



WAGNER  
SOCIETY  
nsw

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

# WAGNER QUARTERLY

ISSUE NO 41

# 168

MARCH 2023



Wagner Society NSW patron **Simone Young AM**. Still from her new documentary *Knowing the Score*

## 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



Susanne Chaundy on Zoom



June Donsworth, Hermes De Zan, Jane Nash & Alan Hauserman

## SUNDAY 29 JANUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT



Esteban Insausti in Sydney, Andrew Bailey in Melbourne on Zoom

## SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT



Members enjoying lively conversations after the event

## FOR YOUR DIARY

2023

24 Mar - 1 May 2023	Complete Melbourne Opera <b>Ring Cycle</b>	Bendigo
15, 16, 19 April	Film. Met Opera Live <b>Lohengrin</b>	Dendy & Chauvel Cinemas, Sydney
17, 20 May	<b>OA Tannhäuser</b> concert performance	Melbourne
26, 27 May	<b>WASO Die Walkure Act I</b> conducted by <b>Asher Fisch</b>	Perth
8 – 30 July	Sofia Wagner Festival	Sofia, Bulgaria
8 July	<b>Das Rheingold</b>	Singapore
16, 18 Nov	<b>SSO Das Rheingold</b> in concert	Sydney Opera House
1 – 23 Dec	<b>OA Ring Cycle</b>	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 12 March	12.00pm DVD <b>Richard Strauss</b> – <i>at the End of the Rainbow</i> 2.00pm Talk by <b>Peter Bassett</b> : <i>A new look at the Ring</i>	Goethe Institut
Sun 21 May	12.30pm AGM, <b>Concert</b> , Wagner's Birthday celebration	Robert Mitchell's house, Newtown

Advice about changes to the Program will be emailed in our e-news to people who have given their email addresses to the Society's Membership Secretary; the latest updates will also be available on the Society's website: [www.wagner.org.au](http://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,

I am writing this on the eve of our second live event for 2023 at the Goethe Institut, in which we will hear from Maestro Anthony Negus and Carmen Jakobi as they prepare for the *Ring* in Bendigo. A few weeks ago, we hosted Suzanne Chaundy and the designer Andrew Bailey as they gave some insight into the Melbourne Opera production – read a review of it inside.

### Bendigo Ring Cultural Festival

Whilst it hasn't been widely publicised, there is a cultural festival around the three cycles in Bendigo. A brochure is in the offing. However, you can see and book what is on offer by going into the Bendigo tourism link (<https://www.bendigoregion.com.au/arts-culture-theatres/ring-cycle-festival>). There are a number of recitals, concerts, a masterclass by Deborah Humble, something down a mine and a gala dinner on the Ring stage itself! There will be surprises I am told. The idea of Bendigo becoming the Bayreuth of the South Pacific is appealing. To be fully supported.

### Bayreuth Festival 2023

The way we used to obtain tickets to the Bayreuth Festival is evolving. Whereas before we would await an allocation from the RWVI (Richard Wagner Verband International) and sought additional tickets via the Gesellschaft der Freunde von Bayreuth, we can now apply directly to them both for what we want. This has closed for the 2023 Festival but if you want to attend in 2024 be aware that obtaining tickets via the WSNSW is a fairly sure way of getting there. Of course, that does not mean that 2023 is out of the question – single ticket sales and also latent orders via the RWVI and Freunde are still possible. And for those who like to live on the edge you can wait until closer to the Festival and pick up returns from members across the world (one of the many benefits of being a WSNSW member and part of the global Wagner network). As I always say: if you want to attend an event, even if heavily booked, the chances are you will get there.....somehow.

### Richard Wagner Museum Bayreuth

Some of you may have seen a petition from the Richard Wagner Museum Bayreuth asking for support to secure funding to complete the editing and production of the last 5 volumes of correspondence. These correspond to the last decade of Wagner's life covering the setting up of the Bayreuth Festival, the building of the Festspielhaus, the first *Ring* and *Parsifal* performances. Whilst always controversial these documents provide an historical insight and are therefore invaluable. I urge anyone interested to support this petition.

### Josef Lienhardt

We heard of the death in early February of Josef Lienhardt. He was instrumental in resurrecting the Wagner Verband Freiburg after the war and remaining its President for nearly six decades. He was also President of the RWVI from 1988 to 2008. He helped found many Wagner Societies around Germany specially after the fall of the wall in 1989. Our deep condolences to his family. And from us monumental respect and gratitude for his singular contribution to the cause.

### WSNSW Jane Mathews Scholarship

The 2023 WSNSW Jane Mathews Scholar is Olivia Swain. She is a young Australian soprano, recently graduated from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music with a Masters of Music Studies (Opera Performance), under the guidance of Dr. Rowena Cowley. We will get an opportunity to hear the first two recipients of the Scholarship, Ellen McNeill and Olivia Swain, in recital as part of our traditional combined AGM and Richard Wagner Birthday event in May.

### Your Society and Committee

The WSNSW has survived the worst of the COVID pandemic. The membership held despite not being able to meet in person for a year. In that period we developed alternate ways to communicate, email, E-News, social media. But in order to maintain these means of communication and keep evolving them, **we need help with IT**. We restarted the catering roster and hope to take that to the level set by Barbara de Rome. And finally, we continue to assist young artists via several projects. But we need your generosity to lend much needed support to these stars of the future. Please contact me for further information on donating to a WSNSW project.

### Epilogue

Need I remind you that there is much Wagner to be had in Australia in 2023 with two *Rings* (Bendigo and Brisbane), a *Tannhäuser* in Melbourne, two "local" *Rheingolds* (in Sydney with our Patron Simone Young and the SSO, and in Singapore) as well as excerpts from *Die Walküre* in Perth. For those going to Melbourne there is a rare opportunity to catch Philip Glass' *Satyagraha* a few days before *Tannhäuser*. This is an OA first and I highly recommend this work not only because of its beauty and power but also its place in the evolving narrative of music drama in the Wagnerian sense of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Stay safe and happy listening.

### Esteban Insausti

President



## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to March 2023. I hope you enjoy the variety of short articles plus the second parts of reviews by Ross and Terence. Thanks to Leona for proofreading. There are some great Wagner productions coming up this year and I invite readers to send me your thoughts about the performances for future issues.

**Mike Day**  
michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com

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# FUTURE WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS

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## 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 and records of performances of his works, embedded in interviews with relatives, famous musicians and Strauss experts, including Christian Strauss, Stefan Mickisch and Brigitte Fassbaender.

**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.



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## SUNDAY 21 MAY AT ROBERT MITCHELL'S HOUSE, 47 STATION ST, NEWTOWN

**12.30 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

NOTE: ONLY CURRENTLY PAID-UP MEMBERS ARE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE

**1.30 ANNUAL WAGNER BIRTHDAY CONCERT**

A delightful program of music by Wagner, Strauss, Wolf and Schubert from sopranos Ellen McNeil and Olivia Swain, accompanied by Katherine Day, followed by singing *Happy Birthday Dear Richard*, cake and bubbles



**Olivia Swain**

is a young Australian soprano currently completing a Master of Music Studies at the Sydney Con. She is a 2023 Pacific Opera Young Artist



**Ellen McNeil**

is a Pacific Opera Young Artist and the recipient of our first Jane Mathews AO Scholarship. She was a participant in our Masterclass last March



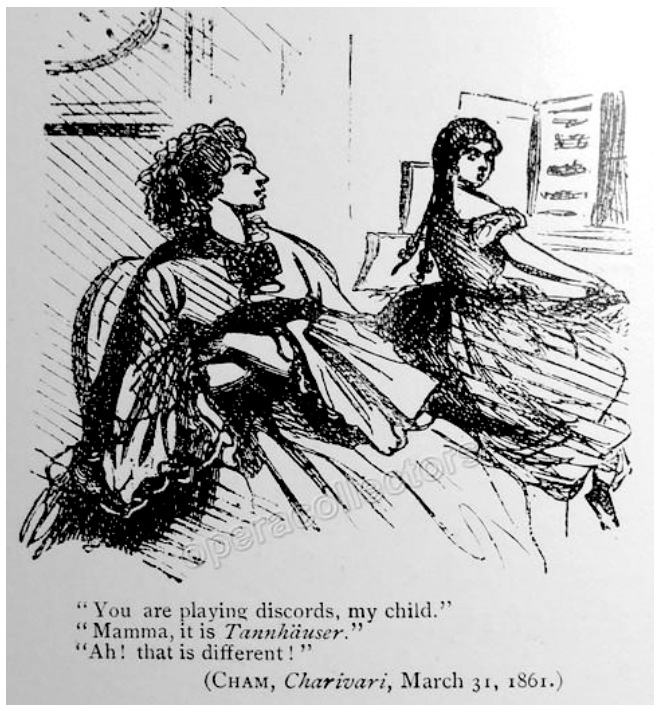
**Katherine Day**

Is a concert pianist and is the founder and artistic director of Music To You. She holds degrees from the University of Melbourne and a Post Graduate Diploma in Advanced Solo Studies from the prestigious Royal College of Music, London.

# FUTURE WAGNER PERFORMANCES

## HOME AND AWAY

### SOLO TANNHÄUSER CONCERT PERFORMANCES IN MELBOURNE 17, 20 MAY



### Before Eurovision, there was the Wartburg Song Contest. Eurovision could only wish for this much drama!

Imagine basking in the adoration of Venus herself. Our minstrel-knight Tannhäuser has found a paradise of passion and pleasure with the goddess of love and beauty. Life is perfect. Until, he gets bored – and homesick. Venus banishes him. Much to the joy of his friends and former love Elisabeth, Tannhäuser finds himself in Wartburg and enters the upcoming song contest. Only, he is unable to forget the sensuous realm of Venusberg, and praises Venus in song. Horrified, the crowd turns on him, insisting he atone for his sins with a pilgrimage. Elisabeth prays for his soul as Tannhäuser seeks salvation in Rome. Will he be absolved, or are Venus’ charms impossible to resist? Understatement was never in Wagner’s vocabulary. His works are epic in scale, mythical of storyline, and radical in their orchestration. *Tannhäuser* is no exception. From its thrilling overture to its shattering climax, Wagner’s exploration of love, religion and redemption through German folklore has fascinated and entranced audiences since its scandalous premiere. Presented in concert at Arts Centre Melbourne, Wagner’s magnificent orchestrations are conducted by **Asher Fisch** and gloriously played by Orchestra Victoria. The cast includes **Stefan Vinke** as Tannhäuser, **Amber Wagner** as Elizabeth, **Samuel Dundas** as Wolfram von Eschenbach and **Anna-Louise Cole** as Venus.

### SOFIA OPERA WAGNER FESTIVAL

To honour the 210th anniversary of the birth of Richard Wagner and the 140th anniversary of his death, the **Sofia Opera and Ballet** is dedicating 7 titles from his illustrious work at the Sofia Opera Wagner Festival. From 8th until 30th July 2023, admirers of the works of Wagner will have the opportunity and pleasure to be our dear guests in our capital city Sofia, Bulgaria and of the works of the great German composer. We kindly invite you to make your choice from our Festival programme according to your convenience and interest: DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN New Production *Das Rheingold* – 08.07.2023 at 18:00 *Die Walküre* – 09.07.2023 at 18:00 *Siegfried* – 11.07.2023 at 18:00 *Götterdämmerung* – 13.07.2023 at 18:00 *Tristan und Isolde* – 23.07.2023 at 18:00 *Parsifal* – 25.07.2023 at 18:00 *Der fliegende Holländer* – 29, 30.07.2023 at 20:00 (Open air stage).

All roles are performed by Bulgarian artists.

Tickets are on sale and available on the Sofia Opera and Ballet website: [www.operasofia.bg](http://www.operasofia.bg); For ticket requests please email: [wagner.abo@operasofia.bg](mailto:wagner.abo@operasofia.bg), [sales@operasofia.bg](mailto:sales@operasofia.bg) or contact the ticket office: +35928006272.

melbourne opera  
 RICHARD WAGNER'S  
**DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN**  
 THE RING CYCLE  
 BENDIGO • VICTORIA  
 24 March - 30 April, 2023  
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[www.bendigoringcycle.com.au](http://www.bendigoringcycle.com.au)

3 cycles of  
 4 magnificent operas  
 Das Rheingold  
 Die Walküre  
 Siegfried  
 Götterdämmerung  
 Sung In German with English Subtitles

With an All-Australian cast and the 90-piece Melbourne Opera Orchestra conducted by internationally acclaimed Anthony Negus and David Kram AM

CITY OF GREAT BENDIGO | bvse | Ulumbarra Theatre  
 Presented in association with Bendigo Venues & Events

## SSO DAS RHEINGOLD 2023: JOIN THE RING LEADERS

### BE PART OF THESE UNPARALLELED PERFORMANCES FROM THE BEGINNING

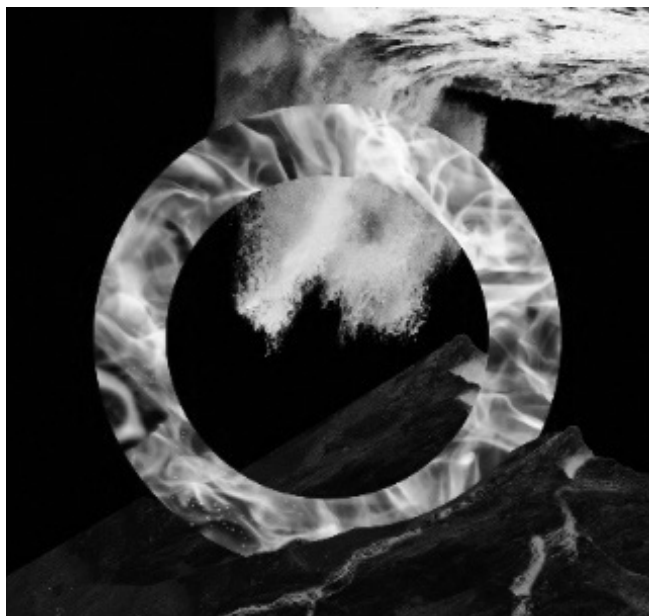
Next November, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Chief Conductor Simone Young present Wagner's *Das Rheingold* as an Opera in Concert. These performances mark the beginning of a four-year journey through Wagner's monumental Ring Cycle.

Simone Young, acclaimed for her mastery of Wagner's music, will bring together the world's leading Wagnerian singers and the full forces of the Sydney Symphony – all in the renewed acoustic of the Concert Hall. These performances are a wonderful opportunity to be part of musical history in the making.

### HELP BRING THESE LANDMARK OPERAS TO LIFE

When you join the *Ring Leaders*, you become an important partner in the Orchestra's journey through these iconic operas – brought to the Concert Hall stage for the first time in more than 20 years! Each year we will invite you to go behind the scenes and share experiences with Simone Young and the cast including exclusive Open Rehearsals and our Salon with the Stars. **Your support ensures the success of this immense four-year project showcasing the brilliant sound of the Orchestra.**

<https://www.sydneyssyphony.com/support-us/donate/join-the-ring-leaders>



## DAS RHEINGOLD IN SINGAPORE

Building on the critically acclaimed success of *Die Walküre* in early 2020 just before the arrival of the pandemic, **the Orchestra of the Music Makers** presents the long-awaited Singapore premiere of Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold* on 8 July 2023 in the world renowned Esplanade Concert Hall. The production features a stellar international cast led by Greer Grimsley, Peter Sidhom, Tuomas Katajalla and Caitlin Hulcup. The performance is directed by Tang

Xinxin and conducted by Joshua Tan. Experience the grandeur of Wagner's sound in the outstanding acoustics of the Esplanade. Tickets will be available from March on [www.orchestra.sg](http://www.orchestra.sg) and [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg). The Richard Wagner Association (Singapore) will be delighted to welcome visitors from Australia and arrange a dinner for them around the time of the event. You can contact the association directly on [wagnersingapore@gmail.com](mailto:wagnersingapore@gmail.com).

## IT'S MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL TIME!

We would like to encourage members to renew their membership subscriptions for 2023 **DUE BEFORE 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

**Subscriptions for 2023 are the same as for 2022:**

<b>Single Membership</b>	<b>\$75</b>
<b>Single pensioner membership</b> a pensioner concession is for current holders of an Australian pension, e.g., age pension. Seniors cards are not eligible for concession prices.	<b>\$45</b>
<b>Shared membership</b> - same mailing address and contact numbers	<b>\$110</b>
<b>Shared Pensioner membership</b> - same mailing address and contact numbers	<b>\$65</b>
<b>Student membership</b> – please provide proof of student status	<b>\$25</b>

**PLEASE NOTE THAT MEMBERSHIP CANNOT BE RENEWED ONLINE**

**The two ways to pay your subscription are:**

### 1. by Electronic Funds Transfer

Use your bank's internet banking facilities to send your payment electronically to Westpac Banking Corporation, Paddington NSW Branch.

**Account Name:** The Wagner Society  
**BSB:** 032040 | **Account Number:** 911323

### 2. by Cheque

Mail a cheque or money order for your annual membership fee to:

The Wagner Society  
GPO Box 4574, Sydney NSW 2001

Queries, contact Julie Clarke:  
[jmc50wagner@gmail.com](mailto:jmc50wagner@gmail.com)

# REPORTS ON RECENT MEETINGS

## SUNDAY 29 JANUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

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

Members reported enjoying this very funny and informative Emmy Award winning documentary that follows the activities and thoughts of the backstage crew during the staging of the San Francisco Ring. For those who missed it it's available on Vimeo and excerpts can be seen on YouTube.

### 2.00 SPECIAL LIVE ZOOM *CONVERSATION WITH SUZANNE CHAUNDY AND ANDREW BAILEY*

President, **Esteban Insausti**, interviewed **Suzanne Chaundy**, director of the Melbourne Opera Ring Cycle, and **Andrew Bailey**, designer of the Ring via zoom.

To date most Sydney people have seen *Das Rheingold* in February 2021 in the early stages of digital concert hall, so very few closeups). This was followed by a staged *Die Walküre* in 2022, and a *Siegfried* concert performance later last year – The complete Ring will be staged in a venue, new to most of us, from March 2023. Suzanne talked about her major conceptual conceit – the two sides of the coin; the over world and the underworld – Schwarz and Licht. She also explained why the production has a clear narrative as opposed to the heavy conceptual production most seasoned Ring attendees see in Germany and Europe. Australian Rings are few and far between (except in 2023 when we will have two productions) which means that for the majority who cannot travel overseas to see one this is it. The experience needs to be a positive one, especially for those seeing a Ring for the first time. This was both candid and perceptive when put in the context of OA's recent Melbourne production.

With shades of Wieland Wagner ranging from grandeur to simplicity Andrew unveiled his designs. It's the first independent Ring, certainly in Eastern Australia since the Quinlan Cycle in 1913. Andrew's main design is a 3-D model of a drawbridge which pivots into the air. The actual drawbridge weighs 3 and a half tonnes and measures 7 and a half metres deep. This formed the roof of Hunding's hut and Nibelheim. It has a large circle on the pivoting roof through which grows the world ash. It becomes an exceedingly effective Ring of Fire. The large circle features again as

atmospheric moon and in Rheingold the same symbols become illuminated swings for the Rhein daughters. By the way I liked the swing poles in the first opera.

The design aim is simple and modern timelessness. And creating a good singing space, with no voids. It's a very flexible set, with weathered metallic landscapes, and deconstructed rich metallic finishes. The precedents and mood boards that Andrew shared showed eclectic but consistent imagery, including the "war room" from Stanley Kubrick's "Doctor Strangelove". Andrew and Esteban discussed the importance of sightlines for the audience to enjoy the action on stage as well as for the singers to follow the conductor in the pit.

As a way to explain the colour progression or strategy of the production, Andrew introduced us to the costume designs of Harriet Oxley (currently working in Japan but back for the Bendigo rehearsals), who also worked together with Chaundy and Bailey on *Flying Dutchman*. For the Ring the costumes are pastel, ethereal and real – simple and modern and timeless. The costume designs look amazing – we have already seen that Fricka has some totemic head wear – displaying power and glamour and that shiny fabrics abound for Freia, Brünnhilde, Donner, the Rheinmaidens, and the Walküren.

Towards the end of the chat Suzanne tried to add up the design team, the troops backstage and in the pit and on stage – it seemed like hundreds. A number we are eager to see in Bendigo next month.

**Leona Geeves and Esteban Insausti**

**Julie Clarke** added: We were entertained with Suzanne's concepts of this production and it was fascinating to see Andrew's models of the set staging and how they are used and enhanced within each of the four operas. Suzanne has a very traditional approach to this Ring Cycle, incorporating all the essential elements while adding some whimsical features which enhance the productions. Colour and costume design add a splendid richness and beauty to this all-Australian cast Ring.

### DONATIONS TO HELP THE SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

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

**GENEROUS DONATIONS WERE RECEIVED SINCE DECEMBER 2022 FROM THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS:** Anna-Lisa Klettenberg, Brian Freestone, Ian McGraw, Diana Rose Orr, Sue Kelly and Carol Bailey

### WE WARMLY WELCOME NEW MEMBERS WHO JOINED SINCE DECEMBER 2022:

Erica Booker 1271, Bettina Boss 1272



## SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

### 12.00 DVD GLOBAL WAGNER – FROM BAYREUTH TO THE WORLD

Members agreed that this documentary by **Axel Brüggemann** flowed with effortless authenticity, and always with an engaging lightness of touch and an unexpected diversity of scenery and personal observation from the colourful characters included.

### 2.00 SPECIAL ZOOM CONVERSATION

Because of changes to rehearsal schedules, we were unable to have a live Zoom conversation as planned so instead we showed a recording made a week earlier in Melbourne of a 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*, and **Miki Oikawa**, president of the Richard Wagner Society of Victoria, moderated by **Robert MacFarlane**, who will play Mime in the *Ring*.



Wagner Society NSW patron **Simone Young AM** has earned many accolades across her dazzling 30-year music career. All have been hard won. Released in February 2023 the documentary *Knowing the Score* gets up-close and personal with Simone in an engaging, luscious music documentary revealing two key themes; the long struggle for gender parity in the high art of classical music and the heart-breaking struggle for artists to be valued in times of crisis, or sometimes even at all.

Though one of the world’s great contemporary conductors, Simone’s work continues to be viewed through a gender lens. Simone is the first woman to be appointed Chief Conductor of The Sydney Symphony Orchestra in all its 90-year history, a post she took up in 2022. The fact of being a woman still plagues her.

Though Simone has personally overcome many obstacles she remains an outlier. Prejudices and traditions that should be obsolete still dominate her profession. Recently Simone has been concerned with a bigger threat to her industry. During the COVID-19 lockdowns she and thousands of her colleagues in Australia and around

the world were abandoned by policies that undermine the essential place of Art in our lives.

“We are grieving for something that we may have lost forever. We are grieving for careers that might be finished as we knew them. We are dealing with having to reassess our own roles in the world”

The cultural and creative sectors were decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic. So, what is the role of the artist in today’s world? Simone laments, “Do we matter?”

Knowing the Score advocates through passionate testimony and excellence in performance the importance of arts and culture to not only entertain but to transform human adversity. Now more than ever we need to discuss the role of artists towards a thriving democracy and social well-being. Knowing the Score is a documentary for our times.

**Director** Janine Hosking Simon Target **Writer** Janine Hosking **Producer** Margie Bryant **Executive Producers** Cate Blanchett Mitzi Goldman Jonathan Page **Dir. of Photography** Simon Target **Editor** Christopher Mill

## SIEGFRIED IDYLL

by Michael Clive

First, let's get our Siegfrieds straight. The Siegfried of Richard Wagner's impossibly beautiful *Siegfried Idyll* is not the Siegfried for whom the third opera of Wagner's gigantic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung* is named. Nor does it have anything to do with the gorgeous passage known as "Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey" from the prelude of the Ring's fourth opera, *Götterdämmerung*, though elements from the Idyll did find their way into the *Ring*. In these comprehensively imagined music dramas, Wagner projects his personal cosmology onto a mythic universe — a place of normative values whose inhabitants journey toward moral perfection. But Wagner's personal life, which gave rise to the *Siegfried Idyll*, was something else again.

The *Siegfried Idyll* takes its name from Wagner's son by his second wife, Cosima. At the time they fell passionately in love, Cosima — who was Franz Liszt's illegitimate daughter by the glamorous Parisian socialite Marie d'Agoult — was married to the distinguished conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner's strongest supporters. Wagner's affair with Cosima von Bülow was just one of many on his part, but it proved fateful, finally dooming his marriage to his first wife, Minna. Wagner felt that his genius and his passion were reasons enough for his host and former pupil to step aside; inflamed by love, he was inspired to begin work on his revolutionary opera *Tristan und Isolde*. For her part, Cosima became pregnant with their daughter Isolde. When Minna conveniently died in 1866, Cosima's husband granted her a divorce, and she and Wagner married. Two more children followed: Eva and Siegfried.

When Cosima entered Wagner's life, it was as if they were transfigured beings who entered the world of Wagner's creative imagination. Their shared passion crystallized for Wagner the premise of *Tristan und Isolde* — the transcendence of inner, spiritual love over external reality and human law — and their relationship unleashed his work on his most innovative music. Together, Wagner and Cosima embodied not only the creative fantasies of his music dramas, but also the principles of his writing on aesthetic philosophy, including his insistence on the purity of German art and myth, and his virulent anti-Semitism. Cosima furthered these ideas after Wagner's death, managing the opera house at Bayreuth as a shrine to her husband and his ideas.

Though it is relatively short (for Wagner) and intimately scaled for a chamber ensemble, the *Siegfried Idyll* is in a sense a token of this special moment in the life of one of music history's most remarkable and disturbing figures. Composed in appreciation of the marital joy that Wagner and Cosima enjoyed after his years of turmoil, it was conceived as a gift for Cosima and specifically scored for an orchestra of 13 to 15



Cosima, Siegfried and Richard Wagner, 1873

players to be positioned on the stairway leading to Cosima's bedroom. It was rehearsed in secret and played to awaken her on Christmas Day in 1870.

Originally titled the *Tribschen Idyll*, the *Siegfried Idyll* is ecstatic and flowing; like so much of Wagner's music, it seems to nullify the external sense of time with its own timeless pulse. It begins with a sunrise both literal and figurative, a beautiful dawn that also marks the beginning of a new kind of life. (The work's original subtitle indicates that the sunrise is orange, and that a bird, "Fidi," is singing; both the roseate tones of the morning sky and the poetic birdsong are evident in the music.

As a kind of gift card to supplement the *Idyll*, Wagner provided a poetic dedication to Cosima in which he explained the work as follows:

*It was your self-sacrificing, noble will  
That found a place for my work to develop,  
Consecrated by you as a refuge from the world,  
Where my work grew and mightily arose,  
A hero's world magically became an idyll for us,  
An age-old distance became a familiar homeland.  
Then a call happily rang forth into my melodies:  
"A son is there!" —he had to be named Siegfried.*

*For him and you I had to express thanks in music—  
What lovelier reward could there be for deeds of love?  
We nurtured within the bounds of our home  
The quiet joy, that here became sound.  
To those who proved ever faithful to us,  
Kind to Siegfried, and friendly to our son,  
With your blessing, may that which we formerly enjoyed  
As sounding happiness now be offered.*

The *Idyll* can be heard as an attempt to transmute infidelity into nobility, like lead into gold. The morality may be questionable, but it is difficult to argue with the beauty of the music.

Wagner never intended for *Siegfried Idyll* to be performed publicly, but financial pressures forced him to sell the score to the publisher B. Schott in 1878. In order to accommodate the logistics of the stairway outside Cosima's bedroom, the original version required a small chamber orchestra of 13 musicians: flute, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, trumpet, two violins, viola, cello, and double bass. When *Siegfried Idyll* was published, Wagner expanded the orchestration to include a larger orchestra.

Wagner's musical sources include his opera *Siegfried*, from which he borrowed the horn motif and the melody of the

forest bird as well as the major love theme; melodies from an uncompleted string quartet sketched some years before; and a lullaby composed in 1868 (heard in the oboe solo).

The opening of *Siegfried Idyll* seems to emerge out of subconsciousness. You can almost hear the piece waking up at the first light of dawn, gradually finding its way forward. Birdsongs and horn calls draw us close to nature. At the end of the piece, the calm repose of the prolonged final chord tells us that we're home. <https://thelistenersclub.com/2014/12/26/siegfried-idyll-wagners-musical-love-letter/>

## WAGNER'S LAST PERFORMANCE

Exactly twelve years after the first *Siegfried Idyll* performance in Tribschen Wagner conducted his last concert in Venice – his Symphony in C major

In 1882 Wagner developed heart trouble and had his first major heart attack in late March. Richard and Cosima left Bayreuth for Venice and moved into the Palazzo Vendramin on 18 September. On 25 December Wagner conducted his “youthful symphony” in C major at La Fenice. This Symphony in C major, WWV 29, from 1832 is Wagner's only completed symphony. (Wagner also started in 1834 an incomplete symphony in E major (WWV 35), of which only the first movement and part of the second movement exist). The symphony was heavily influenced by Beethoven's symphonies in its form and orchestration.

According to Wagner himself, in a letter to a friend, he composed the C major symphony in the brief space of six weeks at the beginning of the summer of 1832. The composition shows the influence of the symphonies of Beethoven and also of the late symphonies of Mozart. The orchestration is in the style of Weber and Beethoven.

### Early performances

The symphony was performed in rehearsal by a student orchestra at the Prague Conservatory in November 1832, conducted by Dionys Weber, with Wagner in attendance. It received its first public performance on 15 December, at the Euterpe music society in Leipzig, conducted by Wagner's early teacher, Christian Gottlieb Müller. Clara Wieck described the performance in a letter to her future husband Robert Schumann dated 17 December 1832: *Father Friedrich Wieck went to the Euterpe Hall on Saturday. Listen! Herr Wagner has got ahead of you; a symphony of his was performed, which is said to be as like as two peas to Beethoven's Symphony in A major.*

The second public performance was at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 10 January 1833, as part of the annual subscription concerts. The work received another performance at Würzburg on 27 August 1833.

The score was subsequently thought to have been lost after Wagner presented it to Felix Mendelssohn in 1836 (see below), but the parts from the Prague performance were found in Dresden in 1877 in a trunk which had been left behind by Wagner when he fled the city in 1849. The work was performed again at Christmas 1882, two months before his death, for Cosima's birthday at La Fenice; it was conducted by Wagner and by Engelbert Humperdinck. Wagner made several revisions to the full score for the performance. In a subsequent “Essay on the Revival of Youthful Works” he wrote: “If there is anything at all in this work which shows the mark of Richard Wagner, it is the fact that it is not polluted by the hypocritical stance which was to appear later and which Germans find very difficult to get the better of, and the fact that, from the outset, he remained true to himself and was unwilling to be deflected from his proper course.”

### Mendelssohn and Wagner's Symphony

The same 1882 essay contains a passage in which Wagner implies that Mendelssohn had tried to deliberately suppress the Symphony. The score had in fact been given by Wagner to Mendelssohn as a gift, as is demonstrable from a letter written by Wagner on 11 April 1836; Wagner perhaps had a grievance that Mendelssohn had not subsequently conducted it. In 1874 Wagner told Cosima that he thought Mendelssohn had destroyed the score “perhaps because he detected in it a talent which was disagreeable to him.” This invention was of a piece with Wagner's antisemitic attitude to Mendelssohn.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_C\\_major\\_\(Wagner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_in_C_major_(Wagner))

## BIOGRAPHIES OF COSIMA WAGNER

An outline by Colin Baskerville

Cosima Wagner was of considerable interest to the English-speaking world at the time of her death in April, 1930. The astute New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf had commissioned the budding Wagner writer, Ernest Newman, to write an introduction and Catherine Alison Phillips to translate a two-volume biography. This had been published in Munich in 1929 by Drei Masken Verlag AG. The author's name was hard to find in the English language edition but was Du Moulin-Eckart, Richard Maria Ferdinand, Graf (1864-1938). A substantial portion of Volume One is online. The book is surprisingly personal, chatty and packed with fascinating and informative anecdotes about people now of interest. Ernest Newman subsequently changed his opinion about the author's flitting from fact to fact.

The Australian author of **The Young Cosima** bought a copy which is now held in the National Library of Australia Henry Handel Richardson Collection. This publishing feat was remarkable set against the New York Wall Street crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression.

Alice Hunt Sokoloff, a distinguished U.S. biographer, published **Cosima Wagner: Extraordinary Daughter of Franz Liszt** (U.S title) in N.Y. 1969. The UK title was simply **Cosima Wagner: a Biography** and published in London in 1970. This was translated into the German language and published in Germany. She studied the piano under Alexander Siloti who in turn was a student of Franz Liszt. One can speculate that Siloti was a primary source for her biography.

George Richard Marek published **Cosima Wagner** in N.Y. and London in 1981 and 1983. Geoffrey Skelton's 1982 book **Richard and Cosima Wagner: Biography of a Marriage** is restricted to their marriage.

Françoise Giroud published **Cosima la sublime** in French in Paris in 1996. She was an important figure in French literary circles cofounding "L'Express".

Oliver Hilmes's biography **Cosima Wagner - The Lady of Bayreuth** published in Germany in 2007 is impeccably researched. He was given access to the National Archives of the Richard Wagner Foundation in Bayreuth. There are thirty-eight pages of Notes and Bibliography. The biographer's challenge lies in the selection of key items from hard-copy material. The emphasis on assessing primary source material is a drawback when critical items may be missing or simply not committed to hard-copy for whatever reason. Contemporary readers expect a biography to be put in context. In Cosima's case this means the rise of the German nation, a period of profound change and two wars—the Franco-Prussian War of 1860 and the First World War, 1914-1918. Hilmes is surprisingly strong when analysing the Wagner family finances in the background of the First World War. Yale University Press has chosen to allocate sixteen pages for black and white photographs. The cover photo is striking; the back photo is the classic photo holding hands with Wagner. It's disappointing that this is the only visual material in a very wordy, substantial book. Hilmes' biography consists of three

hundred and sixty pages packed with detail but a heavy going read. Other reviewers beg to differ. Maybe this biography needs to be read side by side with Cosima's own diaries. When the reader asks such questions as "what was Cosima's favourite Wagner opera/ character etc?" there is no clarification. Yes, she was determined to keep the Bayreuth Festival going.

There are serious reservations about the musical literacy and response of the audiences who were hearing Wagner's operas for the first time. The biography suggests that King Ludwig himself and the Kaiser's son had major limitations in their appreciation of the music. By comparison today's audiences are well-informed about the operas either by seeing live, or on DVD/ TV etc, or listening on CDs/ radio broadcasts.

The biography is useful in illuminating the issue of Copyright. In Cosima's time the Copyright within Germany was legislated by a German parliament. Her lobbying of members of parliament was ultimately unsuccessful, especially with respect to the duration of thirty/ fifty years after the composer's death.

Also, Cosima wanted Bayreuth to keep a monopoly on Parsifal. She was unable to prevent a New York performance as German Copyright law did not apply in the U.S. Closer to home the Munich Opera scheduled other Wagner operas. At the time she saw this as a threat to the financial viability of the Bayreuth Festival. Copyright issues still bedevil the artistic world today.

Readers are encouraged to engage with Oliver Hilmes' biography but cautioned to exercise critical judgment

Hilmes, Oliver, *Cosima Wagner - The Lady of Bayreuth*, Translated by Stewart Spencer, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010

Sabine Zurmühl has just published **Cosima Wagner - A Contradictory Life** in German. It remains to be seen whether it is translated into English.

Vanessa Redgrave starred as Cosima in the 1983 movie with Richard Burton as Wagner. Her performance was arresting. She brought Cosima "to visual life". The Tony Palmer film was remastered for a 2011 DVD release. Consequently, today's visually oriented generation will be able to enjoy the movie anew.

### WAGNER SOCIETY E-NEWS

Our regular Wagner Society e-news are emailed to members at the addresses they have provided. Occasionally some members do not appear to have received these emails. This could be because their email address has changed, or emails have been going into their spam or junk mail, or for some other reason. If you feel this applies to you, please let the Membership Secretary know by filling out the Contact us form on the website or by emailing [webmaster@wagner.org.au](mailto:webmaster@wagner.org.au) and we will work to resolve this issue.

## ROGELIO DE EGUSQUIZA Y BARRENA

In past issues of the Quarterly, I have featured paintings by Rogelio de Egusquiza y Barrena. To modern tastes the paintings border on being kitsch, as do the overly sentimental works by the contemporary English Pre-Raphaelites, but they are nevertheless beautifully drawn or painted and genuinely deeply felt. **Mike Day**

“Musical drama is the complement to a painting, it is a living image in which it fuses with the drama of the musical expression, aiming to achieve the truth that arises from intelligence and culture...” Rogelio de Egusquiza

The painter Rogelio de Egusquiza y Barrena was born on 20 July 1845 in Santander. Despite leaving at a relatively early age for Paris, where he principally lived and worked between 1869 and 1914, he maintained lifelong connections with his native region. French critics of the day recognised and praised Egusquiza’s work: both his genre paintings, which he exhibited at the official Salons and at the Petit gallery in the 1870s and 1880s and which were close to the style of Fortuny; and his later output, which is so closely identified with the iconography of Richard Wagner, of whom he became one of the composer’s principal exponents, earning Egusquiza his greatest accolades.

He heard Wagner’s music for the first time in 1876, after returning to Paris. Three years later, he travelled to Munich to hear a performance of *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. His enthusiasm for what he heard led him to go to Bayreuth, where he introduced himself to Wagner and became his friend. In the following years, he and Wagner got together again several times; in Venice (1880), Berlin (1881) and Bayreuth (1882); where he was a guest at the premiere of *Parsifal*.

After his first meeting with Wagner, he decided to devote his career to doing works on Wagnerian themes; mostly portraits of the characters rather than specific scenes. During his visits to Germany, he also created portraits of Arthur Schopenhauer (posthumous) and King Ludwig II of Bavaria and wrote an article for the newsletter Bayreuther Blätter called «Über die Beleuchtung der Bühne» (On Stage Lighting).

He participated in the *Salons de la Rose + Croix* in 1892, 1893, 1896 and 1897, and presented prints from *Parsifal* at the Exposition Universelle (1900), winning a silver medal. Although he lived in Paris, he was a frequent visitor to Madrid and

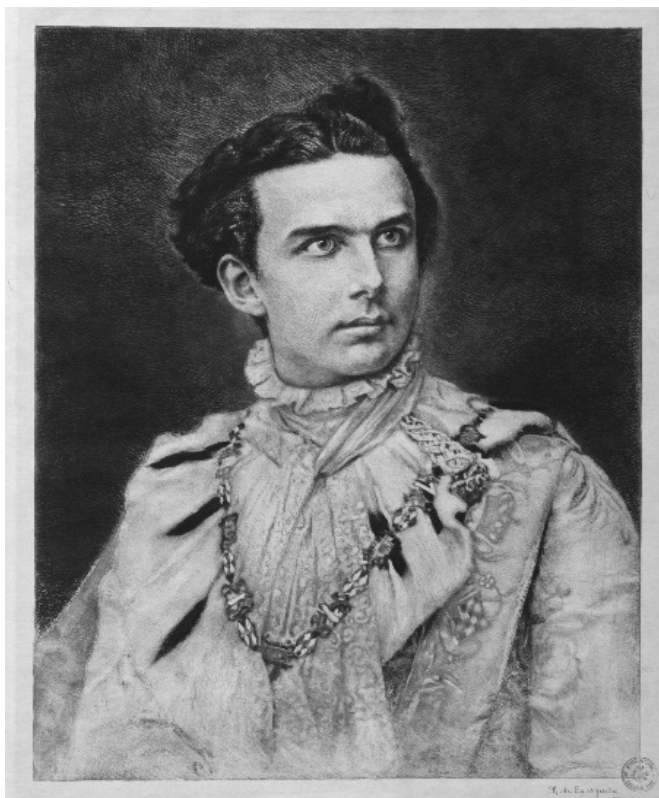


Rogelio de Egusquiza with bust of Wagner

was part of a circle of Wagnerian admirers that met at the L’hardy restaurant.

When the “Asociación Wagneriana de Madrid” was established in 1911, he presented them with copies of voice and piano versions of several operas and one hundred etchings of his portrait of Wagner (based on a familiar photograph), to be sold to benefit the association. Later, he was made an honorary member.

He remained in Paris until 1914, when World War I forced him to return to Spain. He died in Madrid the following year.



King Ludwig II 1883



Wagner 1883 based on 1871 photograph

WORKS BY ROGELIO DE EGUSQUIZA Y BARRENA



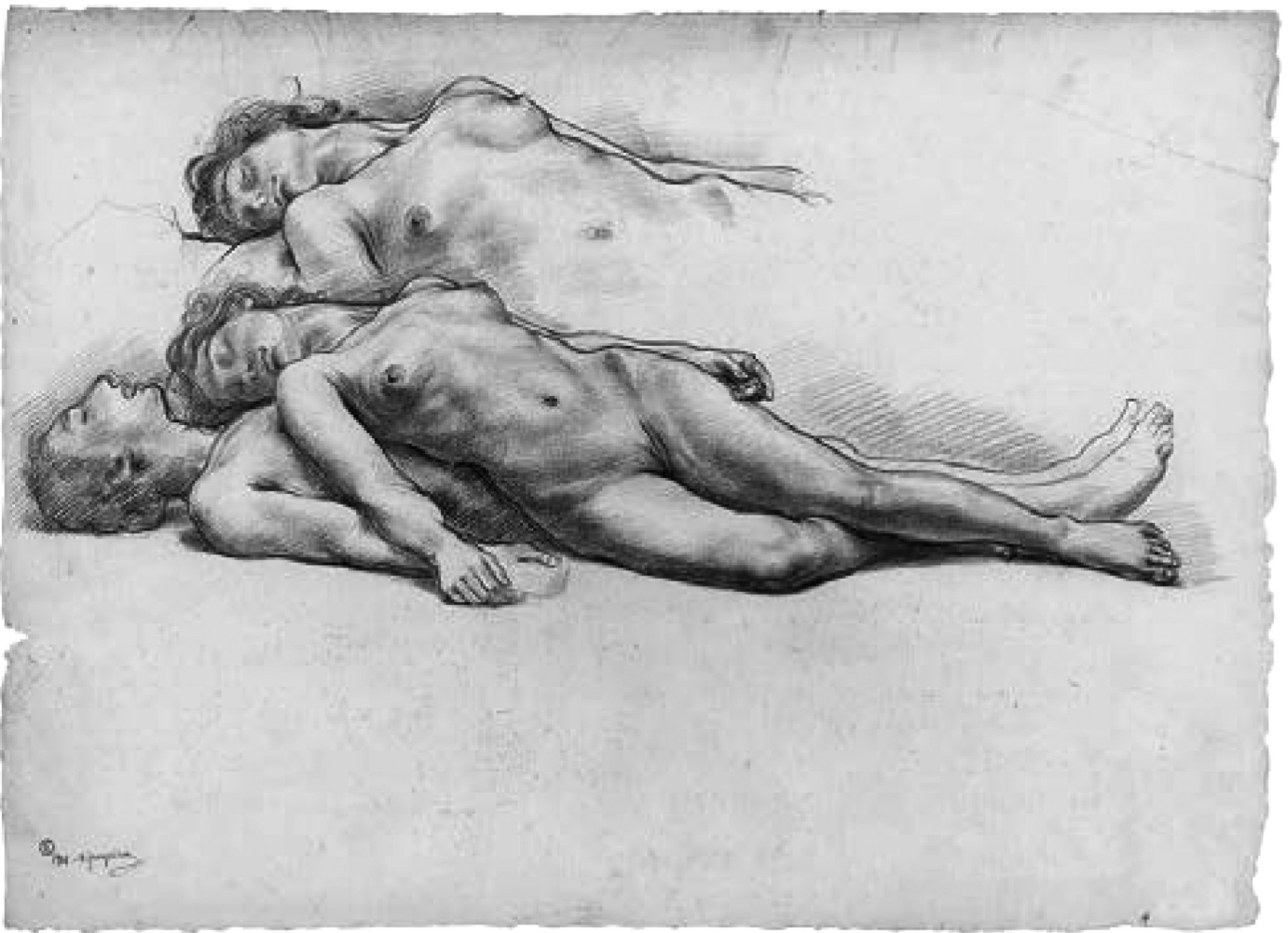
Sigmund and Sieglinde 1892



The Holy Grail 1893



Kundry 1894



Tristan und Isolde - Death Study 1901

## MARK TWAIN AT THE SHRINE OF ST WAGNER

Excerpt from Mark Twain's Travel letters from 1891 - 92

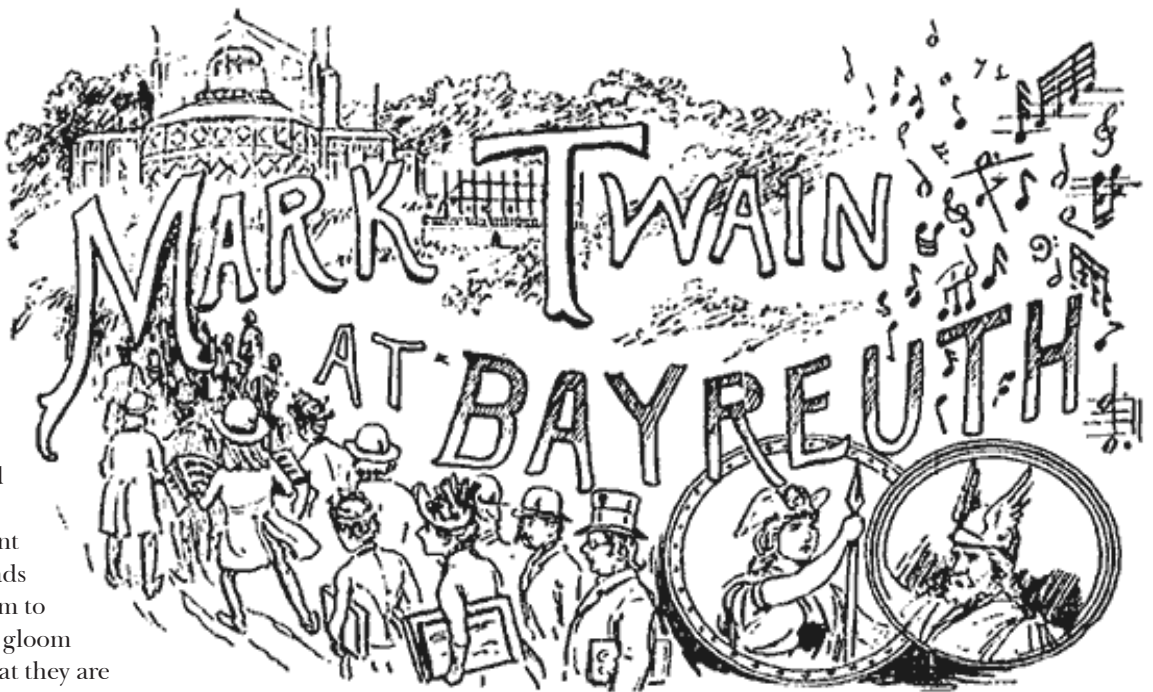
with original illustrations by Dan Beard and Harold R. Heaton Chicago *Daily Tribune*, December 6, 1891

I have seen all sorts of audiences--at theatres, operas, concerts, lectures, sermons, funerals--but none which was twin to the Wagner audience of Bayreuth for fixed and reverential attention, absolute attention and petrified retention to the end of an act of the attitude assumed at the beginning of it.

You detect no movement in the solid mass of heads and shoulders. You seem to sit with the dead in the gloom of a tomb. You know that they are being stirred to their profoundest depths; that there are times when they want to rise and wave handkerchiefs and shout their approbation, and times when tears are running down their faces, and it would be a relief to free their pent emotions in sobs or screams; yet you hear not one utterance till the curtain swings together and the closing strains have slowly faded out and died; then the dead rise with one impulse and shake the building with their applause. Every seat is full in the first act; there is not a vacant one in the last. If a man would be conspicuous, let him come here and retire from the house in the midst of an act. It would make him celebrated.

This audience reminds me of nothing I have ever seen and of nothing I have read about except the city in the Arabian tale where all the inhabitants have been turned to brass and the traveller finds them after centuries mute, motionless, and still retaining the attitudes which they last knew in life. Here the Wagner audience dress as they please, and sit in the dark and worship in silence. At the Metropolitan in New York, they sit in a glare, and wear their showiest harness; they hum airs, they squeak fans, they titter, and they gabble all the time. In some of the boxes the conversation and laughter are so loud as to divide the attention of the house with the stage. In large measure the Metropolitan is a show-case for rich fashionables who are not trained in Wagnerian music and have no reverence for it, but who like to promote art and show their clothes.

Can that be an agreeable atmosphere to persons in whom this music produces a sort of divine ecstasy and to whom its creator is a very deity, his stage a temple, the works of his brain and hands consecrated things, and the partaking of them with eye and ear a sacred solemnity? Manifestly, no. Then, perhaps the temporary expatriation, the tedious traversing of seas and continents, the



pilgrimage to Bayreuth stands explained. These devotees would worship in an atmosphere of devotion. It is only here that they can find it without fleck or blemish or any worldly pollution. In this remote village there are no sights to see, there is no newspaper to intrude the worries of the distant world, there is nothing going on, it is always Sunday. The pilgrim wends to his temple out of town, sits out his moving service, returns to his bed with his heart and soul and his body exhausted by long hours of tremendous emotion, and he is in no fit condition to do anything but to lie torpid and slowly gather back life and strength for the next service. This opera of "Tristan and Isolde" last night broke the hearts of all witnesses who were of the faith, and I know of some who have heard of many who could not sleep after it, but cried the night away. I feel strongly out of place here. Sometimes I feel like the sane person in a community of the mad; sometimes I feel like the one blind man where all others see; the one groping savage in the college of the learned, and always, during service, I feel like a heretic in heaven.

But by no means do I ever overlook or minify the fact that this is one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. I have never seen anything like this before. I have never seen anything so great and fine and real as this devotion.



## MEMBERS' REPORTS

### FROM GERMANY 2022

#### BAYREUTH 2022: ROSS WHITELAW'S NOTES, MADE IMMEDIATELY AFTER EACH PERFORMANCE - PART II

*Das Rheingold* 25.08.2022



Alberich and children

Apart from the quite excellent singing, there was little to like in tonight's performance of *Das Rheingold*. The central theme of child exploitation and abduction (in one instance at gunpoint), I imagine would have been deeply

troubling to many, especially someone who had experienced childhood trauma of a similar nature. I suppose we will have to see where director Valentin Schwarz take us with that but really, it is not somewhere I want to go.

The violence condoned and encouraged by Alberich towards Mime and perpetrated by children was too much for one patron at least who made his displeasure known. I'm sure many others agreed. The premise that the child is Hagen maybe excuses it but again, I'm not sure that interpretation fits within the Ring's time -line. Another example of directorial license?

Sets were not coherent, an Eames chair in a room of Ikea furniture but one example and as for such props as an actual ring, a spear or a Tarnhelm, forget it. This may sound carping but they are among the unifying pointers with which an audience navigates a way through the Ring and should not be lightly dismissed. I had the feeling that whenever some plot device got in the way of the director's overarching vision, it was simply ignored because it was too difficult to deal with.

The singers tonight redeemed the performance as a whole, especially Alberich, Fasolt, Mime and Erda with the rest of the cast giving creditable accounts of their roles with the possible exception of Wotan who, whilst vocally sound, just didn't step up to the mark dramatically.

Cornelius Meister led a fairly pedestrian rendering of the score although it was played with the orchestra's customary professionalism.

Hang on for the ride and see where this takes us.

*Die Walküre* 26.08.22



The Valkyries

Act one promised to be a tour de force, with Georg Zeppenfeld as Hunding, Lise Davidsen as Sieglinde and Klaus Florian Vogt as Siegmund. Vocally it was, although I can't help thinking that Vogt is miscast – his voice just isn't that of the fearless warrior he claims to be. It is clear, ringing and has the ping of a true Heldentenor, but is too sweet for Hunding.

Davidsen as a pregnant Sieglinde (who exactly is the father - Hunding by legal presumption but Wotan perhaps?) never falters. Clear, clean and focused, power and precision come to mind, yet sufficiently under control to handle the softer parts in spades. And she can act. A long and bright future is ahead for her.

Zeppenfeld puts in his usual sterling performance as Hunding – great singer and actor. No wonder he is a Bayreuth fixture.

The set is ok, but the direction leaves much to be desired. Without at least representation of some of the set pieces, much of the meaning is lost which affects the momentum of the piece. For example, the drugging of Hunding didn't occur as far as I could see – he just sort of wandered off with a beer in hand and sat down on a chair and fell asleep.

Act two opened with the family Wotan mourning over the coffin of Freia who had been left with a gun in *Das Rheingold* after coming back from the giants somewhat the worse for wear. Familiar scenes of family dissent followed by the Wotan/Fricka confrontation. As Wotan, Tomasz Konieczny was outstanding – a marked improvement on the Rheingold Wotan. Christa Mayer's Fricka didn't give the tongue lashing / Wotan deserved with enough venom, but sang well enough.

Irène Theorin's Brünnhilde took all in her stride – a little pushed at her top, sustained notes but I think she was just warming up. The set for act two is sort of divided between the god zone and the people zone and goes back to something like the set for *Das Rheingold*. Forgettable and not a lot of help to the protagonists. Cornelius Meister made a better fist of this act than any previously. Perhaps he is hitting his stride.

Act three began with the Valkyries in a glass box with cosmetic surgery bandages covering their faces and looking excitedly at designer shoes. They were an underpowered lot and couldn't have been further from the battlefield. No dead warriors being transported to Valhalla here. Mesmerising singing from everyone else though. Wotan's monologue and farewell to Brünnhilde had the audience in rapt attention. Sieglinde trying to procure an abortion with knitting needles (who flees their house with their lover and remembers to bring their knitting just in case he doesn't turn out to be as exciting as expected). Doesn't work well but her encounter thereafter with a groping Wotan gives a clue to the father of the child. A well-directed final scene with only a single candle to provide flame although I would have directed Wotan differently as his anguish over Brünnhilde's fate seemed a bit overdone to me.

All in all, a good night. We'll see how Schwarz manages some of the trickier scenes to come like forging a sword when there isn't one and slaying a dragon.

### *Siegfried* 28.08.22



The Woodbird, Siegfried, Mime and young Hagen

Act one was a shocker. It is my least favourite anyway, and in the hands of Herr Schwarz, my opinion is confirmed. A stage setting that was shambolic, direction which illuminated nothing and added to the confusion just left the singing to redeem things. Sadly, it didn't. I had been anticipating hearing Andreas Schager but he just bellowed his part. OK, Siegfried is meant to be loud and rumbunctious but there is opportunity to shape phrases and words as the music dictates. Sadly, he didn't respond to any of these moments and to my mind largely failed to do so throughout the opera although things improved in acts two and three.

Arnold Bezuyen, a veteran Mime, sang well enough and gratifyingly did not adopt the weazling tone which is usually overdone with this character. Tomasz Konieczny continues to shine as the Wanderer, bringing much needed control and direction as did Olafur Sigurdarson as Alberich. These two really complemented each other and provided some of the highlights of the show.

A fresh Brünnhilde (Daniela Köhler) sang strongly and with great beauty but sadly was let down once again by the director who seemed intent on keeping her away from Siegfried, no matter how passionate their singing. And who knows why Siegfried punches Grane (Igor Schwab – not in a horse costume but a conservative grey suit).

The set is another variation of the ones gone before and is uninspiring. Herr Meister though took the orchestra through their paces with great aplomb, giving the Bayreuth acoustic ample opportunity to shine.

### *Götterdämmerung* 30.08.22



Brünnhilde

Well, here it all should come together. Themes resolved, ends tied up and all revealed. Not here though.

Act one and the Norns didn't seem to go anywhere much even though they are glooittery other worldly characters which is a bit incongruous given the rest of the production. It is still situated in Brünnhilde and Siegfried's bedroom/study/rock. The set is very limiting. More horse abuse as Grane is beaten up and delivered on a trolley.

Act two uses the height of the stage and allows the Gibichung space and depth to be effective. Some fine singing from all concerned, although Irène Theorin's Brünnhilde has a distinct and wide vibrato that is not to all tastes, certainly not mine. This is one of the better acts so far in the Ring, largely due to the absence of furniture etc. and the space the singers were given, physically and vocally.

Act three begins with the Rhinemaidens who struggled to sing in unison and in my opinion did not sing beautifully, but then again given that they were in the bottom of an empty swimming pool, this may not be surprising. Very grungy, irritating stage business with a fishing rod and fake fish. For her last appearance, Brünnhilde sensibly neither climbed down the ladder into the pool nor did she clamber ungracefully through the outlet pipe in one side of it. She simply walked on from stage right. She then had to sing to the severed head of Grane which she did with apparent conviction but I'm sure deep misgivings about the direction of Herr Schwarz.

The final scene involved everyone dying and just lying around waiting for the music to finish. As was the audience, I think judging from the rather lukewarm applause given that it was the last night of the festival. Loud boos for the production followed the initial fall of the curtain.

Albert Dohmen's Hagen was exemplary and he shows his range and experience to great effect. Olafur Sigurdarson continued to sing Alberich as he should be sung and Elisabeth Teige as Gutrune made the most of her part. Finally, Stephen Gould was a marked improvement on Andreas Schager as Siegfried, being able to shape words and phrases as opposed to Schager's bellowing style.

The orchestra was in fine form tonight made a great contribution, allowing the extraordinary acoustic to be heard in full bloom. The chorus was strong as usual.

This will not go down as one of the great Rings but much will be written about it, I'm sure. Comparison with the Castorf production is inevitable and not favourable to my mind. When you asked "why?" of something that occurred in the Castorf Ring there was a reasoned explanation even though it might be unusual, awkward to strange but here, the question was more often answered with a shrug. It was nevertheless wonderful to be in on the first presentation. There is still magic in Bayreuth.

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

### Report by Dr Terence Watson - Part II

This was the first time I've seen The Ring Cycle performed on successive evenings. Here, they dealt with the enormous demands on the singers by having different ones in the relevant artworks. While this made for some discontinuities in acting, singing, and physical appearances, the effect of seeing the works serially was powerful. Again, the conductor, Ulf Schirmer, kept the pace quite fast so that the entire cycle seemed to pass in a flash. Each of the music-dramas of The Ring Cycle featured a relatively simple, though imposing, set, more suggestive than realistic. Occasionally, the set was turned around to show a different aspect of the locales of the texts. Most of the productions used the revolve stage to great effect.

#### *Das Rheingold*



Robert and I had seen the first instalment of The Ring Cycle in 2013. *Das Rheingold* is set in what seemed to be a ruined Roman bathhouse, in which the Rheintöchter gambolled while Alberich splashed and slipped, creating quite lovely reflections on the walls of the bathhouse. The bath itself, once drained of its film of water, served as a stage on a stage on which much of the action happened. There was a spiral staircase that wound above and below the bathhouse level, serving to show Wotan and Loge descending into Nibelheim and returning. The forging of the gold was splendidly noisy with the anvils amplified through the hall. Erda was accompanied by the Norns in very slinky, glittery costumes.

I forgot to mention the dancers! They were there to represent the Rhine River to begin with—or water slugs, as they were totally encased in a stretch material from which limbs or heads or occasionally whole bodies would appear as they took on the roles of servants in Valhalla, or Nibelungen. I could have done without them, but they didn't intrude too much and sometimes performed useful functions. The Director, Rosamund Gilmore, who was a classically trained dancer, seemed to have taken Wagner at his word, in such works as *The Artwork of the Future* and *Opera and Drama*, that the dance was central not only to ancient Greek tragedy, but also to the music-drama or *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is, though, perhaps a telling point that, despite the theorising, Wagner never wrote ballet music for any of his artworks, except *Der fliegende Holländer*, a bit in *Meistersinger*, and the Paris *Tannhäuser*, the latter very much against his will.

#### *Die Walküre*



In *Die Walküre*, some dancers seemed to be intended to invoke images associated with some of the characters, thus giving the work a set of visual motifs to parallel the musical ones. Two of the dancers sported a single wing on the opposite side of their body to the other one. Two others had one horn sprouting from their head, also on the opposite side. I initially thought that the winged dancers represented German eagles, but I later realised that they were Wotan's ravens. The two horned dancers, though, were clearly associated with Fricka as her rams, especially when they entered in A1 of *Die Walküre* being led by Fricka on chains and dancing somewhat convulsively.

Act 1 of *Die Walküre* opens with a simple set of the interior of Hunding's hut, with the trunk of the ash tree and a staircase on stage left, and a doorway stage right to the bedroom. There was also a table and a couple of chairs, an all-purpose kitchenette, stage right. The ravens and the rams crept into the house and loitered a little creepily in corners watching the couple discover each other.

The set for A3 was more abstract, perhaps representing Valhalla, but a little like the leaning tower of Pisa, suggesting the gods are in a precarious state.

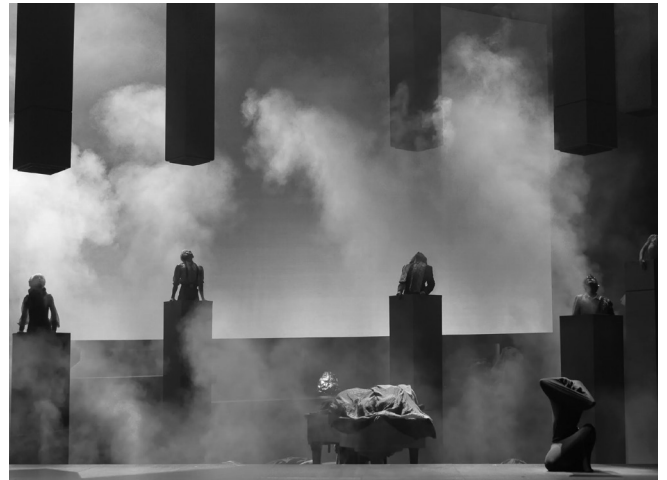
It became apparent that the Director was also offering a chronology with each of the music-dramas. The Roman-looking set of *Das Rheingold* is succeeded by a modern set, whose time is suggested by the WWI-looking rifles that Hunding, and later the Valkyries, carried, and the battle dress that he and they wore. The dancers, now dressed in white, move carefully among a host of white boots on the stage, perhaps suggesting all the heroes who have been taken to Valhalla, but reminding Robert and me of Barrie Kosky's famous production of *Nabucco*. *Siegfried* is perhaps the exception as it seemed to be located in some far distant past, with only the presence of the lopsided Valhalla to indicate some connection to the world of the Cycle. *Götterdämmerung* conveyed a quite contemporary ambience, with the palace looking as if it had been designed by a German architect given to the same pared-back look of much of modern Germany's public buildings, still imposing, but without any connections to classical or Nazi monumental architecture.

*Siegfried*

The set for Act 1 of *Siegfried* suggested the interior of Mime's cave, with a stairway up one wall. The interaction between the 2 performers was reasonably persuasive, though Karlström as Mime was streets ahead in the acting stakes. Gould did not beat time on the anvil during the Nothung forging scene; rather, he made air swipes in time to the music—a little disappointing, since many other performers manage this feat, adding a degree of verisimilitude to the action. The bear was an endearing large teddy bear that lumbered amiably across the stage and even gave Mime a hug.

Act 2 gave us a strange moment when Fafner appears on the stage after Siegfried summons the *Wurm*. Instead of a version of a dragon however “real” or symbolic, we are presented with a huge mannikin, dressed as a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century businessman, sitting on a huge red upholstered settee, and surrounded by minions. I took this to be a Marxist critique of unproductive capitalism, in the sense that Fafner has been sitting on his gold, doing nothing with it. Siegfried, therefore, has no trouble shafting Nothung in the guts of the bloated monster who is in no position to defend himself. A strong, and probably misleading reading of Wagner's critique of money in some of his essays: he actually wanted money redistributed mostly to himself via royal patronage that, luckily for him, happened. The murder of Mime happened quite quickly as the dialogue between them followed the quite fast tempo in which Schirmer conducted this episode. Still, it is always a shock to see him killed so brutally, in this case by Siegfried casually, backhandedly whacking him on the head with the hilt of Nothung with nary a look back at the corpse.

A3 begins with a rocky outcrop at the foot of which Siegfried meets his father and smashes his spear. Volle was in fine form as The Wanderer, out-acting Gould in *Walküre*. Volle made the god's mixture of shock and relief quite credible. The outcrop then revolves to show Valhalla as the leaning tower of Pisa. Brünnhilde's rock, a perfunctory box, is in front of it. Loge's fire is actual flames around the base of the box from gas burners under the stage. Impressive enough, but no competition to the spectacular circle of fire created by Elke Neidhardt and her team in the 2004 Adelaide Ring Cycle.

*Götterdämmerung*

Almost unbelievably, it was time for the culmination of this amazing artwork. The Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* opens in front of Valhalla with the Norns again in their slinky, glittery outfits, and with the lycra-clad dancers writhing elementally around them. The 3 singers were well-matched and looked far younger than their actual age as primordial beings might suggest, but then being immortal probably helps. Then Brünnhilde and Siegfried exchange gifts—he gives her the ring; she gives him her horse Grane—before he sets off on his Rhine Journey.

Act 1 opens during the Rhine Journey and features the Gibichungs lounging around in a hyper-modern, palatial living room, complete with piano, and a glass-topped table that must have cost a lot, given how Gunther polishes it regularly and nearly faints when Siegfried leans heavily on it. They are all dressed in haut couture outfits, with Gunther in a very fetching long white coat.

Act 2 opens with one of the creepiest moments in the Cycle as Hagen's father Alberich slithers out of a trapdoor while Hagen is in some sort of somnambulist state. Scene 2 was very powerful in this production. I've never seen Brünnhilde so degraded as she was here. With her hands bound, she is dragged into the Gibichung hall by an insolent, swaggering Gunther. He clearly regards her as little more than a wild animal he will tame, with violence if needed. Lindstrom's acting capacities came to the fore in this scene as she convincingly transformed from shocked and trapped into ferocious and vindictive when she realises that she has been betrayed by Siegfried and made captive to this fool holding her in bondage. The scene ends with the powerful vengeance scene in which she, Gunther, and Hagen swear to kill Siegfried—for very different reasons.

Act 3 opens with the Rhinedaughters' final appearance as they cavort in front of a pool in which some dancers, along with Grane, swim. The pool is located on what had been the floor of the palace, and the walls are still visible in the dark behind. They fail to persuade Siegfried to give them the ring, because it is a precious gift from Brünnhilde. We are supposed to believe that Siegfried is immune to Alberich's curse on the ring because he knows nothing about the curse, and is

a fine, upstanding young man with no unseemly desires, despite the traditional “fact” about a curse, that it can traverse generations, affecting people who know nothing of it or its origins. Perhaps there are classes of curses?

At the end of scene 2, Siegfried sings his dying paean to Brünnhilde, one of the glories of this artwork, and Vinke gave it a great shot, with some sotto voce singing and a ringing conclusion before he falls dead on the body of a stag killed in the hunt. Still spreadeagled over the stag, he is gently dragged off stage by Grane.

Scene 3 returns us to the Gibichung hall, with Grane, very movingly, carrying Siegfried's body on his back as he traverses the mezzanine floor of the palace. Siegfried's body then reappears atop the piano that is wheeled into centre stage. We were rewarded with a quite impressive burning and collapse of the Gibichung hall, with the set turning blood red and the pillars separating with part going up and part going down as the revolve subsided into the sub-stage. The separated pillars revealed the gods standing inside the lower part of the pillar. The gods had mysteriously appeared from and disappeared into one or other of these pillars during earlier entr'actes, suggesting, I guess, their continued existence, but ineffectualness, in this modern world. Smoke fills the hall and the light changes to blue to represent the Rhine River overflowing. Altogether an impressive climax.

We know that Grane is Brünnhilde's horse, who also shares in her fate of losing his supernatural status when Wotan strips her of her godhead. I've seen 8 real horses in the Palais Garnier, or symbolic representations of a horse, in some productions, notably the animated, wire Grane in Opera Australia's 2013 and 2016 Melbourne productions. Much has been made of Rosamund Gilmore's elevation of the horse to an active participant in three of the artworks. Her conception is one of the most interesting and rewarding innovations in

this production. I fell in love with his character as it emerged through the three works.

We first see him when Brünnhilde bids him farewell in *Die Walküre*. He is dressed in a bizarre costume that suggests a satyr, with hooved feet, but human upper body. Because of the hooves, he has to walk rather oddly, as I guess a satyr might have done (or perhaps still does in the mountains of Greece).

The second incarnation happens when Brünnhilde gives Grane to Siegfried. The performer, a senior dancer in the Leipzig troupe, walks to the side of the stage rear, where there is a rack of props, and changes into tights and t-shirt over which he wears the same kind of white coat Siegfried now sports as a member of the Gibichung family.

At all times, though, this character relates to his mistress/master in the same way. He is unfailing vigilant, caring, noble, elegant, and gentle as he watches over Brünnhilde as Wotan berates her for her alleged betrayal and disobedience, on her flaming rock; during her awakening; and as she hands him to Siegfried. In keeping with Siegfried's insouciance as the newest member of the Gibichung family, Grane follows him around at a respectful distance, but with a certain new freedom of movement and delight in his new clothes. The highlight for me came when he accompanies Siegfried as he encounters the Rhinedaughters. Grane now splashes into the pool with the other dancers and joins them in their routine. As I mentioned before, he tenderly supports the dying Siegfried, and then hauls his body off stage. I cried when I saw him carrying Siegfried's body across the mezzanine. It was such an unexpected image, and a deeply moving one that could only work as powerfully as it did because of the way in which the dancer and the Director had worked to develop this entirely new character. At the end, Grane is bowed over the keyboard end of the piano on which Siegfried's body is brought into the hall and on which Brünnhilde joins him, and on which they all die.



Grane from *Walküre* in a composite of images



Grane in *Walküre*

## Parsifal



It was with much sadness that I contemplated the end of this fantastic experience as the performance of *Parsifal* neared. It wasn't until after about the first 20 minutes that I remembered that we had seen this production in 2013! This production from 2008 is undoubtedly the most beautiful to look at of the productions we have seen in the festival. It uses a scrim, generally lit with blue light, throughout, creating the impression, I guess, that this is another world of timeless, spiritual aspirations. Many people disliked it because it made it impossible to see everything clearly—part of the Director's intent, perhaps, since the work itself is impossible to see clearly, or at least as presenting a consistent point of view or theme. In this Leipzig *Parsifal*, everything is played straight and even reverentially, in the old-style approach to this opera.

The set for Act 1 was a suggestion of a courtyard inside a huge temple/castle with long slatted windows at the back—all in grey with the blue tinge from the scrim. There was no swan (that I could see) and the Parsifal of Andreas Schager, wearing a silly wig, was rather gormless to begin with. At Parsifal's entrance, the slats at the back turn ninety degrees to give more light on the stage, which is a nice dramatic touch. Elena Pankratova's Kundry was quite moving.

The Act 2 flower maiden scene was again very beautiful in a conservative way with the maidens, dressed in light flowing pastel-coloured dresses, moving in synchronised waves to and from Parsifal as each made their move on him. This Parsifal was very distressed with all the hands caressing him and he kept waving them off as if their hands were a swarm of bumblebees about to sting him. When Kundry arrives, she too is very conventional in a red (velvet) evening dress with bare shoulders; there is much serious seduction and being seduced going on here. Schager's Parsifal is certainly quite sexually aroused, and so his cry of "*Die Wunde!*" came as a shock.

Roland Aeschlimann set the opening not in the traditional field of green grass and flowers, but in a snow-covered courtyard, with the snow covering little bumps. It created a very dreary, dispiriting impression that matched Gurnemanz's explanation to the newly-returned Parsifal that the Grail Temple and its denizens had fallen on hard times since the death of Amfortas's father Titurel, and Amfortas's refusal to perform the Grail ceremony. As Parsifal reveals himself, and Gurnemanz recognises the spear Parsifal has brought with him, Kundry slowly pulls away the snowy sheets to reveal little Buddhas in serried rows. This is a rather tendentious reference to the fact

that Wagner had been working on a scenario for an opera to be called *Die Sieger, The Victors*, about a young couple seeking enlightenment from the Buddha. Although she is an outcast and he a monk, Buddha accepts them both into his fold, and permits a chaste relationship between them. I think the opera represents Wagner's attempt to create a new kind of religion by combining elements from all sorts of places and times and belief systems—contributing to the difficulty of finding a common theme or coherence in the work.

After the mutual baptising scene, Parsifal and Kundry accompany Gurnemanz back to the Grail Temple, where Parsifal heals Amfortas with the tip of the spear that allegedly pierced Christ's side, assumes the role of king, and performs the Grail ceremony. The Knights now have their first feed and drink in a long time (about 8 years in my calculation—truly heroic forbearance). The set consists primarily of the same set of the Grail scene in Act 1, that is, a huge series of concentric circles that turned and seemed to recede into the distance, with, at its centre point, a polyhedron turning slowly and reflecting light from some of its sides. I came to think of this as the wormhole to the divine, or to God, depending on how Christian one thinks the underlying belief system of the work might be.

## Singers

There are far too many singers in such a festival of 13 artworks to do justice to them all. Overall, the standard of singing was very impressive, with major names being brought in to perform more than one role. Readers will be familiar with the work of Stefan Vinke (Rienzi, Siegfried—*Götterdämmerung*), Andreas Schager (Tannhäuser, Tristan, Parsifal), Michael Volle (Wotan—*Rheingold, Siegfried*), René Pape (Gurnemanz), Catherine Foster (Brünnhilde—*Walküre*), Lise Lindstrom (Brünnhilde—*Götterdämmerung*), Florian Vogt (Lohengrin), Groissböck (King Heinrich), Robert Dean Smith (Walther), Stephen Gould (Siegfried), and perhaps James Rutherford (Hans Sachs), whom I'd not heard of. I was keen to hear Lindstrom again, since she sang *Turandot* for Opera Australia recently, and is cast to sing Brünnhilde in that company's Ring Cycle scheduled for November-December 2023. Robert and I found her a little underpowered. She has the top notes, but the bottom ones disappeared into the orchestra, but she also has physical charms and acting ability to go with her voice.

While the singers with whom I was a little familiar performed more or less according to my memories of them in other productions, even as some of them had aged a bit, and their voices changed, it was the cohort of other singers I knew nothing about that deeply impressed me. Together, they attest to a deep level of talent in both Oper Leipzig and opera singers in general. I will limit my comments to those who bowled me over.

For me, Elisabet Strid, as Swedish soprano who reminded me more than a little of Nina Stemme, stood out for her sheer versatility of voice and acting skills. From Senta, through a degraded Elisabeth, an Elsa out of her depth, and Eva to distraught Sieglinde, she brought passion to each role, whether anguish and despair or fresh-eyed, dewy love. As Eva, she was dressed quite young (she is supposed to be about 15), and flirts girlishly with Walther, Magnus Vigilius, who also acts a little adolescently as he tries to impress Eva on their second meeting.

Equally as impressive in voice and acting was the mezzo-soprano Kathrin Göring who first sang the pants role of Adriano in *Rienzi*, then on to a very seductive Venus, Magdalena, an imperious Fricka, and desperate Waltraute. This was Kathrin Göring's final appearance of the many she has made in this festival, and she left on a high. She acted well and sang superbly in her attempt to change Brünnhilde's mind.

Tuomas Pursio also sang 3 roles, with an agility and commitment, from Friedrich the Regent in *Das Liebesverbot*, to Alberich, and the louche Gunther. The regent Friedrich of course is presented as a corseted upright prig. Pursio is blond and blue-eyed (coincidentally, or was he chosen for the role because of his features?). He has a fine bass-baritone voice that he used to good effect in ordering the courtroom to be silent and then in wooing Isabella. He propositions Isabella (sung by an impressive Manuela Uhl, who does not reappear in later productions) with the deal that he will free her brother Claudio from his death sentence for extra-marital sex on the condition that she sleeps with him, a married man. When Friedrich thinks he has caught Isabella in his plan, he gives a little Michael Jackson style moonwalk dance—in fact, almost all the main characters do a little dance routine during one of their numbers. Pursio was able to build on his vile Regent Friedrich to characterise Gunther as a louche, stupid, greedy, egocentric buffoon-would be bully who gets staggeringly drunk during Act 1. He was served an unending flow of alcohol by the servants, who were 2 of the dancers, but dressed now in stereotypically short skirts and tight blouses (for Gunther's obviously venal delight), and with suitably modified horns that looked like bunny's ears. Pursio brought such a verve and comic timing to some of his actions that he was in danger of stealing the show—again.

Another of the impressive male singers was Mathias Hausmann who sang the Herald in *Lohengrin* and acted as Ortrud's lover, but his role as Kurnewal is bigger and gave him room to demonstrate his very powerful and expressive voice. He also cuddled and comforted the raving Tristan of Act 3 with as much affection and care as Brangäne did for Isolde. He also sang Sextus Beckmesser as a normal human being with a powerful voice and menacing if underhanded manner. As Amfortas, he again brought vocal strength and subtlety to this strange role.

Dan Karlström turned out to be another welcome discovery. He appeared first at short notice to sing David as the scheduled singer was ill. He has apparently sung the role many times, but he had to be rushed through his stage movements, and character interpretation during the Sunday. From our point of view, he sang well and didn't make any obvious wrong turns or trip on the rather complicated set. He is of slight build, like Strid, but his voice was a very pleasant, strong but lightish tenor, suiting both Mimes, but it was his comic moves that brought more humanity to the character than directors and singers often extend to him. On his single appearance, Tobias Kehrer presented us with probably the most credibly intimidating Hundung I've ever seen. He is physically big, with a huge voice, and a compelling characterisation.

## Orchestra and Chorus

I have mentioned the way in which the chorus in *Das Liebesverbot* threw themselves into their alternative cultural roles with gay abandon. We had a reduced chorus for *Rienzi* because of a number of Covid cases, but that had a slightly positive effect on the problem of moving the large numbers of chorus members Wagner wrote for onto and off the stage for many of the large number of scenes of which the opera is composed. The reduced numbers had no discernible effect on the quality or volume! In *Holländer*, late in the work, the Steersman and his girlfriend are going for it on the bare stage when his sailor mates and their partners creep up on them and then burst out into the final sailor's merrymaking chorus. The steersman did a very credible job of leaping up in fright in *flagrante delicto*. All through this work there was strong secure singing, and great chorus work. In *Tannhäuser*, we never see the Pilgrims though we hear their various choruses as they are hidden behind the set, but again the singing of the chorus is very impressive. Very clear diction—I can understand most of what is being sung—and beautiful balance in the parts. Similarly, with *Lohengrin* the chorus is mostly behind as scrim or inside a part of the set (usually a kind of bleacher seats - sort of buried in the back wall of the palace), and again the chorus were wonderful. I guess this minimised interaction with the valuable merchandise on the stage and any chance of spreading the plague, but it also eliminated the need for the chorus to enter and leave. The male and female choruses in *Götterdämmerung*, and the male chorus in *Parsifal*, were also impressive, dealing with the more complex part writing Wagner had developed by this stage of his career with ease and clarity.

The orchestra on all nights produced wonderful, high-quality sound from the pit, and the acoustic of the house is fine too, enabling us to hear aspects of the score that had escaped our notice before. Under conductor Matthias Foremny the playing in *Rienzi*, was almost flawless, as it was in *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* under his direction. It is evident that he, and the cast I hope, had decided that they will play and sing the scores very fast, in part so that we can all be out by about 10.00pm for supper! but also to counter a tradition of Wagner-playing that takes the music very slowly so as to emphasise its supposedly monumental aspects. This is not to say that Foremny charged through those moments of reflection or intimacy etc with brashness. He definitely allowed space for the singer to make the most of those moments. The fast pacing was most evident in the overture with its many march themes that were played as if in double time, thus creating a great sense of excitement and urgency. What was true of Foremny's conducting, was true of the approach of the other conductors (Ulf Schirmer for all the remaining works, except for *Lohengrin*, conducted by Christoph Gedschold). In particular, the sound produced by the orchestra for *Parsifal* was again outstanding. I have not felt such bass string notes through my feet since my first time hearing *Parsifal* in Bayreuth in row 5—a thrilling acoustic and physiological experience. The funeral march was one of the most thrilling I've heard, perhaps because I was so close to the orchestra (row 10 centre), but also because Schirmer had all orchestral guns blazing. *Parsifal* not only brought the close to the festival, but also to Ulf Schirmer's retirement from his time at the Leipzig Opera, after 11 years as artistic

Director and his 13<sup>th</sup> season as general music Director. He received a rousing ovation from the audience members who were already on their feet, as we had been for almost all the performances. He certainly ended this part of his career on a superlative achievement. According to the biography on Oper Leipzig's website, he began his career in good company: "Born in Eschenhausen near Bremen, he studied at the local conservatory and at the music academy in Hamburg with György Ligeti, Christoph von Dohnányi and Horst Stein. He was Lorin Maazel's assistant and resident conductor at the Vienna State Opera...." You can read his extensive and remarkable CV at [www.oper-leipzig.de/en/programm/person/ulf-schirmer/1064](http://www.oper-leipzig.de/en/programm/person/ulf-schirmer/1064).

### Other events

As with the bicentenary celebrations in 2013, Leipzig again organised an extensive accompanying program of talks, walks, and drinks. Since most of the former were conducted in German, and we wanted to limit our exposure to potential sources of Covid, we did not participate. We did, though, see 2 exhibitions. The first, "Wagner and Mendelssohn," explored their time in Leipzig and subsequent contacts, surprisingly quite a few—they clearly kept abreast of each other's activities. The exhibition was quite small and hosted in the small *Stadtgeschichtliches Museum*, next to the bigger *Museum der Bildenden Kunst*, and consisted largely of memorabilia (sketchbooks, letters, paintings and cartoons of the two composers, quite lovely watercolours by Mendelssohn, the podium he used to conduct the Gewandhaus Orchestra, a copy of Wagner's matriculation certificate to the University of Leipzig, and an example of a *Tafelklavier* (table piano) that both composers used). The exhibition, though, helped place the 2 men in historical context through very informative placards under and in between the exhibits. It was a worthwhile addition to the festival.

The other exhibition was the permanent one hosted in the *Nikolaischule* that Wagner attended for the first few years of his very disrupted schooling. Again, there is a mixture of maps of Leipzig from the 1810s, paintings, sketches, photographs of family members and friends, and reproductions of Wagner's documents, as well as memorabilia, such as a copy of the program for a 19 September 1820 performance of Schiller's

*William Tell* in which the 7 year old Wagner and his sister Klara appeared, paintings of other places Wagner lived in during his childhood, as well as of the *Kreuzschule* in Dresden where he spent some unhappy years by himself, and an interesting watercolour of a street in Leipzig during the 1830 uprising). There were also many placards informing us of the contents and significance of the exhibits.

To complement this exhibition, the foyer to the main hall was adorned with a special collection of posters for Wagner productions, mainly of The Ring Cycle, collected over the previous 15 years from many places by Klaus Billand, an undoubted Wagner enthusiast. Klaus writes for many prestigious opera magazines, including "Opera" in London, the Viennese "Online Merker," the French "Opera Online", as well as a number of Richard Wagner devoted organisations and journals, including the respected Finland based "Wagneriaani" and the long-standing Bayreuther *Festspielnachrichten* produced for each year's festival. Examples from Klaus's collection have been displayed in Bayreuth, Budapest, Füssen, Geneva, and Vienna.

I was pleased to be introduced to Klaus by fellow NSW Wagner Society attendee Dr Lourdes St George and we chatted briefly during an interval in the Festival. In his notes for the exhibition, Klaus invited us to "Enjoy the adventure of a visual walk through Wagner's Oeuvre and try to hear the music behind what you see, asking Tristan's question the other way around: 'Wie, hör' ich das Licht?' (What? Is it the music I see?)." Klaus also observes: "With the 'Ring', Wagner proposed socially revolutionary ideas and concepts of great relevance for the life of us human beings and societies at large, with a real claim to universality. This can be seen in manifold facets on the 'Ring' posters of this exhibition." Klaus notes that many of the posters focus on the mythological elements in Wagner's artworks, as well as the many striking stage images that Wagner demanded—fire, water, rainbow bridges, magical swans, and swords. The photo gives you a hint of the impressive range and number of posters on display. Once finished in Leipzig, the exhibition headed to the Bayreuther Festspiele for display in the Old Castle. You can discover more about Klaus and his wide-ranging interests in Wagner and his artworks on his website: [www.klaus-billand.com](http://www.klaus-billand.com).

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# NEWS FROM SINGERS SUPPORTED BY THE SOCIETY

IN THE DECEMBER 2022 QUARTERLY, WE PUBLISHED SAM'S SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION FOR FUNDING BY THE SOCIETY. SINCE THEN, HE HAS PERFORMED TRISTAN FOR OPÉRA NATIONAL DE LORRAINE.

## TAKING ON TRISTAN

A CONVERSATION WITH AUSTRALIAN TENOR – **SAM SAKKER**

Wagner Society singer **Eleanor Greenwood** has recorded the following conversation with Sam.

I spoke to Sam about his experience singing the role of Tristan in Bucharest and his preparation for Lorraine.

"I'm excited about the production", he says. "The director is brilliant. He's a theatre director and this is his first opera. Also, **Dorothea Röschmann** is singing and it's her first Isolde." Dorothea Röschmann is a soprano, famous for her singing of Mozart heroines, and she has in recent years expanded her repertoire to include Wagner roles including Elisabeth and Elsa. Sam is full of praise for her beautiful singing. He mentions as well, the great singing by **Jongmin Park** who is also in the cast. As a graduate of the Covent Garden Young Artist's Program, Sam is no stranger to singing alongside big-name singers, and this will be a wonderful experience to add to his already impressive resume. Sam's first performance singing Tristan in Bucharest was in a concert version of Act 2. That was a beneficial way to approach the role he says, as it was a chance to get his brain and body used to singing the Act in context with orchestra, before undertaking a full production. Singing in concert allowed for, "a chance to become familiar with the sensation of combining text, music and the technique required to sing it over the large orchestration."

I have always found for myself, singing with the orchestra is an entirely different experience to singing with piano, as orchestra in some repertoire can almost take on a life and character of its own. Sam agrees with this and he emphasises how singing with orchestra can actually be much easier than singing with piano. He explains, "With Orchestra, the support is like a 'cushion' of support; the rhythm itself is 'cushioned', as compared to when singing with a piano which is more of a percussive experience." As singers, he says, we respond to that naturally. Certain instruments will also take longer to actually create sound than a piano would, and this can create 'millisecond suspensions' which have an often-helpful effect on the way you breathe, and on the overall approach taken to your singing.

I ask him what the difficulties of singing a role such as Tristan might be. Are there things we may not be aware of? He explains how in a work the size of Tristan, it can be hard to conceptualise the 'big picture'. He says that's because in this work "the story is small but the ideas are big", and a lot of what the character is experiencing is internalised. "The dramatic beats are internalised, as opposed to being

responses to outside stimuli ...and there's a lot of philosophy and analyses occurring as opposed to 'action' taking place", he explains.

Does this lack of 'action' mean it is therefore harder to memorise the music? He answers yes. Because of that and because of having quite a short period of time to learn it, he ended up learning it by rote. Once he had memorised the music and could sing it, he could then go on to apply meaning to the music. In his opinion it would not have worked to try and apply the very many heavy layers of meaning that are to be found in this work, to the actual process of learning of the music. Given the time frame, this would not have been possible to grasp, he says. Had he tried to start off with interpretation, "I may not have ever got to the singing stage. ..I had to trust that what Wagner had written will demonstrate all of that, if I just learn it and sing it accurately - those things will be there." Once he knew the music, he noticed how some of those layers of meaning, started to become apparent. "As the singer, it would just be too much to try to intone all the subtleties and significance of all Wagner has achieved during the learning process. If you just sing what's there, it will all be there in the work, but if you're sloppy and not doing the correct intervals and so on, you may not be achieving that."

The role is fascinating and the piece is enormous, which he appreciates.

"People spend years preparing this role and seeing as I had 5 months I thought I had better get on with it. There were moments at the beginning where I'd look at the score and think, 'where on earth to start..'. He believes it's important to have someone help you with the music, when learning such a role, in order to make sure you are accurate, because in his opinion it is not intuitive music, until you know it, after which it then becomes easy. "What Wagner has done is invent his own colour palette. What he did to music is like inventing a new colour in art.. so don't be surprised if it takes careful thought to get it right!"

One of the things I appreciate about Sam's approach to singing Wagner, is that he cultivates beauty, and doesn't appear to be tempted to push or shout. The sheer size of the music and orchestration can however create an unhelpful need and want for singers to do so. In relation to this he says, "...well, I learnt there's no point in trying to compete with an orchestra as there is no competing. The less I push it, the more it's going to ring. Think of the balloon. If someone

pinches the flange of the balloon, the air stops, but if you hit a sweet spot it just rings out. We want the air pressure underneath the flange of the balloon (or vocal fold) to be at its perfect point, where it will just allow the air to just go.”

In terms of being calm, Sam appreciates the beauty of these roles which includes for him, the way the singer is allowed to be calm and internal. “You are allowed to be the philosopher singer”, he says. Extraneous movement is not required like it might be in something like a Rossini piece, and being more of an ‘internalised, thinking performer’ is a benefit here. Because of this he feels the role suits him not only vocally, but also psychologically. I ask him if he has a favourite operatic role? “This role (that of Tristan), is up there”, he says, before adding, “Dick Johnson in *La fanciulla del West* would be a role I’d love to sing sometime!”

To end our conversation, I ask Sam if he would mind telling us a bit about what it is actually like to try and survive financially as a freelance artist performing around the world today. He answers plainly – “it’s impossible.” After a pause, he continues, “everybody wants you to do something for less, conditions are becoming worse and worse, you have to pay for all of your own travel and expenses and pay your agent as well, and then pay your tax. Basically, you don’t get paid enough to cover your expenses and to be

honest it is not sustainable.” The hard reality for many talented performers in today’s opera industry is that it’s quite difficult to maintain a career. Even taking up wonderful offers that may come about can be a challenge in terms of finance. What does Sam think we should do about it? “We need more people fighting and championing arts, but not only that. We need more people advocating not just to the arts bodies, but to the arts companies who receive the funds, as they are the ones who always want to haggle down and this makes it impossible for artists.” He believes it would be ideal to have an opera company run by singers who work in administration part time and sing in the shows the rest of the time. “You have to be very intelligent to be an Opera Singer. Singers are industrious, capable and clever. They also believe in the product.”

## OBITUARY

### KENNETH ANTONY BLUNDELL STRONG

12.1.1937 - 15.1.2023

We note with sadness the passing of member **Tony Strong** (1027) and send our condolences to Ros and her family. Ros and Tony hosted a delightful soiree for Samantha Crawford at their beautiful home in October 2017



## WAGNER SOCIETY YOUTUBE CHANNEL

We encourage members to visit our YouTube channel at:

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

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

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	June Donsworth	
Quarterly Editor	Mike Day	michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com
Artists' Liaison	Leona Geeves	lg03415@gmail.com
Public Officer	Alasdair Beck	0414 357 441

**R**  
Renaissance  
Tours



**Tannhäuser in Concert**

**Arts Centre Melbourne**  
with Peter Bassett  
19 – 21 May 2023 (3 days)

Join Wagner expert Peter Bassett for a concert performance of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* exclusive to Melbourne, featuring German heldentenor Stefan Vinke.



**European Summer Opera Festivals**

**Munich and Salzburg**  
with Scott Curry  
21 July – 01 August 2023 (12 days)

Enjoy premium category seats for performances at internationally renowned summer festivals in Munich and Salzburg.



**Romanian Rhapsody**

**George Enescu Festival in Bucharest**  
with Mairi Nicolson  
28 August – 11 September 2023 (15 days)

Discover Bucharest's extraordinary George Enescu Festival, featuring the world's most acclaimed orchestras, conductors and soloists.



**Australian Festival of Chamber Music**

**Townsville**  
with Phillip Sametz  
28 July – 01 August 2023 (5 days)

Experience Queensland's internationally-acclaimed chamber music festival, featuring some of the finest international and Australian musicians.



Australia's finest collection of cultural and special interest tours.

For detailed information visit [renaissancetours.com.au](http://renaissancetours.com.au),  
call 1300 727 095 or contact your travel agent.

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## ADDRESS

Please note our permanent address for all correspondence:  
The Wagner Society in New South Wales Inc | GPO Box 4574 SYDNEY NSW 2001  
Telephone: 0412 282 070 (Esteban Insausti, President)  
Website: [www.wagner.org.au](http://www.wagner.org.au) | Website enquiries: [webmaster@wagner.org.au](mailto:webmaster@wagner.org.au)

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

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Wagner's home in Tribschen, Lucerne, Switzerland, from 30 March 1866 until 28 April 1872,  
where his *Siegfried Idyll* was first performed for Cosima on 25 December 1870

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## ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY FUNCTIONS

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

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**The Wagner Quarterly is designed, produced and distributed by MKR Productions**  
154 Matcham Road, Matcham NSW 2250 | Ph: 0402 834 419 | Email: [michael@mkproductions.com.au](mailto:michael@mkproductions.com.au)

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