out why the director, Valentin Schwarz, made the choices he did. I was there to enjoy Wagner's glorious score in the ideal acoustic created by the master himself.

The singing was mostly excellent, although there were some lapses in pitch from a couple of the men. The Rhein Maidens blended well, without being outstanding. Fricka (Christa Mayer) and Erda (Okka von der Damerau) triumphed over the unnecessary actions given them. The overall impression was that Schwarz's interpretation of Wagner's Nibelung tetralogy is as deep as the Rhein he depicts in this first evening.

Die Walküre, August 11



The Valkyries

The subheading 'It is getting worse' above Mark Berry's www.wagneropera.net review of the first outing of *Die Walküre* is, like all generalisations, not necessarily accurate. To be fair, the unnecessary additions to the narrative keep piling on but they are no longer as distracting.

At this point we have seen two rings: the first, a child's inflatable pool toy that was used by one of the Rhein Maidens to 'capture' Alberich while she taunts him (ho-hum) in *Rheingold*; the second, Wotan's (Tomasz Konieczny) wedding ring, which he drops into the glass offered him by Fricka (Christa Mayer) to toast their (her) 'success' during the final bars of Act 3. The marriage is over, full stop. He walks off stage right, picking up Brünnhilde's discarded hat as he leaves. Fricka exits stage left. (Powerful drama through simple theatre action, at last!)

Act 1 was greeted with thunderous applause and cheering at the first curtain. Not a boo to be heard. We forgave the

fact that Hunding (Georg Zeppenfeld) is on stage during the storm, dealing with the blackout it has caused, and giving a bucket to the heavily pregnant Sieglinde (Lise Davidsen), presumably to catch drips from the leaking roof. (You understand how all this unnecessary ‘play’ can distract from the wonderful music.) Hunding leaves presumably to get some fuse wire before Siegmund (Klaus Florian Vogt) arrives. The three-bar radiator seems to be on (during a blackout?) because he heads straight to it to warm himself. Later there is an attempt to make it look as if it is truly working, yet it is sat on, leant on with hands and is used as a resting place for Siegmund’s jacket. (Would you do any of those things?) In a production that appears to have set out to de-deify the gods and make them relatable as real, flawed humans, to my mind anachronisms like that undercut Schwarz’s aim.

Yes, there is a tree (fallen) but no sword. Instead, there is a box under a suspended mosquito net on the bed upstairs. After the usual drinking, eating – Hunding can’t stand his wife’s cooking – and drugging, Sieglinde retrieves the box and Siegmund manages to unlock the pyramid (remember the pyramid?) from its base to find a gun.

During the duet the house set retreats and Spring flies in SLOWLY in the form of two connected bedrooms in which two blond children in spangled leotards play (see Mark Berry for possible explanations). The slowness of the transformation cannot match the rapid change in the music. No theatrical magic here. The audience’s reaction was thanks to the brilliant singing and acting of Davidsen, Vogt and Zeppenfeld; and the orchestra, again under Cornelius Meister, which gripped us with the opening storm and thrilled us with the rapture of the incestuous lovers well over an hour later. This writer’s eyes were filled with the tears that were absent the night before.

Unfortunately Act 2 seemed to flag somewhat, despite the many added distractions. Brünnhilde’s (Irène Theorin) initial ‘hoi-o-to-hos’ were brilliant but later her mid-range and mid-volume singing revealed an unfocussed and sometimes unsteady tone and unclear diction. Why we witness Freia’s coffin viewing while Fricka and Wotan argue and he briefly plays with a Rubik’s Cube; why Hunding is silently present for part of that argument; why a couple of maids are polishing the family silver within earshot of Brünnhilde’s encounter with Siegmund in the garden just outside Walhalla’s living room, are all distractions that do not add to our depth of understanding.

As for the post-plastic surgery clinic scene where bandaged, entitled, rich-bitches squabble during the famous Act 3 Ride, is totally unfathomable and demeaning to women. Having just given birth, before she leaves with the baby, escorted by Grane, Brünnhilde’s personal assistant, Sieglinde has unbelievably extraordinary pelvic floor muscle control to support the first statement of the glorious love theme that Brünnhilde will repeat in her immolation scene several hours into the future.

The great farewell scene between father and daughter is mercifully simple. The set recedes, Brünnhilde and Grane walk upstage and a wall of frosted Perspex flies in. Wotan is visibly shattered by his own decision, lying in a foetal position

in front of the wall. The stage is his and Konieczny made the most of it with beautifully nuanced singing. Loge is called but does not appear in any form, not even the slightest red glow from behind the Perspex. Fricka and a flunky arrive with a tray-mobile on which there is a single lit candle. The flunky uncorks the bottle, pours two glasses and hands them to Fricka. She offers one to Wotan who takes it and, after toasting, he slowly pours his wine out while she drinks. Then the moment comes when he drops his wedding ring in her glass and exits. All that during the Magic Fire Music. With barely any help from the director, the cast and Wagner triumphed.

Siegfried, August 13



The Woodbird, Siegfried, Mime and young Hagen

If I were to give this review a title, it would be ‘From Rage to Rapture’. When the curtain rises on Act 1, it is evident that director Cornelius Schwarz and his three designers have forgotten the notion that ‘less is more’. We are transported back to Hunding’s hut with some modifications and a great deal of ‘stuff’. There’s an extra staircase whose only purpose seems to be to access a puppet theatre stage behind red curtains installed above the glowing radiator; a sewing machine upstairs in the bedroom; a chair lift for the disabled Mime who doesn’t appear to need it; a pitched tent near where the tree had fallen; a fish tank, and several puppet dolls on miniature stools. Strung across the doorway to the kitchen is a ‘Happy Birthday’ banner (in English) but there is no evidence of an anvil. Fireworks let off in the kitchen is the only concession to sharpening a sword on an electric grinding stone.

The sword is delivered by Wotan in a gift-wrapped box and is disguised in a new medical style walking stick for Mime. Consequently, the first section of anvil tapping in the score is completely ignored. Siegfried’s forging scene is farcical and although he bangs the sword on the walls and a curtain, the action is not in time with the anvil music in the score. So ineffective is the sword that it can’t even sever the papier-mâché head of a puppet.

To this writer, the stage goings-on were shambolic and meaningless. Rage welled up from the depths of me and ‘rubbish!!’ emanated from my throat.

Act 2 returns us to the sparsely but expensively furnished Walhalla living room. Nurses attend a patient whose hospital bed faces upstage. The little boy in the yellow tee shirt from *Rheingold* is now a Man in a Yellow tee shirt (MiY) sitting by

what turns out to be Fafner's sick bed. (The night's cast list names the silent character 'Der junge Hagen' – see below.)

The act unfolds as expected, with a few exceptions. After the scene between Wotan and Alberich, they sit upstage having a scotch in front of the fire during the following scene. One of the nurses turns out to be the Woodbird. Siegfried makes no attempt to play an instrument but just awkwardly attempts to fondle the Woodbird, who at first gives him short shrift. Fafner, having been moved onto a walking frame, is knocked to the floor by Siegfried, whereupon no one runs to the aid of the giant who is clearly dying from a heart attack. Finally, Siegfried retrieves what from row 17 appears to be a sparkling crystal – a 'ring' at last? – which he then passes to the MiY, (Siegfried obviously hasn't seen the listed cast of characters! Presumably, then, the crystal is not the ring.) and after he understands Mime's intent, runs him through with the sword. The MiY finishes him off by smothering him with a cushion. Siegfried and the MiY head off while the Woodbird removes her nurse's smock and goes her own way. At last, there has been some kind of attempt at story telling based on the text. My rage is now somewhat assuaged.

The set for Act 3 is that for Act 2 but looking in the other direction and including the courtyard garden. There is a body lying upstage, presumably Fafner's. All the staff have resigned. Wotan (The Wanderer) enters wearing Brünnhilde's hat from scene 1 of *Walküre*. Erda enters from the other side with an unknown woman. Is this the now grown child she left with during the Rainbow Bridge music at the end of *Rheingold*? (It doesn't matter. This is another of Schwarz's unexplained additions.) After his unsatisfactory encounters with both Erda (no questions answered) and Siegfried (sword/gun shattered), Wotan retreats and the devoted Grane leads Brünnhilde into the garden. She wears an elegantly pleated shift, her head is swathed in post-plastic surgery bandages and sun glasses. The bandages and sunglasses removed, Schwarz undercuts Siegfried's first feelings of fear, having had Mime show him pictures of naked women in *Walküre* and having had him flirt with the Woodbird. Brünnhilde is delighted to see her old hat again and the scene ends rapturously as Wagner intended.

My conversion from rage to rapture was completed by the magnificent singing and orchestral playing. To me, Andreas Schager as Siegfried seemed to be shouting his way through Act 1. Since Schwarz sees him as an uncouth, drunken lout, Schager's singing may be a reflection of the character interpretation. He redeems himself somewhat in the other acts, however, with some subtlety in his middle tone, although he seems incapable of soft singing above the stave. Arnold Bezuyen as Mime is ideally cast not only vocally but physically and dramatically. The Wanderer confirmed Tomasz Konieczny's command over the role of Wotan. Olafur Sigurdarson, Wilhelm Schwinghammer and Okka von der Damerau all made their marks as Alberich, Fafner and Erda, respectively. But Daniela Köhler was greeted at the curtain calls with the audience's greatest adulation. And deservedly so. From finest pianissimo to glorious fortissimo, throughout her range Köhler proved herself to be a brilliant vocal artist and actress. Rapture!

Götterdämmerung, August 15



Brünnhilde

The final 'day' of Wagner's tetralogy offers many musical highlights and to my mind they were superbly realized by Cornelius Meister and the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra. Many others in the audience at the final curtain disagreed but my companion and I both felt that Meister was bearing the brunt of the production team's dereliction of duty to Wagner and the audience, having failed to honour most of the text's details and having superimposed unnecessary, unintelligible and unresolved elements to the unfolding scenario. The director did not appear at the curtain calls.

In my previous reports I have omitted to mention several of the extraneous additions to the action: the yellow and black cap that occasionally could be interpreted as being the Tarnhelm; Freia's brown and yellow chevron patterned 'security blanket' that has made an appearance in each opera, mostly associated with the unexplained children who are present throughout; and the drawings of traditional Norse god-like heads that the children obsessively colour in. Several of them are crumpled and discarded by the adults. Is this Schwarz reminding us that he has rejected the mythology on which Wagner based his operas? Yet when the Gibichung vassals arrive in Act 2, they carry masks on sticks that are based on such Norse images. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The Prologue opens in the double bedroom from the Spring Song of *Walküre*, Act 1. It seems Brünnhilde and Siegfried have an eight- or ten-year-old daughter. She is put to bed by her mother, who wears a matching pink nightie and peignoir, and her father, in chinos and bomber jacket, reluctantly tucks her in. Once she is asleep, from under the covers the Norns appear in tatty dress, their heads, faces and limbs covered in silver spangles and their fingers extended into witch-like talons. Are these the embodiment of the child's nightmares? She wakes and engages with them, however, and the rubber floatation ring and a plastic ball that appeared in *Rheingold*, scene 1 are found under the bed and used for play. Are these the Rhein Maidens in disguise? Confused? I am!

The Norns having retreated, Siegfried (Stephen Gould) and Brünnhilde (Irène Theorin) re-enter. This appears not to be a happy marriage and Siegfried's relationship with Grane (Igor Schwab) is also far from cordial: which of them gets to drive the car on their Rhein journey? Out flies the bedroom and the Gibichungs' bungalow trucks forward. Its style is that of this production's Walhalla, but tellingly not as expensively furnished. In fact, Guttrune (Elisabeth Teige) and Gunther (Michael Kupfer-Radecky) have just moved in and the servants are still unpacking. Don't ask me why a servant is told to shove a Christmas tree, lights still flickering, top first into an obviously very deep fireplace, leaving half a meter of the base exposed.

Hagen (Albert Dohmen), who is now the Man in the Yellow tee shirt, lets them know that Siegfried is on his way and that they would do well to treat him nicely. At this point I should point out that my assumption that the flashy 'ring', which is really more of a knuckleduster, that Siegfried took from the dead Fafner and gave to the 'young Hagen' is not indeed the ring, nor the Tarnhelm. Hagen still has it but makes no effective use of it. When Siegfried and Grane arrive, things clearly haven't improved between them. Grane is immediately sent off to the servants' quarters. Both with long, obviously bleached hair, Guttrune, in a lime-green jumpsuit, and Gunther, in a grey tee shirt emblazoned in rhinestones with WHO THE FUCK IS GRANE (yes, in English), make a play for Siegfried. Grane rushes in with a head wound but is dragged back to the kitchen. The next time we see him he is semiconscious on a porter's trolley, covered in blood and suffering. The blood brotherhood oath taken by Gunther and Siegfried is sealed by sipping Grane's blood from a single glass and a long man-on-man kiss. Although he resiles from any further smooching, Siegfried hands Gunther the car keys for the drive to Brünnhilde's rock – sorry, double bedroom. As the curtain descends we see Hagen with a knife preparing to finish off the whimpering Grane and dismember him.

Maison Gibichung having receded, Brünnhilde's bedroom flies back in. (Sadly, I have to report that before the smother curtain had been closed between the two sets, the silhouettes of two stage managers could be seen entering the stage through the sheer curtains on one of the windows.) Brünnhilde attempts to stop the little girl from drawing Norse masks, but she is distracted when Waltraute (Christa Mayer) enters through the window in a tattered version of her plastic surgery clinic Valkyrie outfit. During Waltraute's great warning scene, Brünnhilde offers her a cup of tea. Accepting it, Waltraute empties the entire contents of the sugar bowl into the cup, spilling most of it. After she has left, Brünnhilde gets down on her hands and knees and very effectively cleans up the mess with a cloth. Wotan's former favourite Valkyrie is reduced to a pink housecoat-wearing hausfrau.

The window is left open when Waltraute leaves and now Gunther arrives through the door while Siegfried sings behind the window's sheer curtain. There is still no sign of a ring and Gunther blindfolds Brünnhilde before dragging her off. (Dear reader, I have now written more for the prologue and Act 1 of *Götterdämmerung* than I did for the whole of Siegfried. Read on if you dare!)

Act 2 opens in a gym whose walls are constructed of the same frosted Perspex panels that have been part of each room in Wotan's domain. A single punching bag is suspended from the ceiling. After Hagen rises from his chair and makes some desultory attempts at punching, Alberich joins him in some light sparring. Alberich departs, the walls fly out and the vassals appear through dense mist. Except for the fact that Brünnhilde brings her child with her, Schwarz doesn't surprise with any gimmicks. There is even a sword for the unhappy couple to swear upon.

Now for Act 3, perhaps the most dispiriting of all. The scene is the cutaway of a very deep but empty, derelict swimming pool, obviously on the Walhalla estate because of the backdrop. The rim of the pool is fenced off, although there is gate access to a ladder to the bottom. The Rhein Maidens are asleep at the back while Siegfried and the child are fishing in a small puddle at the

deep end. When the Rhein Maidens wake and are unsuccessful in convincing Siegfried that he should return the ring to them, they crawl off through a tunnel to one side of the pool.

Hagen arrives in the company of the intoxicated Gunther and vassals. Gunther is carrying a white plastic bag in which we easily guess Alberich has placed some of Grane's body parts. Guttrune has her moment and after Hagen climbs down into the pool, the conspiracy proceeds, leading him to stab Siegfried in the back. The vassals are appalled and drunkenly stagger off. Gunther opens the gate and drops the plastic bag into the pool before making his exit.

As the funeral music begins, the distressed child tries to wake Siegfried (at which time a mobile phone rings in the audience, I kid you not!) The child and Hagen cover the body with his jacket and sit at the entrance to the tunnel. The child eventually crawls away. Brünnhilde arrives in the company of three Valkyries and the child. She begins her immolation scene from behind the safety fence above. Hagen eventually crawls out through the tunnel and Brünnhilde abandons child and sisters only to re-enter inexplicably downstage left. I can only guess that Ms Theorin refused to climb down the ladder.

“ The immoral profession of musical criticism must be abolished.”

- Richard Wagner

As she is calling Grane, Brünnhilde trips over the plastic bag and opens it to find his severed head. Suddenly we have lurched into *Salome* territory. At some point one of the Valkyries kills the child and they leave. Brünnhilde then lies beside Siegfried with Grane's head between them. There is one line left to be sung. On cue Hagen appears at the pool edge above, sings the line and leaves: a meaningless gesture, since there is no ring.

There is no fire, no water. Eventually the cyclorama descends to reveal a series of horizontal strip lights. The pool trucks back and projected onto its back wall are the twin foetuses of the *Rheingold* prelude, this time in loving embrace.

Despite Wagner's glorious music, I doubt there was a moist eye in the house. The booing erupted immediately, drowning out any cheering that there may have been. My companion and I were surprised at the vehement reaction received by Ms Theorin. Although not necessarily ideal, she certainly had all the notes and delivered them efficiently. The rest of the cast received accolades of varying enthusiasm. And the audience left 10 minutes later in a subdued atmosphere.

My reactions are purely personal. I do not apologize for them, nor do I believe they are definitive. I look forward to hearing and/or reading other people's opinions. You can read mine as a cautionary tale or a challenge. I can't imagine what the dramaturg (Konrad Kuhn) was thinking as he addressed Schwarz's ideas. How complicit was he in the final product?

My pilgrimage to Bayreuth has not been a waste of time, effort or money. But I'd rather it had been a more rewarding week. With the exception of some scenes, I am sticking to my very first assessment of Schwarz's production: banal.

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A TALE OF TWO RINGS – SCENOGRAPHY AT BAYREUTH AND BERLIN

by Esteban Insausti



Bayreuth *Götterdämmerung*

2022 saw the premieres of two new productions of Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Bayreuth Festival in August and at Berlin’s Staatsoper Unter den Linden in October. The tetralogy has been a challenge to opera companies, directors and designers since its premiere in Bayreuth in August 1876. Every *Ring* production is judged, fairly or unfairly, on a number of previous productions. Some of these benchmark productions originate from Bayreuth. The logistics of mounting such a large production, engaging singers and musicians that can tackle this repertoire, and budgets, dictate whether the work can be mounted in one year. Few houses other than Bayreuth have the ability and resources to carry this out. Staatsoper Unter den Linden committed to a new production in one year in honour of Daniel Barenboim’s 80th birthday. Barenboim has been their long-time music director. Even rival Deutsche Oper created their latest production (premiered as a whole in late 2021) over a number of years (interrupted by Covid), directed by Stefan Herheim, co-designed by him and Silke Bauer, and conducted by Donald Runnicles.

The days of “traditional” or “naturalistic” productions, apart from the popular ones seen in Seattle, are over. They are certainly over in Europe. Since Wieland Wagner’s post-war 1951 Bayreuth *Ring*, a staging which broke with “tradition” but drew heavily on Adolphe Appia and the contemporary understanding of Classical Greek Theatre, one can say that productions fluctuate in a large range between the mythic and the political. Patrice Chareau’s centennial production (Bayreuth 1976) established the benchmark away from Wieland’s mythic world by setting the Marxist class struggle described in G.B.Shaw’s *The Perfect Wagnerite* to music. With sets by Richard Peduzzi, this *Ring* ranged aesthetically between the late 19th century and modern times, with top hats and large industrial revolution machinery cheek by jowl with hydro-electric dams. Class was to the fore. It was astonishing, and challenging, to the audience at the time. An audience that up to that point, the first generation of the Neue Bayreuth era, had been comfortable with Wieland’s and Wolfgang’s discs, split or otherwise, light and colour, as



Berlin *Die Walküre*

well as mythical totemic backdrops and stage elements. It is possible that Chareau’s concept could not have occurred without the landmark Leipzig production from 1973-1976 by Joachim Herz, which set the *Ring* as a parable of 19th century class conflict.

But why talk about benchmarks at all? In Wagner, and specially the *Ring*, it is important to understand where a production sits in the context of the history of performances. All stage productions have to confront the question as to why a particular work needs to be staged in that particular place and time. However, the nature of a piece like the *Ring* is such that it invites constant interpretation and identification with contemporary issues. Like Shakespeare, Richard Wagner seems to have the ability to ground his work in his time but also lift it into ANY time. Ruth Berghaus summarised this when talking of her production in Frankfurt: “The *Ring* [...] does not take place in a single time and place but rather always. That is why there can be no anachronisms.”(2)

After 146 years of productions is there anything left to say about the *Ring*? Of course there is. Harry Kupfer stated in an interview with the Los Angeles Times at the time of his landmark Bayreuth production: “The people who see this *Ring*” he insisted, “should learn something. They should not close their eyes, enjoy the pretty music and think how nice these world-destructions are. I want to give the audience something to think about.”(3)

So, to Valentin Schwarz and Dmitri Tcherniakov. What of their much-awaited productions? Both productions encapsulate the concerns and tropes of our time: binge television, reality dramas, social media, crime. To start with, there are more conceptual and scenographic similarities between the two than is comfortable. The scenographic and conceptual boundaries were not pushed or breached in any way as was the case with productions by Chareau or Kupfer. Certain narrative departures and, in the case of Schwarz, questionable topics, annoyed and confounded those of us that saw the productions live. Both creative teams were working in houses that have cutting edge technology with multiple scenic opportunities and state of the art lighting at their disposal. In the case of the recently renovated Unter den Linden, expanded wing space, turntable and lifting. Tcherniakov used all this to great effect in *Das Rheingold* in particular. Schwarz’s production was consciously traditional in its banal almost mono setting.

Tcherniakov directed and designed in Berlin, whilst Schwarz directed in Bayreuth with designs by Andrea Cozzi. First some of the similarities: both productions decided to stage their *Ring*

almost exclusively indoors and in one architectural setting. The ambience in both productions carries GDR (DDR) wood panelling to new levels. Both productions began with a video projection that established (presumably) the main theme of their production. In Bayreuth the video of DNA and twins set an interesting proposition that was not clearly reflected in the set or the subsequent *mise en scene*. In Berlin the video showed the effects of an experiment with dyes injected into a brain – human behaviour, under constant experiment, pervaded the E.S.C.H.E. (the institution Tcherniakov uses as his setting). Nature, a significant presence in Wagner’s drama, hardly appears in either production. The biological videos are the closest “nature” gets to the setting. Tcherniakov used video projections throughout. Both productions set out to show no tricks or magic – we are meant to be in a very human world.

Following the DNA video Schwarz’s initial stage image is of a shallow pool, outdoors, with a traditional painted landscape backdrop. The landscape may be described as a Bavarian one, with soft rolling hills and lush trees. This is not the Rhine of cliffs, rocks and mountains. The same pool, but in deep section, and painted bucolic landscape appear in the last Act of *Götterdämmerung* as a kind of bookend. After the theft of the gold (I won’t discuss this confusing and controversial staging) the stage transforms in front of our eyes into a luxury interior. The five or six pieces that make up the entire Ring set are flown, pushed and brought together to create every scene in the tetralogy. For Schwarz and Cozzi, their concept was to stage the tetralogy as a Netflix family drama, *Falconcrest* on the Rhine or *Succession* of the Nibelungen. Set in, presumably, Wotan’s estate “Walhalla”, we are never clear where we are, as the same pieces of the set reconfigure to suggest different spaces within the same “house”. There is a mezzanine just above normal door height that is used very sparingly. This is unusual as the space the mezzanine takes up is substantial and highlights the small scale of the set. The Bayreuth stage is very tall, as wide as it is tall, and Schwarz and Cozzi’s set “swims” in it. There are walls of translucent plastic above the mezzanine that try to give the set an epic quality (and mask the vastness of the stage) but to my eye made the scene look like a factory. Was this meant to depict large windows? Why couldn’t we have seen the painted landscape instead? The plastic sheeting lends itself to beautiful lighting effects but this was not explored until Act 2 of *Götterdämmerung* where a white box with walls and ceiling constructed of this plastic sheeting provided the most beautiful and effective setting of the whole production.

This “house”, Walhalla, was rather banal, perhaps to reflect the banality of the “gods” dwelling in it. The only trappings of luxury were some large paintings, the ubiquitous Eames chair and a glowing pyramid object that may or may not have represented the gold or ring. This pyramid is also depicted in a much larger form as a glasshouse or outbuilding that is never integrated into the setting or explained. For me there were similarities to Asplund’s and Lewerentz’s Staff Quarters (now restored as Visitor’s Centre) in their Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm – the pyramid shape further emphasising a funereal or death cult atmosphere. The depiction of landscape in this luxury interior is something that is contained and minimised. Some plants and bushes are depicted in a small “courtyard” that in some configurations looks like a vitrine – nature captured, contained, on display in this vacuous luxury house. The set did not fill the stage, in the same way that Castorf’s and Aleksandar Denic’s setting dominated the Bayreuth stage with its height and multiple spaces. Castorf may have confounded the audience with ideas outside the Wagnerian narrative but there was a consistent reference to oil as the gold down to the peeling posters on the drab walls of the Berlin tenements and we knew where we were.

With Tcherniakov we know we are in the E.S.C.H.E. Institute (Forschungszentrum or research centre), as the stage curtain on show prior to the start of every opera (except *Götterdämmerung*) depicts the architectural plan of the building. In *Das Rheingold* he proceeds to show us the various spaces or rooms (10 by my count including a Lecture Hall, various Laboratories, a Conference Room and an office) in which the tetralogy will unfold. The action unfolds like an episode of *The West Wing* with characters walking and singing through the corridors and rooms, opening and closing doors as they go. When Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim (Scene 3 of *Das Rheingold*) by lift, the whole set lifts to follow the pair down to the basement (a disused office/laboratory taken over by Alberich and his brother Mime). This was impressive, a coup de théâtre, but other staging ideas seem to work against this “magic”. For instance, Hunding’s Hut (a deconstructed room that was reused several times, as Mime and Siegfried’s home and as Brünnhilde’s rock in *Götterdämmerung*) is attached to Wotan’s office with a large one-way mirror window. This setting sits on a bare stage and spins around, we are in a theatre watching this experiment with Wotan, seems to be the message. The limitations of the E.S.C.H.E. Institute concept and the rooms we saw was highlighted by the scenes in front of Fafner’s cave in



Berlin *Das Rheingold*



Berlin *Siegfried*

Act 2 of *Siegfried*. These scenes were mainly sung in between the rooms amongst the scaffold and construction of the sets – it was visually interesting but highlighted the limitations of the set. Or was it meant to convey that we were in an in between world? A world between gods and men, between reality and fantasy? At other times the singers step outside the rooms and interact on the stage, breaking the convention of being in a set.

There were few, if any, beautiful stage images or memorable moments in either production. In the Schwarz Ring the Wotan Fricka confrontation in Act 2 of *Die Walküre* was very good. Set during the wake for Freia (who committed suicide after being abused by the Giants) this whole dialogue had the feel of the opening of *The Godfather Part 1*. And Hundung was present throughout making the outcome even more chilling. The farewell scene at the end of *Die Walküre* was memorable for what happened after the singing was done. A wall descends between Brünnhilde and Wotan. Once it touches the ground Wotan collapses in grief. At that moment Fricka comes on stage with a drinks trolley carrying a bottle of champagne and a single candle (the magic fire?) presumably to celebrate her victory. Wotan takes one of the glasses of champagne from Fricka but proceeds to pour it on the ground, takes off his wedding ring and drops it into the empty glass which he hands back to Fricka. He then picks up Brünnhilde's hat from the ground, puts it on, signalling his transition into Wanderer, and walks away. The end of the marriage and the beginning of the end for the gods. Chilling. Another magical moment was the entry of the vassals in Act 2 of *Götterdämmerung*, a terrifying image as the back wall of the white cube space lifts up to present a group of men in black with red masks advancing through smoke. Wished the rest of the production had such moments of stage beauty.

In the Tcherniakov *Ring* the image of Brünnhilde alone on stage at the end of both *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* placed her at the centre of the message for this production – the one person that successfully transitions from institutionalised experiment to free civilian. At the end of *Die Walküre* the Lecture Hall in which Act 3 took place receded upstage with Wotan, arm outstretched, farewelling his favourite child as she took centre stage (literally) for the second half of the tetralogy. Similarly at the very end, when

Valhalla burns and the Rhine bursts its banks, Brünnhilde appears on an empty stage carrying a suitcase, the Schopenhauerian words that Wagner did not use to describe the end of the world scroll on the back wall (shades of what XXX did at the end of the Stuttgart *Götterdämmerung* in 1998). Erda walks on to greet Brünnhilde and offer her the toy Grane, she refuses it. She then pulls the stage curtain with the plan of E.S.C.H.E. down, having left the experiment she now stands alone in our world – a survivor, a refugee, an exile?

As previously mentioned nature is absent from this scientific world except for an ash (esche) tree (the source from which Wotan derives power and knowledge but also in its dying stage the harbinger of “Das Ende”, as well as the play on words for the institute's name) at the centre of the only space which may be considered to be “outside”, a semi-circular courtyard. There is a room with live rabbits in cages which may also be considered to represent “nature” but its true meaning is inaccessible. The passing of time is effectively represented by the aging characters, the fashion and also the furniture in the rooms. In *Götterdämmerung* there is even an obvious change in management with the Gibichungs redecorating the conference room and Wotan's office with modern wall panelling and furniture.

The importance of a *Ring* production rests with the director's concept of the whole tetralogy and the designer's visual execution of that concept. In the case of both Schwarz/Cozzi and Tcherniakov, they succeed but only partially. Tcherniakov confidently filled the Unter den Linden stage with multiple meticulously detailed “rooms” that shifted, lifted and spun, using the stage machinery and technology to the full. Schwarz and Cozzi in Bayreuth seemed covered by the size of the stage and perhaps the history associated with the theatre. Whilst the set pieces that made up the luxury estate were beautifully detailed, they seemed pale and simple on the vast Bayreuth stage.

Notes:

(1) Michael Cooper, “Harry Kupfer, Director and ‘Opera King of Berlin,’ Dies at 84”, *The New York Times*, 3 January 2020.

(2) Josef Oehrlin, “Signale aus der Götterwelt: Ein Gespräch zur *Siegfried*-Premiere mit Ruth Berghaus,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 November, 1986.

(3) Martin Bernheimer, “Kupfer's Controversial New ‘Ring’ in Bayreuth : High-Tech Kitsch”, *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 1988.

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NEWS FROM SINGERS SUPPORTED BY THE SOCIETY

A LETTER FROM MICHELLE RYAN 31 OCTOBER 2022

Dear All,

It has been quite a while since I last wrote to you! The past twelve months have been the busiest I think I have ever experienced! However, I have enjoyed every moment and would do it all again.

The 2021-2022 season at the State Theatre of Hessen in Wiesbaden started with rehearsals for the French opera *Werther* by Jules Massenet. I was offered a few shows of this production with a few months' notice. I was so grateful for this extra role as I had always wanted to sing the role of Charlotte's younger sister Sophie. It was wonderful to share this role in rehearsals with the other soprano and to learn from each other. Within a few weeks I was juggling another two opera productions at the same time.

Hansel and Gretel rehearsals were only a couple of weeks long and I was asked to share the roles of Gretel, Sandman and Dew Fairy again with another soprano. We actually had a wonderful time swapping roles every rehearsal and it allowed me the chance to have a go at different characters which I loved. As well as this I was at the early stages of rehearsing a very small role in *Pique Dame* by Tchaikovsky, directed by the Intendant of the theatre, Uwe Eric Laufenberg. It was really interesting to be singing German, French and Russian in the space of one month! I found it a tremendous challenge to rehearse so many different styles of opera while learning how to look after my voice when I felt like I was singing a great deal. Sleep, exercise and a healthy diet contributed to managing this. Riding my bike to work was always a delight and a great way to wake up in the morning! It's just splendid to ride through the cobbled streets of Wiesbaden to the beautiful theatre.

I started horse riding lessons around September as I really wanted to pursue a hobby that helped me to get away from the business of the theatre. The riding stables were only a fifteen-minute drive out to Wiesbaden and my horse instructor was a very lovely country lady who taught me very well! It was the first hobby I have ever learnt in German and I got very hooked! As rehearsals got busy I rode less but tried to go whenever I had a spare morning.

Christmas was spent in lovely Wiesbaden! After a sad first Christmas of nothing being open due to Covid, I was finally able to experience the lovely Christmas twilight markets in the Marketplace. I enjoyed a few strolls after work with colleagues, drinking hot mulled wine on a cold Winter's night. I absolutely adore how the Germans do Christmas and don't think anyone does it more special. It was also a real joy



to do performances of *Hansel and Gretel* at this time of year and play a kid on stage! I had really started getting to know my colleagues more at this time and the members of the orchestra as well.

After the New Year, I started rehearsals for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*! The last time I had performed this opera was at a Summer Program in Prague in 2016. It was great to have the chance to give Zerlina another go! This time with the Leporello/Zerlina duet, which is often cut! I had to take some stairs and then on the upper level, climb to

tie Leporello up (in white boots with heels might I add!) while looking down at the Conductor from afar to keep in time. This was a challenge! Zerlina is a very energetic role and I found a lot of weight dropped off after running around the stage in a corset, big dress over a hoop skirt and white boots for a month! It was a very fun production and I loved the cast!

We had also started rehearsals for *Elektra* by Strauss, where I sang the fourth Maid. It was a joy to work with Wagnerian soprano Catherine Foster again, whom I shared the stage with for the Wagner Ring Cycle rehearsals the previous season. During these rehearsals I had organised to do a few auditions around Germany as I knew I had a few weeks of lighter work coming up where I would be able to get away to sing for some agents and companies. A very interesting job caught my eye in Stuttgart, only two hours south of Wiesbaden. I had spent time in Stuttgart in the past and knew the city well. The local radio company in Stuttgart have a very well-known small radio choir which goes under the name of the SWR Vokalensemble. A soprano position had been vacant for some years. I saw that they were auditioning late March so I applied. I was offered an audition and sent a list of prepared pieces, which were very difficult and I also had to bring five of my own to present.

With the help of a few colleagues at the theatre who had very excellent choral training, I made my way to Stuttgart and made it through both rounds of the audition and succeeded in being offered a trial position for the 2022-2023 season. I was absolutely delighted to accept the job and felt very welcome and warmly invited by the Vokalensemble! The ensemble is the smallest radio choir in Germany and specialises in modern music.

Knowing that I had something exciting lined up for the following season made my final months in Wiesbaden an absolute ball! I could really make the most of the rest of the season and enjoy myself to the fullest. During the weeks I was auditioning, I had a surprise jump in for the premier of *Don Carlos* by Verdi. The role of Voce del cielo was already prepared. It is quite small but very significant in the opera. Unfortunately, there was an outbreak of Covid across many

casts in the theatre, meaning one of the sopranos was unable to sing the premiere. I was feeling a little tired myself but got a call the day of the premiere asking if I could please jump in and run down to the theatre to see if the other soprano's dress fitted me. It was a very funny moment when the costume ladies and I breathed a sigh of relief when the dress only just fit! The evening was a success! I found out the same evening a colleague I had sung in a show with in Don Giovanni the evening before had tested positive. Sure enough, I was positive two days later. Thankfully a mild case.

There were two more roles for the rest of the season prepared and ready to rehearse when I was back at work. Servilia in *La Clemenza di Tito* and Die Seele (The Soul) in *Babylon*, which is a modern opera by Jörg Widmann. I had no idea just how demanding this role was going to be for me, but I think it came at the perfect time. The production had been postponed a year due to Covid and was to be the opening of the famous Maifestspiele which is held every year in Wiesbaden. Thankfully I had already started coaching the role the previous year. It has some very difficult vocal challenges and I believe that having already been singing in the theatre quite frequently for six months really helped to build the stamina I was going to need for this. As well as the vocal challenges I found the character to be a tremendous challenge. Die Seele is usually not human in this opera, but my character had been changed to be played as an abandoned Jewish Orthodox wife and mother, who spends a lot of time in pain but also looking to protect her husband Tammu from ruin. It was fabulous to work with conductor Albert Horne and Director Daniela Kerck. The production ended up being received extremely well to full audiences and there were many fantastic reviews after the opening of the May festival! I was very proud to be part of something new and exciting and I believe I really made the most of the role.

After the premiere of *Babylon* and shows of *La Clemenza di Tito* in May, I was very lucky to be in a few church concerts in and outside of Wiesbaden, one being in the beautiful Marktkirche in the square of Wiesbaden. It was a lovely big church to sing in and I enjoyed working on other repertoire aside from opera, including sacred pieces by Schubert and Exultate Jubilate by Mozart. I also took part in a concert celebrating 1700 years of Jewish life in Germany, which was conducted by the theatre's Chief conductor at the time, Patrick Lange

As there were no rehearsals running for June or July and I was mainly just performing in the evenings for concerts or shows, I had planned to prepare a Liederabend (Song evening) with a friend I had worked with in Berlin during the Berlin Opera Academy in 2016. William Kelley and myself put together a program of pieces by Schumann, Strauss, Debussy and the Hermit Songs by Samuel Barber. It was a joy to work together on a project and to perform for a wonderfully supportive audience. In a way, it felt like a farewell concert as it was quite intimate and a lot of friends and colleagues who I had become close with during my two years in Wiesbaden were there to support me. On the 27th June we presented the concert in the absolutely gorgeous foyer in the theatre.

In July I spent a bit of time travelling to Stuttgart to look for a new apartment. Unfortunately, I had no success but I still packed up all of my belongings and prepared my apartment in Wiesbaden for the next German Australian Opera Grant

Awardee, Darcy Carroll. Thankfully he let me leave my things in the basement, and by the time I had flown back to Australia to visit my family after two very long years, I found an apartment through a past German Australian Opera Grant recipient, Sarah Jones. Her colleague at the opera theatre in Stuttgart was taking a sabbatical for a year and the furnished apartment happened to be just under a twenty-minute walk from my new workplace! I said yes and was very thrilled to be able to enjoy my time in Australia without the worry of having no apartment. While I was home I rested and spent much awaited time with family, friends and went to the beach (yes, in the winter time). A friend of mine from the Gold Coast named Sarka Budinksa drove two hours south to the Clarence Valley where my family live and we put on a concert. It was wonderful to sing for the community I grew up in and it was a joy to even perform a piece with my father John, who played the harmonica. The lovely Sr. Anne Gallagher and Gwen Berman from the Maclean Music Academy where I learnt music also accompanied a few pieces and a local soprano in year 12 named Piper Ramsey delighted the audience with two pieces she chose to sing.

The first few months of my new job with the SWR Vokalensemble have been quite the change! The ensemble has currently twenty-eight singers led by the youngest conductor for radio choirs in Germany, Yuval Weinberg, who is my age! For starters, I have my weekends back (except for once every two months when we have concerts or travel away to perform). The support I have received from my colleagues is like nothing I have ever experienced before in a workplace. I really do feel like they have taken me on to guide me and help me to develop as a singer and a performer. In the first two weeks we rehearsed and recorded quite a large number of Hungarian pieces for a CD production in the studio. I had never sung in Hungarian before but managed to pick it up quick enough. It was a little nerve-racking being ready to record at 10am each day, and I even had a few solos! After the recording weeks we started rehearsing for a concert which included works by modern composers Fredrik Zeller and Claudio Scroccarro, some of the Hungarian pieces by Ligeti and works from Haydn, Grieg and Rheinberger. There were most likely around six different languages! We performed in Stuttgart, Alzenau and Mainz. It has been a lot for me to adapt to as an ensemble singer and to go from running around on the stage using my full voice all the time to suddenly blending in with a group of singers who specialise in modern music and can do some pretty amazing things with their voices while standing quite calm and relaxed. I am really looking forward to the next concerts and recording productions. We will also be performing in Amsterdam, Milan, Vienna and Paris!

I would like to thank the German Australian Opera Grant, Hans Henkell and More Than Opera for my two life changing years in Wiesbaden. I would also like to thank the **Wagner Society in NSW** for their support during this time. I would like to thank the 'Tait Memorial' Trust in London for their help this year towards lessons with Yvonne Kenny in the coming months to help develop my voice and continue singing operatically while working in the SWR Vokalensemble. And a big thank you to my family who support me so much while I am living this crazy life on the other side of the world!

Love,

Michelle xo

UPDATE FROM JESSICA BLUNT

In June, I was honoured to participate in the inaugural **Stimme, Leib und Seele** course. 'SLS' is a series of week-long, year-round masterclasses outside of Salzburg, Austria, developed and curated by Australian Europe-based conductor **Jennifer Condon**. Each masterclass is tailored to specific topics and ideas, and explores these in-depth through daily movement classes, group workshops, and one-on-one sessions, as well as a closing-night concert to celebrate the breakthroughs achieved during the week.

When my flight from London first arrived in Salzburg, I had no idea how much my life was about to change.

The courses are run in the freshly renovated Musikvilla Untersberg. It is a classic Alpine villa with a twist: colourful flower-boxes drape over the balcony and a swing hangs from wooden beams overlooking the mountains... inside is a recital room with a grand piano by supplied by the Bösendorfer Salon in Vienna, complete with lights and microphones for live-streams and recordings. Below is a professional-grade movement studio with ballet barre, sprung dance floor (the same floor material used by the Berliner Staatsballet) and floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The villa sits beneath the dramatic backdrop of the Untersberg Mountain, and overlooks the Lattengebirge – you may recall them from the *Sound of Music* film? It is not a stretch for me to say that every day here at Stimme, Leib und Seele, the hills are truly 'alive with the sound of music.'

The first course I participated in focused on 'Uncompromising Physicality' – how to act and move best on stage, particularly during scenes which are physically demanding, without it affecting the production of your best vocal sound. The staff for this course were Jennifer herself for musical context, **Moshe Landsberg** - a répétiteur from Hamburg for coaching, **Geoffrey Alm** - a fight director/coordinator from Seattle, USA, and world-renowned Wagnerian tenor **Stuart Skelton**.

The mornings begin with a body work session in the movement studio, and in this course we learned safe stage fighting skills. After, we would move into the main music room for group workshops. Here, Jennifer has developed a unique four-pronged 'diamond' coaching approach: as we workshopped our scenes and arias, all four coaches would offer feedback and guidance in tandem, each focusing on their area of expertise. We would finish a phrase, or a scene, and be offered four pieces of advice on how to improve and grow as artists.

I can't put into words how much I learned through this experience, but also how much fun I had. The environment was supportive and enriching, pushing boundaries but offering a safe space to do so. I had one-on-one sword fighting lessons with Geoffrey in the dance room. We learnt how to punch, fight, stab and slap safely. The musical coaching with Moshe meant I was exploring new ideas in repertoire I'd been singing for years and had previously thought there was nothing new to consider. I learnt so much vocal technique and character development from Stuart: his wealth of knowledge on vocal pedagogy was much



appreciated as he helped me to explore new arias which sometimes sat in an uncomfortable sustained tessitura (Donna Anna's "Or sai chi l'onore"), and he mixed vocal technique with stagecraft. Who knew singing Tosca's "Vissi d'arte" in the foetal position on the floor could be so comfortable? And who knew one could bounce their voice off the timber stage floor to produce more resonance and feedback?

It was a pleasure to work so closely with incredible artists. In the final concert, I performed excerpts of the *Tosca* Act II Finale and the final duet from *Rigoletto*. My Scarpia/Rigoletto was a Vienna State Opera ensemble member who had come to SLS for updated stagecraft techniques and fine-tuning, and being able to work with him was a real joy.

The following course was 'Young Artist Program Preparation' with Jennifer, **Michael Kraus** (Director of the Vienna Opera Studio), **Anna Kravtsova** (Répétiteur), and **Barbara Schmalz-Rauchbauer** (Body work coach). This course was mostly done in German, and was great language practice! In this course, we focused on preparing for Opera Studio auditions and how to present our best selves and create our best package. It involved a lot of workshopping arias, and finding the 'niche' you could fit into as a singer—what was your best self and how could you put that forward in auditions?

My third course was the 'Hosenrollen' course in September, after I'd attended a language course at the Goethe Institut in Berlin. Here, I was tasked with jumping-in as Sophie for *Der Rosenkavalier* and Gretel for *Hänsel und Gretel*. This course was developed for mezzos to work on a deeper understanding of German 'pants' roles, and was run by Jennifer, **Daniela Sindram** (mezzo soprano, and one of the world's best Octavians), **Jendrik Springer** (resident Vienna State Opera répétiteur, premier Strauss & Wagner coach and regular Bayreuth musical assistant), and **Mandy Demetriou** (movement coach and choreographer from Royal Opera House, Covent Garden). For this course, I learnt the repertoire, particularly Sophie, in 3 days. With the help of Jendrik, I was able to perform 'Presentation of the Rose' memorised, with staging, in the space of a week, with the formidable **Margaret Plummer** as my Octavian. What a joy that was! Margaret's presence on stage, and in the course in general, was bright and warm and I learnt so much singing alongside her. All with the dramatic backdrop of the Austrian and Bavarian mountains behind us and the beautiful music of Strauss filling the villa.

I have learnt so much during my time at Stimme, Leib und Seele. The three courses I have attended have brought exponential growth in my performing and artistry, as well as focused-advice and feedback that I doubt I would have received elsewhere with such care and commitment from the staff—as well as such a wealth of opinions with different specialties. Each staff member and their unique focus could bring something to you – especially during the ‘diamond’ coaching sessions and masterclasses, and contribute to the process of ‘polishing’ and becoming a well-rounded artist.

As a result of my time here, I was invited to work with coach Jendrik Springer at the Wiener Staatsoper in November. I spent three days working on new repertoire as I explore new Fach possibilities as a result of the steady but intense vocal development I have experienced during my time at SLS. I was lucky to see Strauss’ *Ariadne auf Naxos* at the Staatsoper as well. In late November, I am also travelling to London to see my singing teacher.

You may recall, the last time I wrote to the **Wagner Society** I was studying at the Royal Academy of Music in London. My studies there were kindly contributed to by the Wagner Society in NSW, and I am so grateful for your help. In June, I graduated (in absentia, because I was singing with Stuart Skelton at SLS!) from the Master of Arts (Performance) with Distinction. I was also honoured to be awarded a Diploma of the Royal Academy of Music, for outstanding performance in a post-graduate recital, during which I performed one of Wagner’s early art songs “Les adieux de Marie Stuart”. I had a wonderful time in London – performing for English National Opera at the London Coliseum for their *Dance for Ukraine Gala* was a definite highlight! I also performed scenes from *Le nozze di Figaro*, *La bohème*, and *Albert Herring* during my studies, as well as some concerts with Kensington Opera and the Tait Memorial Trust.

For now, however, I am focusing on the wealth of opportunities offered by Germany and Austria. I am focusing on my language studies, and coaching with some of the finest répétiteurs in the business thanks to the people I have met here at SLS. I will be heading back to Vienna in January to see Jendrik once more and continue the work we started during the ‘Hosenrollen’ course and what we’ve explored in my recent coaching at the Staatsoper. My development lately, which I massively attribute to Stimme, Leib und Seele, and the wonderful and ambitious ideas and determination of Jennifer Condon and her staff, has seen new doors open for exploring different repertoire, and possibly even a Fach change... for now, I’m working on experimenting and learning more about my instrument as I grow, and am excited for all the singing-adventures to come!

POST ON OUR FACEBOOK PAGE FROM BASS-BARITONE CHRISTOPHER CURCURUTO

This post has been a long time coming. I was spurred into action this week after I suffered a technology failure that made clear the tremendous impact that a certain organisation’s support has offered me these past few months.

Earlier this year, I made an application to the Wagner Society in NSW for financial assistance to purchase an iPad Pro, Magic Keyboard, and Apple Pencil. My rationale was that with this technology I would better be able to undertake both my professional work as a singer, and as a budding academic, carrying an entire library of resources with me (including a treasury of scores and other resources such as diction and style manuals and pedagogical treatises). Since generously offering me this support, I can honestly say that I use each of these items multiple times daily and they have proven as useful and effective as anticipated.

How do I know this? Well, two weeks ago, I began having issues with the iPad. For some reason, the screen failed. As it is some drive to the Apple Store and I am busy most days, it was almost a week until I was able to have the issue diagnosed which resulted in a complete replacement. Over the course of that week, I was made acutely aware of how heavily I rely on this technology. I had to revert to hard copy scores sans rehearsal markings and directorial cuts, lugging multiple heavy books across campus daily. My day-to-day administration went out the window, I fell behind on emails, drafting necessary documents, presentations, assignments, and general scheduling. Although I have an albeit old laptop, it itself is too large and heavy to be considered portable, and too slow to be of any use. In short, the iPad and accessories have facilitated unparalleled efficiency and access to resources and this was brought into stark contrast when I couldn’t use it for that miserable week.

This public acknowledgement and expression of gratitude, per above, comes woefully late, but believe me when I say that time has only amplified my appreciation. Thank you so much to the members of the **Wagner Society in NSW** for your support. Without it, I would not have been able to purchase this equipment which has evidently served, and continues to serve me so well! It is no overstatement to say that it has truly changed my day-to-day life immensely and for the better. Let it also be known that this isn’t the first time that the Wagner Society in NSW has contributed to my ongoing professional success. In fact, I am in the United States in no small part due to a significant contribution from them. Further, one member in particular, **Leona Geeves**, has been a passionate supporter and advocate for my continued development as a young Wagnerian since 2015 when she offered me my first gig with the Society, performing excerpts from *Tristan and Isolde* after hearing my early attempts at Wolfram’s aria at a studio concert.

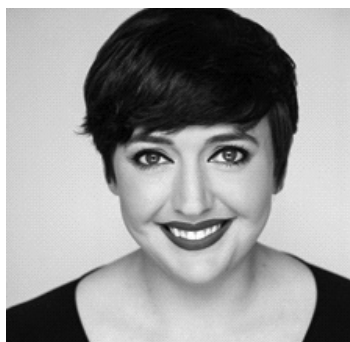
I look forward to returning to Australia, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, to demonstrate the enormous growth I have made as a performer here in the States. I remain passionate about pursuing a professional singing career and can only hope that German repertoire (Wagner, and Strauss just for Leona), remain hallmarks of it.

Written with sincere gratitude.

Chris,
5th November 2022

RECENT RECIPIENTS OF WAGNER SOCIETY HELP

The Society is happy to announce their recent financial support for three outstanding Australian Wagnerian singers who have established careers in Europe but have suffered setbacks due to Covid19.



MARGARET PLUMMER
Mezzo-soprano

Margaret Plummer is an Australian mezzo-soprano living in Vienna, Austria. For the past eight years she was engaged as a full-time member of the Wiener Staatsoper ensemble

where she performed and covered much of the lyric mezzo repertoire including Hänsel, Charlotte, Siebel, Octavian and Waltraute. She also performed at the Hamburg State Opera. She began a freelance career in the summer of 2022 by performing Carmen at the Longborough Festival in England.

She gained a Bachelor of Music in 2005 from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Prior to studying at the Sydney Conservatorium, Margaret attended The Australian National University's School of Music studying Jazz Vocal Performance in 2000. She worked for 8 years for Opera Australia performing in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and toured *La Traviata* to regional centres in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia with Opera Australia's touring arm, Ozopera. She has also performed with Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour and with Pinchgut Opera. In 2014 Margaret won the Vienna State Opera Award from Opera Foundation Australia which brought about her relocation to Europe where she was offered a place in the ensemble in mid-2015.

Margaret has performed as a concert soloist with many choral and symphonic organisations including the Wiener Philharmoniker, the Tiroler Symphonie Orchester, Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Romanian National Orchestra and in recital at the Musikverein and the Boyne Music Festival in Ireland. She has sung in English, German, Italian, French, Czech and Russian She has a thrilling season coming, singing a Blumenmädchen in a new production of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth and Auntie in *Peter Grimes* at La Scala.

The Society supported Margaret financially to allow her to undertake a week of specialist training in Strauss Travesti roles, specifically Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*, at Stimme, Leib & Seele, the masterclass studio outside Salzburg. (Ed note – please see Jessica Blunt's report, above).

On 14 November 2022 Margaret sent us the following note:

The intensive workshop was incredible, I had daily sessions with **Daniela Sindram** (a remarkable German mezzo soprano who specializes in German repertoire), **Mandy Demetriou** (a movement coach from the Royal Opera House who helped us develop our masculine body language) and **Jendrik Springer** (a pianist from Bayreuth Festspiele and Wiener Staatsoper whose knowledge of German repertoire is unmatched).

Each day would end with a live streamed masterclass and the week culminated with a performance of many of the pieces we had been working on through the week. I gained invaluable insight into the role of Octavian and made professional connections that will last my career! **Thank you, Wagner Society!**

ADRIAN TAMBURINI Bass

Adrian has received our support so he can prepare for his role as Hagen in *Götterdämmerung* in the Melbourne Opera Ring Cycle in Bendigo in 2023. He will also be singing the roles of Fasolt (*Das Rheingold*) and Hunding (*Die Walküre*) in two of the three Ring cycles.

Having returned to Melbourne after over a decade living and working in Sydney, Adrian was fortunate enough to sing Fasolt and Hunding for Melbourne Opera in 2021 and 2022 which he says he found very gratifying and a huge privilege. The role of Hagen, however, will be a new role for him. He has started lessons with his teacher, Wagner Society member mezzo-soprano Deborah Humble, and is being coached by répétiteurs Raymond Lawrence, David Kram and Tahu Matheson.



SAM SAKKER Heldentenor

Sam asked the Society for help in preparing the role of Tristan for his debut performances in France with Opéra de Lorraine (Nancy) and Théâtre de Caen (Caen) in Feb-Mar 2023. The Society's investment will help him to cover the costs of coaching as well as costs to travel to London to coach with Wagner specialists Tony Legge, Anthony Negus, and former Covent Garden Head of Music, David Syrus. Sam has said that our assistance towards the considerable expenses of coaching Tristan helps him become one of a handful of tenors capable of singing the role on the world stage. It will make it slightly easier to cast, and therefore put on, especially in Australia where there are very few tenors capable.

SAM'S APPLICATION FOR SPONSORSHIP

29 September 2022

To the NSW Wagner Society

I am writing to you to ask your support with my upcoming project of learning the role of Tristan. I have been a freelance opera singer since 2012, when I left the Opera Australia Chorus and set out to build a soloist career. Since then, I've been a Young Artist and Company Principal Artist at The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, as well as building my repertoire of dramatic roles and concert pieces. My highlights include three productions as Erik in *Der fliegende Holländer* (Cape Town Opera, Nederlandse Reisopera, and Angers Nantes Opéra), Florestan in *Fidelio* (Lyric Opera of Ireland), *Das Lied von Der Erde* (Stadtheater Klagenfurt and The Royal Ballet, Covent Garden), *Faust et Hélène* (Royal Stockholm Philharmonic and BBC Symphony Orchestra), and jump in Siegmund cover for Melbourne Opera's *Die Walküre*.

I'm a Sydney-sider, born and bred - an errant Sydney Grammar boy who studied music in Brisbane (but home was Sydney) and returned fully once I commenced my chorus job at Opera Australia. Sydney was always my base, even while I was in London, until my dad passed away in 2019. The covid pandemic devastated my career's momentum, and my bank balance. In one week, I lost two years of bookings including productions in Montreal, Sydney, Wellington, and London, and I ended up taking a job at St Thomas' Hospital in London to support myself and my wife. We managed to escape the second UK lockdown and landed in Melbourne, where we now have a little home as our international base. Whilst we lost all our work, we did have a happy shift, welcoming our daughter, Octavia, at the end of 2021.

I've always admired the work of the NSW Wagner Society, sponsoring Wagner productions and concerts, singers and lectures - I gave a talk to the Wagner Society in 2018 which was well received, though I did waffle on quite a bit. Hence why I've thought to ask your help on this occasion. These Tristans that have come my way are a very lucky circumstance but come with a bit of stress. They were planned some time ago by the Opéra de Lorraine but their Tristan withdrew in May, leaving them with some of the most difficult repertoire to recast at the last minute.

My name was put forward by a friend's agent, and after hearing recordings of my Siegmund, I was asked if I felt I could prepare the role in 6 months. Thanks to pandemic cancellations (which are still happening and without any financial restitution) I was available and up for the challenge. It has been a real task but Tristan is very comfortable in my voice, and I'm building the stamina to sing the whole work (about 2.5hrs of just Tristan singing), but I need constant coaching. Coaching with Wagner experts is the only way I can assimilate this difficult role in the timeframe that I have.

My little family and I will be staying at my mother in law's in Belfast from mid-October whilst I prepare in the final couple of months before beginning rehearsals of Tristan und Isolde in December. I plan to travel weekly to London to coach with Tony Legge, David Syrus and Anthony Negus (when available), for a minimum of 6 weeks, with 3 days of coaching per week, for a minimum of two hours a day. I would very much appreciate any assistance that the NSW Wagner Society could afford me for my preparation of Tristan.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sam Sakker

WE RECEIVED THE FOLLOWING GLOWING REFERENCE FORM TONY LEGGE

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Sam Sakker

I have been working with Sam the past few months on the rôle of Tristan, which has been an exciting journey. Sam really understands the Wagner style and unusually has the stamina to sing consistently for a long time. I have worked with many Wagner tenors at Bayreuth and elsewhere, and know the hard, repetitive work needed to teach the voice. Sam has been very organised in his learning and very patient, as this process cannot be rushed. The more time he can get to work with a pianist and coach, the better, as there are very few Tristans in the world, and it would be nice to bring another Australian into the fold! I hope the Society can be helpful in this aspect, in the way it has been so generous in the past.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Legge

Sir Arthur Sullivan Professor of Opera, Royal Academy of Music

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Backstage at Bayreuth

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY FUNCTIONS

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

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