

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER

QUARTERLY

DECEMBER 2024
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WAGNER
SOCIETY
nsw



Hans Sachs 1494 – 1576 Woodcut by Hans Brosmer 1545

COMING SOCIETY EVENTS 2025

STARTING TIMES AND VENUE MAY VARY - PLEASE CHECK ONLINE FOR DETAILS | WEDNESDAY ZOOMS TO BE ADVISED

2025	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
Sun 19 Jan	7.00pm Ben Woodward talks about the slimmed down Regents Opera <i>Ring</i>	Zoom
Sun 2 Feb	2.00pm Talk by Robert Gay on Cosima Wagner	Goethe Institut
Wed 12 Feb	12.00pm Talk by Dr John Mastrogiovanni on <i>Parsifal</i> (part 2)	Zoom
Wed 12 Mar	5.00pm Talk by German tenor Mirko Roschkowski	Zoom
Sun 23 Mar	2.00pm Talk by Prof Colin Mackerras – ' <i>Parsifal</i> Reanalysed'	Goethe Institut
Sun 13 April	12.30pm DVD Richard Strauss's <i>Elektra</i> with Birgit Nilsson and James Levine at the MET.	Goethe Institut
Wed 7 May	7.00pm TBC Margaret Plummer	Zoom
Sun 25 May	2.00pm Wagner's Birthday Concert	Goethe Institut
Sun 22 June	12.00pm DVD Zubin Mehta and La Fura dels Baus Valencia <i>Ring</i> highlights 2.00pm Talk by Stephen Mould about his new book about Carlo Felice Cillario	Goethe Institut
Sun 20 Jul	2.00pm Talk by Prof Carole Cusack	Goethe Institut
Sun 17 Aug	2.00pm Talk 'The Master's Apprentices' by Prof Raymond Holden from the Royal College of Music	Goethe Institut
Sun 14 Sep	2.00pm WSNSW 45th Anniversary celebration concert	St Columba
Sun 12 Oct	2.00pm Talk by mezzo-soprano Deborah Humble	Goethe Institut
Sat 15 Nov	10.00am – 4.00pm <i>Siegfried</i> Symposium	Customs House
Sun 30 Nov	2.00pm Xmas concert	St Columba

Advice about changes to the Program will be emailed in our e-news to people who have given their email addresses to the Society's Membership Secretary. The latest updates will also be available on the Society's website: www.wagner.org.au
Admission to each event will be: \$25 per Member | \$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)

FOR YOUR DIARY

9 Feb – 2 Mar	Regents Opera London Two Ring Cycles	London
16, 18, 20, 22 Feb	Melbourne Opera <i>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</i>	Grand Exhibition Hall Melbourne
1 – 17 May	Royal Opera <i>Die Walküre</i> Director Barrie Kosky	ROH London
17 May – 24 June	Glyndebourne <i>Parsifal</i> Conductor Robin Ticciati	Glyndebourne
24 July – 26 Aug	Bayreuth Festival. Two Ring Cycles conducted by Simone Young. 26, 27, 29, 31 July 15, 16, 18, 29 Aug	Bayreuth
13, 16 Nov	SSO/ Simone Young <i>Siegfried</i>	SOH

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THE SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Society are to promote the music of Richard Wagner and his contemporaries, to explore a wider understanding of their work, and to support Wagnerian productions in Australia and emerging Wagnerian performers from NSW

THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW INC

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

DEAR FRIENDS,

We end 2024 on a high. A very high high. The performances of *Die Walküre* by the SSO under Simone Young were extraordinary. Particularly the Sunday afternoon performance. Simply staggering. It was very rewarding to meet many of you, including friends from interstate, at the intervals and the various events we hosted during that week. I take this opportunity to once again thank the SSO for the loan of a Wagner Tuba for our Symposium. And to Deborah Humble, as my guest at the Reception at Customs House, for sharing some memories and thoughts about performing with Simone Young, as well as giving us a preview of her forthcoming debut as Magdalena in Melbourne Opera's production of the *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. We are very proud to assist Deborah's preparation of the role of Kundry – a very exciting and well-earned prospect for one of our most talented and engaging singer-actors.

The Society presented 15 events this year, including 3 Zooms. This is still an extraordinary effort despite having to cancel two events, one due to our guest being stuck in London! For the first time since Covid Year 2020 we can present you with a full programme of events for 2025 in our December Quarterly. I hope you can block or pencil these dates in your diaries as we love having full rooms once again. The Symposium and Reception this year were very well attended as were the last few talks. We are also offering a full schedule of Zoom Events (Zoom Wednesdays, generally) covering international guests. A few are still to be confirmed later in 2025. We like to share the Zoom events with all our interstate and international Wagner Societies as a way of staying in touch but also as a thank you for being part of the bigger Wagnerian family.

Whilst many of our past concerts are available on our YouTube Channel for your convenience, we do not have a policy of capturing live events. For two reasons: one we encourage you to come to our events, and two, it is often difficult to record events properly. Nevertheless, I am aware that not everyone can come to WSNSW events. If there is a way of making it easier to attend please let me know.

I am also aware that some of you are not liking Eventbrite as a way to purchase tickets to our events. At the moment we have several ways of procuring tickets – Eventbrite, depositing an amount into the Wagner Society account and paying at the door. What we are aiming to achieve is to avoid as much as possible members and attendees paying at the door. For several reasons. Mainly to avoid the time required to pay at the front desk, handling cash or getting stuck trying to pay via the Square. Please note that paying via the Square, though seemingly convenient, means that the Society has to pay the fee. With Eventbrite you pay the fee, as you would purchasing tickets to anything these days. One of the advantages of paying through Eventbrite is that we obtain an immediate register of names and number of attendees which helps us enormously with organising an appropriate amount of catering and printed programmes for those attending. Through 2025 we will endeavour to further streamline purchasing tickets to our events. Remember you don't need to print out a ticket but we do need to know your name to go on the register and your money to cover costs. This becomes essential for externally catered events such as the Symposium and Reception. So please help us. But if anyone has a suggestion to improve this situation please get in touch.

Finally, as you all know there is limited Wagner programmed in 2025. But can we complain too much when the two productions on offer are *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Siegfried*? I look forward to visiting Melbourne in February when the Victorian Society (and our friends at Melbourne Opera) will no doubt host something social around their performances and then we return the favour once again in November.

To end this, my final communication for 2024, I offer my thanks to the hardworking Committee and you, the members, for making this year a very successful one for the WSNSW. Wishing you a happy end of the year and hope to see you during 2025.

With best wishes. Happy listening!

ESTEBAN INSAUSTI

President Wagner Society in NSW Inc



SEASON'S GREETINGS FROM THE EDITOR

Dear readers, This bumper 'Summer Reading' issue includes articles about *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in preparation for the Melbourne Opera performances in February, featuring our favourite members **Warwick Fyfe** and **Deborah Humble**. I remind readers that the Sept 2018 Quarterly also included several *Meistersinger* articles, in preparation for the OA/ROH production in Melbourne. You can access all past issues on our website, where you can also find photos of attendees at recent events.

Thanks to **Dr Terence Watson** for his fascinating account of his recent travels encountering unexpected Wagner connections. Thanks to **Peter Bassett** for his continuing summaries of his Brisbane *Ring* talks and thanks also to **Minnie Biggs** and **Ross Whitelaw** for their interesting observations. My gratitude, as always, to **Leona Geeves** for proofreading.

Happy Holidays

MIKE DAY | michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com

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FUTURE SOCIETY EVENTS

SUNDAY 19 JANUARY 2025 ON ZOOM

AT 7.00PM FROM LONDON BEN WOODWARD, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF REGENTS OPERA, TALKS WITH ROSS WHITELAW ABOUT THE SLIMMED DOWN *RING*

"Regents Opera's lean and mean Wagner packs a punch"

— The Guardian

"Is this slimmed down Wagner the future of opera?"

— The Times

"Fringe Opera at its greatest"

— Opera Now

Ben Woodward is founder and Artistic Director of Regents Opera in London, who are about to undertake a complete *Ring Cycle* – quite the feat for a "fringe" opera company.

Regents Opera was founded - as Fulham Opera - in 2011, with a performance of *Das Rheingold* fully staged in a small 120-seat church, with piano accompaniment, provided by Woodward. After this was a huge success, the company moved forward to giving a pair of complete *Ring Cycles* in 2014, with piano, adding just a flute and a horn for the latter two operas. That company has, over the past decade, by way of various productions of Verdi, Strauss, other Wagner (*Holländer* and *Die Meistersinger*), now come full circle to give fringe opera productions of the *Ring* once again, though this time, in an arrangement for 22 instruments (single wind, 3 horns playing 2 parts, trumpet, bass trombone and 12 strings plus organ), which will be fully staged in the round (is this the first Ring in the round??) in York Hall in London's east end, by Irish director **Caroline Staunton** of the Staatsoper Berlin, and conducted by Woodward himself.



Regents Opera *Die Walküre*

Ben Woodward was a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, then the Guildhall School of Music in London, and has worked at the Staatsoper Hannover, and Landestheater Flensburg and the ROH. He now lives in Berlin with his wife Catharine, who, having just sung Gerhilde at Bayreuth (and will be doing so again next year), in this *Ring Cycle* will sing Brünnhilde.

SUNDAY 2 FEBRUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

2.00PM TALK BY ROBERT GAY ON COSIMA WAGNER
(ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED FOR 20 OCTOBER 2024)



Robert Gay has significant expertise as a music history educator and tour leader, having designed and led more than 100 tours to the great musical cities of Western and Central Europe and North America. Known for his popular music history courses, which have been offered at the University of Sydney's Centre for Continuing Education for more than 30 years, Robert's musical expertise extends from the Baroque period through to the great composers of the modern era. Robert trained as a lyric baritone in London and Munich, and he was also President of the Sydney Schubert Society for many years. He has been a guest lecturer for the Australian Decorative and Fine Arts Society (ACNC), and is regularly invited to present talks on opera

and music history to organisations such as the Wagner Society in NSW.

Francesca Gaetana Cosima Wagner (née Liszt; 24 December 1837 – 1 April 1930) was the daughter of the Hungarian composer and pianist **Franz Liszt** and Franco-German romantic author **Marie d'Agoult**. She became the second wife of **Richard Wagner**, and with him founded the Bayreuth Festival as a showcase for his stage works; after his death she devoted the rest of her life to the promotion of his music and philosophy. Commentators have recognised Cosima as the principal inspiration for Wagner's later works, particularly *Parsifal*.

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY ON ZOOM

AT 12.00PM FROM LA DR JOHN MASTROGIOVANNI CONTINUES HIS *PARSIFAL* TALK

John Mastrogiovanni talked to the society via Zoom on 26 June 2024 about his book *Parsifal: The Will and Redemption*. He didn't have time to finish the talk so we have invited him back to offer his conclusion. He is a very engaging personality – well worth the effort.

WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH AT ON ZOOM (TBC)

AT 5.00PM FROM GERMANY MIRKO ROSCHKOWSKI IN CONVERSATION WITH ROSS WHITELAW



Mirko Roschkowski as Froh and Christina Nilsson as Freia, Bayreuth 2024

Mirko Roschkowski was born in Dortmund and after graduating from high school studied special education at the University of Cologne. At the end of his studies, he started to audition for small roles and gained a beginner's contract in Bremerhaven, where he worked and trained for

three years, specialising in Mozart roles. Mirko learned the craft of opera singing primarily on stage and through self-study and with his musical partners. He made the jump from Bremerhaven to the Deutsche Oper am Rhein, and after three years went to the Bonn Opera and soon after to Cologne. He went on to sing at the Nuremberg State Theatre, Berlin State Opera, Vienna

Volksoper, Semperoper, Mannheim National Theatre and Wiesbaden State Theatre, to name just a few.

His repertoire includes eleven Mozart roles but also many other major roles including Lenski (*Eugene Onegin*), Max (*Der Freischütz*) and Lucio Silla, as well as Boris (*Káťa Kabanová*), Faust, Prince (*The Love for Three Oranges*), Don José (*Carmen*) and Hoffmann. As Lucio Silla, he had the honour of a guest appearance at the famous Scala in Milan. In the 2018/19 season, he was able to make his debut as Lohengrin at the Bonn Theatre, a career step that he had long planned and carefully prepared. It marked a high point in his career so far. This was immediately followed by another high point with *Rusalka* at the Cologne Opera.

The pandemic slowed Mirko down and many projects fell victim to it, including his planned debut as Florestan. Since the 21/22 season he has been able to get going again, singing for the first time at the state theatres in Kassel, Augsburg and Karlsruhe. Highlights have been Éléazar in *La Juive*, Lohengrin in Wiesbaden and Claudio in Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot* at the Leipzig Opera. In the summer of 2024, a long-held dream came true: his debut at the Bayreuth Festival as Froh in *Das Rheingold* under the direction of Simone Young. Mirko considered it a special honour to be part of the singing family on the Green Hill!

"It is precisely these encounters with artistic personalities, crazy, wild, lovable people, that make theatre life so extraordinary. I enjoy the privilege of being part of it."

CONGRATULATIONS

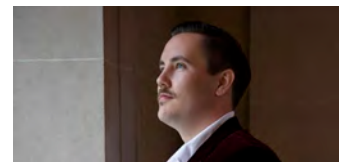
Simone Young AM awarded 'Conductor of the Year'

Opera magazine's 2024 International Opera Awards were presented at Munich's Prinzregententheater on 2 October. Among the artists recognised was Australian conductor Simone Young AM, awarded 'Conductor of the Year' for her recent work in venues including La Scala, Vienna State Opera, and at the Bayreuth Festival, where she became the first Australian to conduct. Now in its 11th edition, the International Opera Awards is the only global event dedicated to celebrating opera's impact across every aspect of the art form, from its performers to its philanthropists and institutions. Hosted by the BBC's **Petroc Trelawny**, the ceremony featured performances by the Bayerische Staatsorchester, under the direction of **Vladimir Jurowski**, Mexican tenor **Arturo Chacón Cruz** (winner of the 2024 Readers' Award) and **Arnheiður Eiríksdóttir** and **Justin Austin**, co-winners of the 2024 Rising Star Award.



Congratulations to WSNSW sponsored tenor Nathan Bryon

Nathan is the recipient of the 2025 German-Australian Opera Grant. This includes a twelve-month employment contract (August 2025 - July 2026) at the renowned Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, flights, one month's German tuition at the Goethe-Institut as well as prize money of \$5,000. This comes immediately after Nathan's win of a 4 months contract at the Vienna State Opera, awarded by Opera Foundation.



Congratulations to WSNSW member Sarah Penicka-Smith

Sarah has been awarded a 2024 Churchill Fellowship, which will enable her to "research socially-engaged orchestral and operatic models in order to run projects in Australia". Across her career, Penicka-Smith has been consistently dedicated to the promotion of marginalised voices in the world of classical and choral music. She currently serves as the Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of River City Voices, a community-centred choir that presents classical and contemporary choral music designed with the spirit of the Western Sydney community in mind. She was also named the first Associate Conductor of Willoughby Symphony Orchestra, and was the longest-serving Music Director of the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Choir. In 2023 Sarah conducted the WSO's 'Villains and Valkyries' Concert, which featured several WSNSW supported singers.



REPORTS ON RECENT WAGNER

SUNDAY 29 SEPTEMBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

12.30PM DVD
RICHARD STRAUSS
AND HIS HEROINES

This was a very enjoyable, well-made and researched film exploring Strauss' relationship to women and the creation of his famous female characters. The primary focus is on his attachment to Pauline, his wife of more than 55 years. Highlights were interviews with the great Strauss singers **Brigitte Fassbaender, Renée Fleming, Dame Gwyneth Jones and Christa Ludwig**. Also included are excerpts from their masterclasses.

2.00PM TALK BY DR. GEOFFREY SEIDEL - 'LOLA MONTEZ - FROM SPAIN TO SYDNEY VIA SAXONY

In April 2023, as part of the MO Bendigo *Ring Cycle* festivities, the President of the Richard Wagner Society in South Australia, **Dr Geoffrey Seidel**, gave a very entertaining and popular talk: **Lola Montez: The Wagner and Bendigo Connections**. WSNSW invited Geoffrey to come to Sydney to repeat the talk for the benefit of members who didn't hear it in Bendigo. He elaborated further on the subject and included extra information about her time in Sydney. The talk was illustrated with many interesting portraits and caricatures from the period plus some wonderfully kitsch clips from movies made about her outrageous exploits. It's fascinating to speculate that if Lola Montez hadn't caused a scandal that prompted the abdication of King Ludwig I then Ludwig II possibly would never have been able



Dr Geoffrey Seidel And Nick Dorsch



Barbara Brady and Jenny Ferns

to finance the *Ring*. Also, if Lola hadn't introduced the 13 year old Hans von **Bülow** to Franz Liszt then Hans may never have taken up a musical career and later married Liszt's daughter Cosima.

SUNDAY 10 NOVEMBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

10.30AM – 4.00PM WSNSW SYMPOSIUM ON DIE WALKÜRE



Ysolt Clark with Wagner Tuba

This was the second of the WSNSW symposia mounted around the Simone Young/SSO *Ring*. Over the proposed four years we will hear from a series of distinguished academics, dramaturgs, conductors, musicians, singers, directors and designers; giving listeners background, insight or different viewpoints into, arguably, Wagner's greatest *Gesamtkunstwerk*. We hope to publish summaries of all the talks at the end of the cycle in 2026. Below is a brief roundup of the day's proceedings.

Our president **Esteban Insausti** introduced the session.

Wagner specialist **Dr Antony Ernst** spoke first about his piece *Law and Power in Die Walküre*, which he had presented to the society in August. Antony's thesis is that, in this work, Wagner, with his revolutionary background, is exploring the change in Germany from autocratic monarchy to human rights-based popular society. Wagner's message is that deep under human invented ('unjust') laws lies natural law. Love trumps Authority

Dr Thea Brejzek, Professor of Spatial Theory at UTS and co-author of several books about scenic design and the use of scale models, spoke about controversial designer **Romeo Castellucci's** iconoclasm in the 2024 *Die Walküre* in Brussels, and his obsession with using young children and live animals on stage, because of their pure emotions, instincts, and honesty, which audiences can find deeply disturbing. As well

as directing, Castellucci also designs the sets, costumes and lighting, so his productions have a remarkable unity, free from compromise, evoking powerful emotions, true to the meaning of the work.

After a break for a tasty lunch, thanks to Serena from Café Maybach, we continued with Associate Professor **Stephen Mould**, from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, who gave us some 'behind the scenes' insights into preparing for performances of Wagner's works. In particular, Stephen talked about Wagner's scores and his use (or non-use) of metronome tempi. Stephen described working with **Jeffrey Tate** on the 1998 Adelaide *Ring*, and the influence that **Reginald Goodall** had had on Tate and the overall sound of the orchestra. Goodall had a technique that forced the players to listen intently to what the other players were doing. Tate later came under the influence of **Georg Solti** and Stephen displayed some fascinating pages of Solti's notes about tempo and silence on the *Walküre* score that he conducted from.

Brisbane based horn player and educator **Ysolt Clark** then followed with a delightful demonstration and explanation of the Wagner Tuba and when Wagner uses them for special atmospherics. By coincidence, Ysolt played a passage from *Walküre* that Stephen had highlighted. An interesting insight was that the Wagner tubas are always in sets of four and the



Dr Antony Ernst

SOCIETY EVENTS

sound is incorrect with fewer. They seem to be very temperamental instruments to play, but not as difficult as French horns.

Following a delicious and indulgent afternoon tea, thanks to Agnes and Esteban, helden-baritone **Warwick Fyfe** entertained us with tales of his experiences singing Wotan. He promised to tell us 'How to sing Wotan, without anecdotes', but of course, in his inimitable theatrical fashion, he strayed delightfully off-topic. Especially entertaining was his rendition of some off-colour Monty Python ditties. He lavished praise on his coach Dr **Christina Henson Hayes** and stressed the importance of singing the words with intent. We look forward to seeing his Hans Sachs in Melbourne in February 2025 and Alberich in the SSO *Siegfried* in September.

A very stimulating and varied day was brought to a close by Esteban, followed by drinks and lively conversation. Members were excitedly anticipating the *Walküre* performances to come a few days later. **Jenny Edwards**, on behalf of the audience, thanked Esteban for organising such a stimulating series of presentations.



Esteban Insausti, Ysolt Clark, Warwick Fyfe, Prof Thea Brejzek, Assoc Prof Steven Mould



Michele Day, Lynette Longfoot, Barbara Beasley



Lynne Williams, Claire Brauer, Chris Ford, Helen Meddings



Assoc Prof Steven Mould

EXCERPTS FROM THE REVIEW IN FORUMOPERA.COM OF THE PERFORMANCE OF *DIE WALKÜRE* ON 22 JANUARY 2024, DIRECTED BY ROMEO CASTELLUCCI AT LA MONNAIE, BRUSSELS

..... a staging that is certainly sometimes disturbing, but always as intelligent, abundant and truly a vector of meaning. we say to ourselves as we leave the room that we should see the production again at least once to taste it, sometimes also to understand all its intentions. we are eager to know what happens next, eager to see how far Castellucci will stretch the ball. His productions are recognizable among all; there is purity and symbolism, there is the need to show the body in its truth (here the unfortunate heroes of Valhalla whose corpses pile up), even if it means nudity. There is also the inevitable touch of the spectacular, the need to show, to flamboyantly display. A touch that could, but it should not, obscure the overall vision. What Castellucci highlights here is the animality of the protagonists of this terrible and sordid family story. On stage will be visible a dog, a dozen doves, and eight sumptuous black-coated horses, the latter being present for almost fifty minutes at III, with no other interference with the audience than this recognizable aroma reaching our nostrils. None of this is gratuitous.

The horses first. They are the attraction of the show, Castellucci has said a lot about them. For him, the Valkyries are halfway between divine beings and animals. The Valkyries are animals in the making. The horse cry is like a response to the "Hoiotho!" with which the third act begins. It is not without importance that the Valkyries present themselves with a song-cry whose words do not belong

to human language, words stripped of meaning. All the time that Brünnhilde's eight sisters are on stage, the horses will accompany them.

The doves now: white as snow, white as Fricka, dressed like a bride, white as Fricka's maids, her clones. These defenders of great virtue, of marriage, of blood ties and principles, unassailable of course. Except that as the speech of Wotan's wife hardens, as her hold on her husband grows, Fricka is transformed. Fricka, according to Castellucci, stands as a bulwark of tradition, as the supreme representative of this "malaise of civilization." And the doves that (formidably well trained) initially landed on her hand are in the end captured, strangled and slaughtered by Fricka's iron hand. Wotan witnesses all this and can't help it.

Finally, the dog. He appears at the very beginning of the first act. A huge black dog, mysterious and menacing, sniffing everywhere; Hunding's dog. Does he not recall his master who swallows his soup like a dog would lap up its bowl and spit out half of it? In fact, when, at the end of the second act, Wotan sends Hunding to hell with a flick, we see the famous dog, hanged, ascending to the flies, while the curtain falls. The desire for sobriety, simplification, even purity, another



Wotan (Gábor Bretz) and Fricka (Marie-Nicole Lemieux)

characteristic of Castellucci's productions, can bewilder the viewer. There is no Hunding house, no ash tree, Nothing is stuck in the body of... Sieglinde. On the other hand, very beautiful aesthetic successes like the naked corpses piled up in Valhalla, which give rise to a representation of Michelangelo's Pietà, or the circle of fire which concludes the work by giving it a double meaning: it is not only the circle of fire lit by Loge around the sleeping body of Brünnhilde but also a reprise of the golden ring symbolizing the Rhinegold, seen in *Rheingold*.

<https://www.forumopera.com/spectacle/wagner-die-walkyre-bruxelles/>

Ed: Castellucci directed a wonderfully inventive production of Mozart's *Requiem* for the 2020 Adelaide Festival

SATURDAY 16 NOVEMBER AT CUSTOMS HOUSE, CIRCULAR QUAY

4.00PM – 6.00PM COCKTAIL RECEPTION



Deborah Humble

Taking advantage of the 'day off' between *Die Walküre* performances the Society held a cocktail reception for members and invited members of the Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide Wagner Societies. President **Esteban Insausti** welcomed everyone and cast

member (Waltraute) **Deborah Humble** told us about her recent and upcoming engagements, including coaching in Germany for the role of Kundry in *Parsifal* (sponsored by WSNSW) and singing Magdalena in the Melbourne Opera *Meistersinger* in February.



Glen Richard, Mary Sanders, John Sanders



Achim Leistner, Leona Geeves, Mike Day, June Donsworth, Janice Roberts, Barbara de Rome



Lesley Jakobsen, Lynne Williams, Angela Cook, Chris Ford



Three Presidents: Esteban Insausti, WSNSW; Rosemary Cater-Smith, WS Queensland; Geoffrey Seidel, RWS South Australia



Following the Quarterly report about the talk on 28 July by **Michael Scott-Mitchell** and **Nick Schlieper** about the *Adelaide Ring*, **Peter Bassett** sent the following note:

Might be worth noting that the director, design team, executive producer, associate producer, technical director, production co-ordinator, and a number of the principal singers were from New South Wales. So there was a sizeable NSW involvement in the production without which (I have to say) it would not have happened.

The following link might be of interest:

<https://inreview.com.au/inreview/inreview-commentary/2024/08/22/a-blazing-spectacle-20-years-on-the-adelaide-ring-remains-unforgettable/>

I've put it on the QWS website at <http://wagnerqld.com.au/category/news/> and it's also on The Opera Critic site at <https://theoperacritic.com/articles.php>

All good wishes, Peter



DIE WALKÜRE WITH THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

CONDUCTED BY OUR PATRON SIMONE YOUNG AM

FRIDAY 15 AND SUNDAY 17 NOVEMBER

EXCERPTS FROM REVIEWS OF THE SIMONE YOUNG/SSO DIE WALKÜRE

Limelight - Jansson J Antmann 18 November 2024

<https://limelight-arts.com.au/reviews/die-walkure-sydney-symphony-orchestra/>

Cosima Wagner described Die Walküre as “the most emotional, the most tragic of Richard’s works”. It is arguably his most troubling too. Commentators have often called into question Wagner’s failure to condemn the incestuous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde. It would seem that Young concurs.

While **Stuart Skelton’s** Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond is undeniably exquisite, Young never allows us to wallow too much in the twins’ burgeoning love. Instead, she leaves us in a constant sense of unease, meticulously drawing out the tragic undertones that undercut an otherwise ecstatic score.

As our protagonists beget Siegfried, Young expertly imbues their lovemaking with a sense of foreboding, leaving us far more susceptible to the modulation in the final

cadence that brings the First Act to its abrupt and dissonant close. This can be overlooked in fully staged productions, where visual cues often focus our attentions on the consummation of Siegmund and Sieglinde’s all-too-human passion. Here, however, we are reminded that the twins are setting in motion a series of events that will ultimately bring about the twilight of the gods.

Under Young, the SSO players deliver a sumptuous reading of Wagner’s score. Never rushed, the drama seems to unfold naturally: poignant moments are allowed to hang; dialogues are conversational; protagonists have time to reflect. This is, after all, an epic, and Young understands better than anyone how to let it simmer.

"Under Young, the SSO players deliver a sumptuous reading of Wagner's score. Never rushed, the drama seems to unfold naturally: poignant moments are allowed to hang; dialogues are conversational; protagonists have time to reflect. This is, after all, an epic, and Young understands better than anyone how to let it simmer."

Australian Book Review – Arts - Peter Rose 18 November 2024

From the brisk, driven orchestral opening, the SSO was superb. It was notable how Young tempered and refined the sound, accentuating the lyrical qualities of Act One and rarely allowing Wagner’s score to overwhelm the singers. Fitting it is to emphasise the orchestra at the head of this review. The overall playing was so consistently good it seems almost unfair to single out individual players or passages, though here are a few: a solo cello passage in Act One (**Kaori Yamagami**); a wind ensemble in Act Three as Brünnhilde prepares to beseech Wotan; the unerring horns at the start of Wotan’s Narrative; and the resolute brass at the end. The score, as ever, was the real hero in this greatest of Wagner operas. Stuart Skelton, now in his mid-fifties, was at his best and deserved his huge ovation. His rich chest notes, thrilling timing, and superlative diction brought back memories of his legendary Siegmund in the second Adelaide Ring twenty years ago.

moment. Young accentuated the drama with a telling silence before resuming.

Hakala was similarly charismatic at the end, as Wotan finally acquiesces to Brünnhilde’s pleas and embraces her. The Farewell was immensely stirring. Done well – timing is everything here – this is one of the most moving moments in all opera, Richard Wagner, as ever, the master manipulator of emotions, filial or not. The feeling and simplicity with which Wotan quietly kissed away Brünnhilde’s godhead before putting her to sleep were unforgettable. In the end, great art, having stilled us, puts away artifice and contrivance and relaxes into pure meaning. How beautifully Hakala conveyed Wotan’s humiliation and moral exhaustion. He seemed to age ten years on the spot. Then he rallied for one last stentorian outcry before Simone Young brought this memorable performance to a resigned yet premonitory conclusion.

So much depends on Wotan, and Finnish baritone **Tommi Hakala** (winner of the 2003 BBC Singer of the World at Cardiff and now in his early fifties) never disappointed. In fact, he got better and better, despite the huge demands of this role. After Wotan’s Act Two scene with the unforgiving Fricka comes his long monologue – interminable to some but really, in the right hands, the dramatic highlight of Der Ring. Here, Wotan was compelling, whispering the opening lines, which only made his gravitas at the end more overwhelming, when Wotan, denouncing lordly splendour and divine pomp, abandons his life’s work and dreams of only one thing – ‘das Ende, das Ende!’ It was a shattering



Final bows

Simone Young's handpicked ensemble of singers welcomed back some of Sydney's favourite Antipodeans, amongst them, the golden-voiced heldentenor **Stuart Skelton**, magnetic as Siegmund, one of his signature roles. As well, the Valkyries who comprised **Helena Dix, Madeleine Pierard, Natalie Aroyan, Deborah Humble, Margaret Plummer, Kristin Darragh** and **Liane Keegan**. What a line-up of talent that was as they fearsomely sashayed

onto stage one by one, with no small degree of chutzpah. This was no collective of sisters, but a parade of individuals, each with their unique style and power. It was a rare treat to hear such talent and consummate Wagnerian expertise coming together amongst the overseas-born main soloists. **Vida Miknevičiūtė** was outstanding as Sieglinde as were **Tommi Hakala** as Wotan, **Peter Rose** as Hunding, **Alexandra Ionis** as Fricka and **Anja Kampe** as Brünnhilde, whom we will hear again in Siegfried in 2025.

For me, this concert production underscored two points. One was that the singers selected had the ability to convey the intensely dramatic narrative and dynamic interactions with little more than their voices and a few minimal

gestures without relying on costumes, props and the freedom of moving around the stage. Skelton, Miknevičiūtė and the Valkyries performed score-free, liberating them to perform unencumbered. In the main, it was up to the singers to tell their story in concert style with little extraneous help.

The other point is that listening to this opera as a concert, without those very elements of a staged production presents a terrific opportunity to simply focus on the music and to understand and appreciate Wagner's magnificence and complexity. Layering this over a staged version, if one were fortunate enough to see one, creates a much more thrilling and enlightened experience.

Minnie Biggs attended the rehearsal and performance of *Die Walküre*

The rehearsal – Tuesday night

Lucky to be invited to the rehearsal of *Die Walküre* with Simone Young at the helm, lucky to be among so many Wagner Society friends, lucky to sit in row G in the orchestra. It was hard to tell which were stage hands and which were singers, everyone in mufti. And then, and then, the orchestra struck up *Happy Birthday* and everyone sang, the orchestra members and all those singers, all those amazing voices, happy birthday to our Stuart Skelton, our most beloved Siegmund. What a start!

Simone Young does not do a straight through rehearsal, rather - impossible to hear her speaking to the orchestra as she faced them - we are treated to: guess where we are in the opera? I was mightily impressed that there were often the correct surtitles on the screen - how do they know what she was going to want to work on next? To start, Act one, there was little of Stuart and less of Sieglinde who was mostly lying not quite dead on a bench until the very last part of the act. Then on to

the battle scene, with Hunding up in the circle and Siegmund on the far side and Wotan finally appearing on the stage. In his glorious strength.

With the delicious opportunity to just listen to and watch the orchestra, I noticed for the first time that there are at least two sections when only the violas played with the brass or woodwinds, no violins. Such a lovely sound. Many of the voices of the other instruments were heard in a quite different way, not outstanding as they always blended perfectly. The only question we did hear Simone ask a production person in front of us was about the balance. Happily, he always gave the thumbs up.

(Ed. Note: This was actually Assistant Conductor, Chad Kelly, and his colleague, Repetiteur, Thomas Johnson, who played for our May concert, both of whom are on the music staff at Opera Australia.)

Then all the Valkyries lined up across the stage and, again, we were able to hear and see their expressions, and their words, which are almost always drowned out or rather distracted by the staging, whatever staging there is. "Ride" staging. Spectacular, interesting, unusual, beautiful or ugly as it may be. Now just a row of women singing. A delight.

The major singers Simone has brought from her time in Europe, some unknown to us, some very famous indeed, are a treat. I want to follow Anja Kampe wherever she sings her next Brünnhilde. They seldom sang at full voice - it was a rehearsal after all - but full enough so I could hardly wait for the performance at the end of the week.

The performance – Friday night

The clouds were scudding across the evening sky, the moon was full, the harbour beautiful. Inside, a hall full of people ready to be entranced - and entranced we were.

Simone Young led her orchestra into the prelude. After the opening voices of doom, the orchestra played with rhythmic contrast, just slightly louder and softer, faster and slower, almost imperceptible but noticeable

and different, beautiful. A new hearing. The beginning of five hours of nearly holding one's breath as the opera in concert unfolded and, undistracted by elaborate or even simple sets, we were treated to the sublime pleasure of hearing and seeing the orchestra play this familiar music as we are never able to do in a staged version. The singers expressed enough 'acting' through their understanding of the music and their voices to bring us right into the hut of Hunding, or the outskirts of Valhalla so they we could see vividly was what not actually shown. Again, we heard instruments always in perfect alignment with the music, never overpowering the singers. Simone knows her stuff!

For Act two she came on with hardly a nod to the audience clapping loudly, sweeping on to the podium and straight into the music, baton waving. What a thrill.

Vida Miknevičiūtė as Sieglinde, Stuart Skelton as Siegmund, Peter Rose as Hunding. Alexandra Ionis as Fricka, Tommi Hakala as Wotan and Anja Kampe as Brünnhilde, a cast beyond compare. (Are there any superlative words I have not used? Add them, please!) Best ever.



Leona Geeves, Minnie Biggs, Michele Day, Jenny Edwards having a great time



Simone Young, Stuart Skelton

OUR MEMBERS ABROAD

REPORT FROM ROSS WHITELAW ON BAYREUTH 2024

Once again, I made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth for the second Ring Cycle (there being only two this year) and also fitted in yet another of the popular **Tobias Kratzer** *Tannhäuser* productions, the latest *Parsifal* which I was unable to attend last year due to a COVID infection, and the new *Tristan und Isolde*. Arriving fresh from a stay of a couple of days in Munich to get body and mind back in the same time zone, I approached the Green Hill with much anticipation, knowing that our Patron, **Simone Young** AM, was going to be in the pit. Would she make a difference to what is an unusual and controversial production by **Valentin Schwarz**?

I had seen the first run of the Cycle in 2023 and the second up to the end of act one of *Siegfried* (COVID prevented me from seeing the rest). I had also watched it on the excellent streaming platform Stage+. Perhaps another viewing would be more rewarding. Well, in terms of stage action and direction, certain things became clearer but the use of children, as potential hostages in the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, abducted by Alberich as a metaphor for the Rheingold and imprisoned and terrorised in the Nibelung scene made for uncomfortable viewing. I'm not sure where the child abuse fits in to Schwarz's conception.

On the other hand, the singing was excellent as one should expect. Highlights were **Tomasz Konieczny's** Wotan, the Fricka of current Bayreuth go-to Mezzo, **Christa Mayer** and **Olafur Sigurdarson** as Alberich. **Tobias Kehrer** as Fafner is also worth mentioning. I sat with **Mirko Roschkowski** (Froh) during the traditional Wagner Society of Southern California dinner held after the show and hope to have him talk to our Society by zoom on 12 March.

Ms Young's conducting was spot on from the start. Too often I have heard the first act of *Das Rheingold* performed as a sort of warm up for the conductor, but not this time. More of which later.

As an aside, I took a back-stage tour organised by the Friends of Bayreuth that morning and watched at least ten stagehands try to get one aspect of the bump in just right. They were still at the minute detail as I left. I also pitied the crew who were meticulously cleaning the vast glass room, part of the act two set as it will be spattered with paint later on.

Die Walküre featured some very special vocal talent. **Catherine Foster's** Brünnhilde was everything you could wish for in that role, but the highlights went to **Michael Spyres** as Siegmund and **Vida Miknevičiūtė** as Sieglinde. Mr Spyres was exceptional for the quality and tone of his darker tenor voice. Ms **Miknevičiūtė** has sung in Melbourne recently and reprised that role for the SSO *Die Walküre*. There was a real chemistry going on between these two despite the best efforts of Mr Schwarz to play down the physical side of their relationship at the end of the Act. Another Bayreuth performer, **Alexandra Ionis** (Siegfrüne in Bayreuth) portrayed Fricka and Rosswisse for us in Sydney.

While not usually a great fan of *Siegfried*, **Klaus Florian Vogt's** performance lifted the entire opera for me. Sung confidently and with great beauty, he did not flag throughout, even when joined by the awakened Brünnhilde. I later met him at dinner and learned that he was staying in his motor home with his wife. **Alexandra Steiner**. She was playing the Woodbird and participated in a Society zoom for us last year.

Götterdämmerung again was strongly sung and once again Mr Vogt and Ms Foster featured. This time, Alexandra Ionis took the role of Second Norn. I still haven't grown to love this Ring production as I did that of Mr Castorf. As I said, you can see it on a streaming service and make up your own mind. Simone Young's conducting was definitely a feature although I don't think she has got the full measure of the Bayreuth pit. She certainly had the measure of the orchestra and performers. Every one of them to whom I spoke had nothing but praise for her expertise and respect for both the music, musicians and singers.

"While not usually a great fan of *Siegfried*, Klaus Florian Vogt's performance lifted the entire opera for me. Sung confidently and with great beauty, he did not flag throughout, even when joined by the awakened Brünnhilde. I later met him at dinner and learned that he was staying in his motor home with his wife. Alexandra Steiner. She was playing the Woodbird and participated in a Society zoom for us last year."



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.

WAGNER – HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

Part One by Terence Watson

“Winckelmann consciously constructed a new style of German. His first writings show an educational and reforming purpose, expressed through a new use of language: it clarified in order to be interpretative, whereas previously it had been largely rhetorical”

David Irwin Ed. 1972
Winckelmann Writings on Art

I'm writing this reminiscence of a recent trip, the main purpose of which was to share in the celebrations of Anton Bruckner's 200th anniversary in Linz, after returning from Simone Young's and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's continuing triumphant presentations of The Ring Cycle, this time *Die Walküre*, with a cast of impressive singers. Since most of the Wagner Society in NSW's members were present on Sunday 17 November (judging by the people I recognised in the almost packed hall), I need not say more about the performance than that it was a sensorially exciting and musically rewarding experience and richly deserved the standing ovation.

Apropos my topic, it proved again that Wagner is “Here,” in Oz from Bendigo to Brisbane in 2023, from Perth (WASO's 2023 Richard Wagner *Die Walküre*: Act I) to Melbourne (MSO's 2024 *Tristan und Isolde* Prelude and *Liebestod*), and of course Simone Young and the SSO's magnificent 2023 concert performance of *Das Rheingold*, and *Siegfried* already announced in their 2025 program.

On the way to Linz, I spent a week in London attending plays and musicals, as well as revisiting some of my favourite places. The Wagner connection appeared in the British Museum, which I had visited primarily for the ancient Greek and Roman (and, which was new to me) the Etruscan exhibitions. Ancient Greek exhibits always awaken memories for me of the Graecophile Wagner, since, from his childhood,

during which he had to learn ancient Greek (and Latin) and Greek literatures, through his adolescence, when the powerful element of Panhellenism was still surging through German culture. He was, though, generally dismissive of the significance of ancient Rome, which empire he considered too militaristic and in artistic. His fascination with ancient Greece was further cultivated by his Uncle Adolph, himself an adept translator from ancient Greek. During his time in Dresden, he also visited, along with all the famous names of the period in German culture, history, etc. the wonderful collection of ancient Greek sculptures (mostly plaster, but some marble, copies) in the *Skulpturensammlung* housed in the *Semperbau am Zwinger*.

This captivation of the German cultural imagination can largely be traced to Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) and his 1764 *History of Ancient Art*. His 1755, based on his own knowledge of Greek literature and his new research materials, *Thoughts on the imitation of Greek works in Painting and sculpture*, impressed most readers in Germany (and France and England when it was translated) with its content and style. His fame made it inevitable that one of his dicta from the book became a standard benchmark for cultural aspiration in German states: “[t]he one way for us to become great, perhaps inimitable, is by imitating the ancients.” David Irwin notes that Winckelmann deliberately cultivated a clear and accessible writing style in part to ensure his views were understood and influential: “Winckelmann consciously constructed a new style of German. His first writings show an educational and reforming purpose, expressed through a new use of language: it clarified in order to be interpretative, whereas previously it had been largely rhetorical” [David Irwin Ed. 1972 *Winckelmann Writings on Art*]. We could compare Winckelmann's commitment to informed, clear, and considered writing with Wagner's generally rushed, often unclear, opinionated, and tortuous language. Winckelmann's work remained influential in German long enough for Wagner to have read his works, and discussed him with Uncle Adolph and friends, and apparently to own his collected works [“Wagner appears to have possessed his *Collected Works* (published in 12 vols, between 1825 and 1829)” [Cosima Wagner *Diaries* 1977 Trans. Geoffrey Skelton, Vol. 1, page 1017, note 10 February 1869]. Yet another unexplored influence on Wagner by a distinguished predecessor, whose influence he does not acknowledge.

After musing on the links between ancient Greece and Wagner's various responses to its culture, and the imitation of its literature and art in his time, I wandered into the European exhibition to refresh some university memories of mediaeval history, and was rewarded with an unexpected Wagner connection: 13th century Tristram Tiles (left):



Tristan Tiles: 13th century; Lead-glazed earthenware floor tile with inlaid design; (Photo: Andreas Praefcke)

King Marke on his throne. 2. Tristan playing triangular harp before the sick King Marke. 3. Tristan Embraces King Marke (no, Marke is not poking his tongue out!). 4. Cornish barons lamenting that the King of Ireland will take their sons as tribute.

Apparently, they were excavated from Chertsey Abbey!! However, they might have been intended for one of King Henry III's palaces. Isolde does not appear in these, although some websites show tiles with Iseult and Tristram together.

“Careful examination of the Tristan tiles from Chertsey revealed that the scenes adhere closely to the twelfth-century Tristan romance as told by the troubadour poet, Thomas of Britain. Thomas’s version of Tristan’s tale focuses on Tristan’s adventures and his demonstration of courtly virtues rather than the hero’s affair with Mark’s wife, Iseult (Isolde). The scene of Tristan and King Mark’s embrace takes place as Tristan departs to slay the Irish knight Morhaut “[https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=32225].

How differently do modern productions of the artwork present the figures in this story to us! A production with costumes and settings in the style of the tiles would seem quaintly anachronistic to us now.

From London, I travelled to Munich. My only theatre experience there was a short opera by Carl Orff, *Der Mond*, of which I knew nothing, except that it was to be performed in the Cuvilliés Theatre, a wonderfully over the top Baroque theatre. Fortunately for me, it was a modern, not baroque, opera. It turns out to be based on a tale collected by the Brothers Grimm. Orff seems to have little regard for Wagner, despite hearing his first opera in 1909—Wagner’s *The flying Dutchman*. Orff did, though, formulate a concept of *elementare Musik*, which appears to build on Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and shares similar building blocks: tone, dance, poetry, image, design, and theatrical gesture, or movement. The Grimm Brothers being another connection with Wagner, I think, since their tales about Sleeping Beauty and the Fool Who Knew No Fear were intertwined into The Ring Cycle.

Der Mond features four brothers who leave their land with no moon and discover a land with a moon, and decide to steal it. When they return home with it, they each decide they wanted their quarter for themselves. They end up dead, but St Peter takes pity on them and returns them to life on the condition that they put the moon back together for a portion of a month. A nice didactic story for children. Orff produced some lovely, relatively straightforward, music for it (not that I want to rush out and buy a copy!). The set was beautiful. A kind of Indonesian cutout forest from their Shadow theatre style, but in 3D, and on a revolving set. The set was white, but often bathed in coloured light to indicate action (e.g., when the brothers fight) or mood. The production featured a young cast and orchestra, with a young female conductor who kept the ensemble together very precisely. I gather that it was produced in coordination with the local arts and

music university. The silliness of the story gave the director many chances to have the characters perform very physically—dancing, acrobatics, chasing each other, even doing a vaudeville routine with their four hats. All the costumes were grey, producing a very monochrome aesthetic, even with the odd bursts of coloured lights. From my front row seat, I enjoyed the verve of the performers, some of whom had impressive voices, and, I hope, will go on to a decent career.

“The painted wood carvings and other tier fittings of the Cuvilliés Theatre had been removed to safety in 1943 and they are all that survive of the original theatre. In 1956 they were presented to the Bavarian Administration of State-owned Palaces, Gardens and Lakes, which restored them over the next two years and reassembled them in a new building near the Apothecary Courtyard in the Residence. The Cuvilliés Theatre – also known as the Old Residence Theatre, to distinguish it from the new, post-war building...” [<https://www.residenz-muenchen.de/englisch/cuv/index.htm>] As far as I can tell, there is no Wagner connection to this theatre, though almost next door, at the State Theatre, *Tristan, Meistersinger, Rheingold, Walküre*, were premiered at King Ludwig II’s orders. Much later, *Die Feen* was premiered on 29 June 1888.

It is, though, easy to wander around central Munich and find traces of Wagner. After Ludwig called him to Munich in May 1864, he lived in the Villa Pellet, on the eastern shore of Lake Starnberg, rented for him by Ludwig. Ludwig then made a larger villa at 21 Briennerstrasse available to Wagner

“How differently do modern productions of the artwork present the figures in this story to us! A production with costumes and settings in the style of the tiles would seem quaintly anachronistic to us now.”



Cuvilliés Theatre—III built in 1751-55 by Elector Maximilian Joseph as his “new opera house.” Originally reserved exclusively for members of court, the theatre is close to the Residence. Many lavish opera productions were mounted here, including the first performances of Mozart’s *Idomeneo*, in 1781. The building housing the theatre was destroyed on 18 March 1944.

"It is easy to imagine Wagner in the heyday of his relationship with Ludwig being escorted through the magnificent Residenz to a private audience with the king, as well as he and Cosima walking through the old city, the Residenz gardens, eating at fashionable restaurants, and attending the theatres in the city, especially the National Theatre for rehearsals and premieres of his works."

and his "amanuensis" and "housekeeper" Cosima von Bülow. Wagner spent many months cultivating his friendship with the young king, and trying to manipulate his financial and artistic policies in his own favour, while trying to keep secret from the king his relationship with the wife of the talented conductor and composer. This behaviour quickly earned him the antipathy of many of the court officials who were already trying to curb the young king's extravagances, and resented the time and attention paid to the upstart revolutionary, whose exile from Saxony and other states was only fully lifted in 1862. Some of the press were also antagonistic for the same reasons, as well as for Wagner's supposed secret Roman Catholicism, as "evidenced" in Tannhäuser, and then his deceitful behaviour to the king about Cosima. In December 1865, they were forced to leave for Switzerland, and another of Wagner's many houses, Triebtschen, again paid for by Ludwig.

It is easy to imagine Wagner in the heyday of his relationship with Ludwig being escorted through the magnificent Residenz to a private audience with the king, as well as he and Cosima walking through the old city, the Residenz gardens, eating at fashionable restaurants, and attending the theatres in the city, especially the *National Theatre* for rehearsals and premieres of his works. The premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*, on 10 June 1865, was, ironically, conducted by Hans von Bülow.

It is similarly easy to imagine Wagner in Vienna. He visited a number of times. The first time was to accompany one of his adolescent heroes: "I was especially captivated by Count Vincenz Tyskiewitsch, a man of exceptionally powerful physique and manly features, who impressed me by a combination of noble bearing and calm self-assurance I had not encountered before. To see a man of such regal quality...made me realize at once my foolishness at having worshipped the

ludicrously decked-out little rowdies from our student world" (the *Burschenschafter*) [ML 59]. When Tyskiewitsch came to leave Leipzig in summer 1832 to seek asylum in Galicia because of his role in the 26 May 1831 Ostrołęka uprising by Poles against their Russian overlords, Wagner decided to accompany him on part of his journey, and then to continue to Vienna. And then, it seems, forgot entirely about this special friend.

Wagner remained in Vienna for some 6 weeks. After recovering from sunburn acquired during the summer walk, he "could again devote [him]self to worldly pleasures," though he does not tell us whether or not there were other "pleasures" than cultural. He reports that he had an inspiring or productive stay in Vienna—"I went to the theatre, listened to [Johann, the elder] Strauss, made excursions and generally indulged myself.... The impressions of musical and theatrical life were certainly very stimulating, and Vienna remained for a long time my idea of creativity rooted in the originality of the people" [ML 62].

Performances of his artworks appeared in the 1850s: 28 August 1857—Tannhäuser by the *Theater in der Josefstadt*, the third opera company in Vienna at their summer theatre the *Thaliatheater* outside the city and revived during the Theatre's winter season in the city; 19 August 1858, *Lohengrin* opened the new season at the Imperial Opera's *Kärntner-Tor* theatre; at the same theatre - *Tannhäuser*, on 19 November 1859; 9 December 1860, *The Flying Dutchman*. It seemed then, that it was likely to be the place for the premiere of his latest work *Tristan und Isolde*.

End of Part 1 Part 2 will be in the March 2025 issue

NEWS FROM GRANGE OPERA

Starting in 2026, Grange Park Opera undertakes the mammoth feat of staging the complete Ring Cycle across four successive years. Founder of Grange Park Opera, **Wasfi Kani** CBE said, "We've been trying out Wagner for some time now - in our acoustic, in our pit and in audience reaction. Emboldened by the success of *Die Walküre* (2017), *Flying Dutchman* (2022) and *Tristan und Isolde* (2023), we took a deep collective breath and decided the time is ripe for the biggest challenge of all: his Ring Cycle. It is a hugely exciting development that we hope will move us to the next level of recognition. So, buckle up, Wagnerians!"

Conductors for the cycle will include **Anthony Negus**, one of the leading Wagnerian exponents of our day. The Ring Cycle will be directed and designed by **Charles Edwards**, acclaimed last summer for his *Tristan und Isolde*. Edwards "...doesn't think of *The Ring* as a tragic, upsetting, world-ending misery. So much of it is funny. Wagner

had a (usually ironic) sense of humour. He was the greatest, revolutionary real theatre-maker and he loved the idea of smashing things up to re-make them."

In October 2024 Grange Park Opera and the English National Opera announced a new partnership which will start on June 14, 2025 with a production of Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa* with the ENO Orchestra under former Music Director Martyn Brabbins. Sir David Pountney directs.

"It's a big deal that the Orchestra of ENO is collaborating with us next summer," said Grange Park Opera's founder, Wasfi Kani CBE, in an official press release. "We'll be the only summer opera season with a proper opera orchestra, and we plan to continue the collaboration into the future . . ."



For more information visit:
www.grangeparkopera.co.uk and follow the social media channels for regular news updates:
 X (formerly Twitter) @grangeparkopera
 Facebook grangeparkoperasurrey /
 Instagram @grangeparkoper

DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG



Melbourne's World-Heritage-listed **Royal Exhibition Building** is to be transformed into a 'Shakespeare's Globe' inspired performance space opera house for four fully staged performances of Melbourne Opera's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* on 16, 18, 20 & 22 February 2025.

Conducted by **Anthony Negus**, directed by **Suzanne Chaundy**, designed by **Andrew Bailey**. Featuring a wonderful cast of Australian singers including WSNSW sponsored **Warwick Fyfe** as Hans Sachs, **James Egglestone**, **Christopher Hillier**, **Robert Macfarlane**, **Lee Abrahmsen** and WSNSW sponsored **Deborah Humble**.

For details:

<https://melbourneopera.com/project/die-meistersinger-von-nurnberg/>

Melbourne Opera: Now in its third decade of operatic performances in Melbourne and beyond, Melbourne Opera has regularly presented works by Richard Wagner. Prior to its groundbreaking presentation of the epic complete Ring Cycle in Bendigo in 2023, the company has also presented *Das Rheingold* (2021), *Die Walküre* (2022), *Siegfried* (2022, concert) *The Flying Dutchman* (2019) *Tristan und Isolde* (2018), *Lohengrin* (2017), *Tannhäuser* (2016), and *Rienzi* (2013, concert).

ALEX ROSS ON DIE MEISTERSINGER - EXTRACT FROM THE REST IS NOISE 2007

Of the Wagner operas, *Die Meistersinger* is the one most rooted in some semblance of historical reality. Its setting is a recognisable version of Nuremberg in the sixteenth century, at a time when guilds of Mastersingers were at their height across Germany. The opera's lead character, the shoemaker-poet Hans Sachs, is a well-documented figure who lived from 1494 to 1676. Nothing supernatural happens over the course of the opera, although there is talk of a mischievous imp setting off the riot at the end of Act II. No potions are drunk,

no wanderers cross the centuries. There are certainly no gods. Yet in its own way *Meistersinger* is as much as a mythic fable as any of the Wagner operas. The chief myth here is Germany, whose spirit Sachs embodies and whose mission he sets forth at the end. That mixture of fact and myth proved, in the end, more politically combustible than any other Wagner creation. Not by accident did *Meistersinger* become a propaganda pageant in Nazi Germany, a fixture of the yearly Party Rally in Nuremberg.

Wagner first sketched out the scenario of *Meistersinger* in the summer of 1845 — a productive period that also yielded a prose draft for *Lohengrin* and early ideas for *Parsifal*. At the time, he was Kapellmeister in Dresden, and was chafing against the conservatism of the Saxon court and of the wider musical community. *Meistersinger*



Lithograph from Hartmann Schedel's famous 1493 Nuremberg Chronicle



POSTAGE STAMP ISSUED FOR 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF HANS SACHS

Wagner's autobiography *Mein Leben* (My Life) described the genesis of *Die Meistersinger*. Taking the waters at Marienbad in 1845 he began reading Georg Gottfried Gervinus' History of German Poetry. This work included chapters on mastersong and on Hans Sachs.

I had formed a particularly vivid picture of Hans Sachs and the mastersingers of Nuremberg. I was especially intrigued by the institution of the Marker and his function in rating mastersongs ... I conceived during a walk a comic scene in which the popular artisan-poet, by hammering upon his cobbler's last, gives the Marker, who is obliged by circumstances to sing in his presence, his comeuppance for previous pedantic misdeeds during official singing contests, by inflicting upon him a lesson of his own.

Gervinus' History of German Poetry also mentions a poem by the real-life Hans Sachs on the subject of Protestant reformer Martin Luther, called "Die Wittenbergisch Nachtigall" (The Wittenberg Nightingale). The opening lines for this poem, addressing the Reformation, were later used by Wagner in Act III Scene 5 when the crowd acclaims Sachs: "Wacht auf, es nahet gen den Tag; ich hör' singen im grünen Hag ein wönigliche Nachtigall." (Awake, the dawn is drawing near; I hear, singing in the green grove, a blissful nightingale)

"Awake! the dawn is drawing near; I hear a blissful nightingale singing in the green grove, its voice rings through hill and valley; night is sinking in the west, the day arises in the east, the ardent red glow of morning approaches through the gloomy clouds."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Meistersinger_von_N%C3%BCrnberg

essentially becomes an allegory for Wagner's own struggles, as a gifted, headstrong young singer-poet contends with the rule-bound small-mindedness of the local Mastersinger guild. From the outset, Hans Sachs was slated to play a mediating role, supporting the young poet while directing him with the wisdom of experience. Sachs is also the conduit for meditations on the nature of German art and its role in binding together the divided German peoples. The phrase "holy German art" was always intended to cap his closing monologue, although its meaning shifted as the scenario and libretto evolved.The final monologue took on a more belligerent, nationalist tone at a late stage, with lasting consequences for the opera's subsequent career as a political symbol.

In the score, *Meistersinger* is designated an *Oper*, or opera — the only one of Wagner's works after *Lohengrin* so described. (The *Ring* is a *Bühnenfestspiel*, or stage festival play; *Tristan* is a *Handlung*, an action; *Parsifal* is *Bühnenweihfestspiel*, a stage-consecration festival play.) It begins with a *Vorspiel*, or prelude, that behaves like the traditional operatic overture that Wagner seemed to have abandoned with the *Lohengrin* prelude. One hears an array of themes in contrasting moods, anticipating characters and situations in the work to come. At the same time, the prelude is a formidable symphonic construction that might have been intended to silence those who dismissed Wagner as an amateur, dilettante, or inept avant-gardist.

Act I. The opera proper opens in St. Katherine's Church in Nuremberg, with the congregation singing a chorale at the end of Mass. Walther von Stolzing, a visiting knight, approaches Eva Pogner, daughter of the local goldsmith, and asks if she is engaged. It turns out that the local mastersinger guild is holding a song contest the next day, with Eva's hand in marriage offered as the prize. (She has the right to refuse, but her father insists on her marrying a mastersinger.) Love having been kindled between him and Eva, Walther sets about learning the complicated rules of the guild, enlisting help from David, an apprentice. The mastersingers gather for the contest, and Walther encounters his chief rival, Beckmesser, and his future mentor, Hans Sachs. The Trial Song that Walther offers is mercilessly dissected by Beckmesser, who serves as Merker, or judge. The complaints he offers — there is no clear beginning, no clear end, shapeless phrases, not a trace of melody — are obvious echoes of the criticism that Wagner encountered throughout his career. Sachs, intrigued by Walther's free, original style, tries to intervene, but the masters will hear none of it, and reject the newcomer out of hand.

Act II begins with scenes involving the subsidiary characters: David, his beloved Magdalena, Pogner, and Eva. Sachs, at work in his cobbler's shop, sings the first of his great solo turns, the *Flieder-Monolog* (lilac-tree monologue), in which he ponders the unconventional beauty of Walther's song. Eva comes to consult with Sachs, indicating that she dreads the prospect of Beckmesser winning the contest. She'd rather Sachs himself win — a proposition that Sachs dismisses, though as a lonely widower he

is wistful at the thought. As night falls, Beckmesser arrives to serenade Eva, who avoids the situation by having Magdalena pose at her window. She and Walther resolve to elope. Sachs, hammering at his shoes, deliberately undermines Beckmesser's singing, just as Beckmesser had undermined Walther's. Events tilt toward chaos when David sees Beckmesser serenading Magdalena and attacks him. A general uproar ensues, in the middle of which Sachs manages to separate Eva and Walther, foiling their plan to escape. He is not opposed to their attachment, but he wants them to be part of the community. In a haunting epilogue, the Night-Watchman makes his way through the town: "Beware of ghosts and spooks, that no evil spirit ensnare your soul!"

The great, brooding prelude to **Act III** anticipates the mood of Sachs's Wahn-Monolog in the first scene, in which he bemoans the "madness" that overtook the town the previous night. It was some malicious sprite at work, he decides, on the eve of Johannistag, or Midsummer Day. Not for the first time one feels a kinship with Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, even if Wagner noticeably lacks the light touch. Walther stops by, and Sachs guides him toward the composition of a new song, the Prize Song, which will pay more heed to the Mastersingers' guidelines while preserving the singer's own voice. You make your own rule, Sachs says, and then you follow it. Then Beckmesser enters, and spies a poem in Sachs's handwriting, not realizing that it is a transcription of Walther's new song. What is Sachs up to — is he entering the contest, too? Sachs says he isn't, and offers the text to Beckmesser as a gift. He calculates, correctly, that Beckmesser will make a hash of it. In the following scene, Eva, Walther, David, and Magdalena gather at Sachs's and sort out various misunderstandings. The ensemble sing a transcendent Quintet that tends to win over even the Wagner sceptics, like James Joyce.

The enormously long final scene takes place in the Festival Meadow. After a parade of town guilds, a Dance of the Apprentices, and a Procession of the Masters, Sachs is hailed as the presiding spirit of the city. The entire company sings the chorus "Wach' auf, es nahet gen den Tag" ("Wake up, the day is night"), based on a text by the historical Sachs. When the contest begins, Beckmesser makes an idiot of himself, spluttering nonsense as he struggles to adapt the Walther-Sachs text to his music. He tries to blame Sachs for the failure, whereupon Sachs reveals that the poem is actually Walther's. General curiosity gives Walther a chance to enter the contest unscheduled, and he conquers all doubters with his Prize Song, "Morgenlich leuchtend im rosigen Schein" ("Glowing in dawn's rosy fingers"). For a moment, the headstrong Walther threatens to reject the guild's offer of membership, but Sachs convinces him otherwise in his closing monologue, the eternal problematic "Verachtet mir die Meister nicht?" ("Scorn not the masters"). After Sachs sings in praise of "holy German art," general joy prevails. .

<https://www.therestisnoise.com/2013/05/die-meistersinger-von-n%C3%BCrnberg.html>

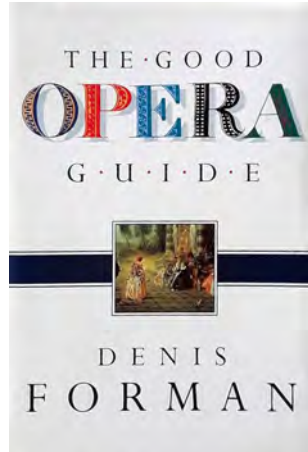
“MEISTERSINGER IS THE ACCEPTABLE FACE OF WAGNER”

DENIS FORMAN

Extract from Denis Forman's Good Opera Guide (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000). © Denis Forman

Meistersinger is the acceptable face of Wagner. There are no hang-ups with sex and sin, no power-mad dwarfs, no sprouting staves, no swans and not a holy grail in sight. Even the racial propaganda mentioned in the notes above can be played down to zero effect except for the unavoidable and disagreeable final outburst about the ethnic cleansing of the arts.The story is simple, strong and rather slow. Its strength lies in Walter's struggle and success in pushing romantic or impressionist art in the face of the sort of hatred that always springs up amongst the arts establishment in the face of anything that is good or new.

Unlike *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and co, the characters in *Meistersinger* are recognisably human. Sachs, of course, sensible, wise, a little radical and clever with it, wins you over pretty soon, although after listening to the Wahn monologue we can see a club bore in the making and in his final utterances about German art a potential fascist. His sudden fantasy of winning the contest himself and taking Eva to be his wife gives him an extra dimension (and her too, for why does she suggest it?) This is not the sort of stuff you find in Verdi or Puccini with their raging black and white passions. It shows both characters with a genuine tenderness for each other and so when Walter enters in the shoe-fitting scene and we rejoice with Eva in her cry of ecstasy, we also feel a stab of pain for Sachs. Walter is a good standard romantic knight and a top-class artist to boot, but he does not win our hearts as does Eva. Beckmesser is less successful, partly perhaps because Wagner was keen to use him as an agent to vent his spite. He is too near a caricature to be taken seriously and too essential to the plot to be just a witless clown. It is an uneasy role which seldom comes off in performance. Pogner, on the other hand, is in kilter with real life: one



meets at least one Pogner on every respectable borough council, and long may they pontificate - civic do-gooders, decent through and through.

But the great glory of *Meistersinger* is its music. The rich sonorities of the Masters' two themes full of pomp and circumstance fill the ear in a highly satisfactory way, the Prize Song beguiles as do few other songs, prize or otherwise. There are some great set pieces - Walter's account of his learning processes ('Am stillen Herd'), the Schusterlied, the last act choruses, the Prize Song itself and above all the Act III quintet which for sheer invention stands alone in Wagner's huge operatic output in the same way as does Beethoven's Act I quartet in his single opera *Fidelio*. The pastiche pieces are immaculate - the opening church scene, David's verses and Pogner's address. With such variety and apparently endless flow of melody, it comes as a bit of a surprise to discover that the use of thematic material in *Meistersinger* is very economical. The two Masters themes do a tremendous amount of work, as does the Prize Song. These three plus another six or seven much shorter mottos generate the music over most pages of the score, set pieces excepted.

The music of *Meistersinger* is closely knit there is nothing flabby about it and although perhaps twenty minutes too long, it is never really boring, as are patches in *The Ring*. It has no vulgarities, as has *Tannhäuser*, is not pretentious like *Parsifal*, and what pomposity it has is delivered with more than a whiff of send-up.

So it's three hearty cheers for *Meistersinger*, a noble life-enhancing work which, although a long sit-down, can give you one of the happiest and most rewarding of evenings in the opera house.

PRELUDE OR OVERTURE?

One exceptional feature about *The Mastersingers* is to be found in its overture. Wagner had already discarded the word 'overture' by the time he came to compose it in 1862. Some seventeen years earlier, the instrumental opening of *Lohengrin* had firmly established the name of 'prelude'. What Wagner disliked most about the typical overture was its empty, tub-thumping character, usually rustled up after the opera had been composed, its opening musical clichés followed by a motley parade of the opera's most singable tunes, and finally some closing gestures — dramatic for tragedy, sprightly for comedy. *Lohengrin* had ushered in a new age for the overture. The work actually depends on the glowing sound-world with which it opens, where the prelude moves us to picture the distant hero's magical arrival, his eventual, majestic appearance, and his quietly sad departure at the end. Yet the overture — sorry, prelude — to *The Mastersingers* was itself exceptional because it was the one occasion when Wagner actually completed it before writing the opera.

All the uniqueness of *The Mastersingers* can be seen crystallised into this prelude — a complete symphonic picture that is a miracle of counterpoint and a marvel of orchestration. Five main themes appear in the prelude, and at the end, three of them are drawn together — the Prize Song theme, the pompous opening theme and the fanfare-like 'long' theme that Wagner copied from an actual tune from the 16th-century mastersingers themselves. The prelude presents the whole story in advance, and it does so in music that mixes 16th-century counterpoint with some of J.S. Bach's best-known procedures, binding them all together in a kind of symphonic development that was unequalled in the nineteenth century.

From beginning to end, *The Mastersingers* stands out in the history of opera — and in the horizon of Wagner's work — not just because it is different, but because its genius is unrivalled.

Excerpt from an article by Heath Lees in the Wagner Society of New Zealand's Newsletter, February, 2018.



Franz Betz, the first Hans Sachs, 1868

WAGNER LINKED THE HISTORICAL HANS SACHS STORY WITH HIS OWN PET PROPAGANDA LINES, SUCH AS:

1. Art is/should be about the most important thing in life.
2. 'German art is in danger of being taken over by foreigners and Jews like that frightful Meyerbeer.'
3. 'It's about time that the establishment gave a decent hearing to modern music. Music like mine, for instance.'
4. 'Music critics who don't like my stuff are small-minded malicious bastards, especially that Hanslick who writes in the Vienna Sunday Times.'

Extract from Denis Forman's Good Opera Guide

WAHN, WAHN

Hans Sachs' great monologue *Wahn, Wahn*

Synopsis: Brooding over the riot of the previous night in which his apprentice David was involved, Sachs philosophises over the madness that is rampant throughout the world. He tries to figure out how the madness that causes such things as war and riots can instead be harnessed to produce good things.

ACT 3 SCENE 1

SACHS:

Madness! Madness!
Everywhere madness!
Wherever I look searchingly
in city and world chronicles,
to seek out the reason
why, till they draw blood,
people torment and flay each other
in useless, foolish anger!
No-one has reward
or thanks for it:
driven to flight,
he thinks he is hunting;
hears not his own cry of pain;
when he digs into his own flesh
he thinks he is giving himself pleasure!
Who will give it its name?
It is the old madness,
without which nothing can happen,
nothing whatever!
If it halts somewhere in its course
it is only to gain new strength in sleep:
suddenly it awakens,
then see who can master it!
How peacefully with its staunch customs,
contented in deed and work,
lies, in the middle of Germany,
my dear Nuremberg!
*(He gazes before him,
filled with a deep and peaceful joy)*
But one evening late,
to prevent a mishap
caused by youthful ardour,
a man knows not what to do;
a cobbler in his shop
plucks at the thread of madness:
how soon in alleys and streets
it begins to rage!
Man, woman, journeyman, and child
fall upon each other as if crazed and blind;
and if madness prevails,
it must now rain blows,
with cuts, blows, and thrashings
to quench the fire of anger.



Michael Volle as Hans Sachs Bayreuth 2017



Lithograph from Hartmann Schedel's famous 1493 Nuremberg Chronicle

God knows how that befell!
A goblin must have helped:
a glow-worm could not find its mate;
it set the trouble in motion.
It was the elder-tree: Midsummer Eve!
But now has come Midsummer Day!
Now let us see how Hans Sachs manages
finely to guide the madness

so as to perform a nobler work:
for if madness won't leave us in peace
even here in Nuremberg,
then let it be in the service of such works
as are seldom successful in plain
activities
and never so without a touch of
madness.

DIE MEISTERSINGER ACT 3 SCENE 5 HANS SACHS'S FINAL WORDS:

Scorn not the Masters, I bid you,
and honour their art!
What speaks high in their praise
fell richly in your favour.
Not to your ancestors, however worthy,
not to your coat-of-arms, spear, or sword,
but to the fact that you are a poet,
that a Master has admitted you -
to that you owe today your highest
happiness.
So, think back to this with gratitude:
how can the art be unworthy
which embraces such prizes?
That our Masters have cared for it
rightly in their own way,
cherished it truly as they thought best,
that has kept it genuine:
if it did not remain aristocratic as of old,
when courts and princes blessed it,
in the stress of evil years
it remained German and true;
and if it flourished nowhere

but where all is stress and strain,
you see how high it remained in honour
-what more would you ask of the Masters?
Beware! Evil tricks threaten us:
if the German people and kingdom should
one day decay,
under a false, foreign rule
soon no prince would understand his
people;
and foreign mists with foreign vanities
they would plant in our German land;
what is German and true none would know,
if it did not live in the honour of German
Masters.
Therefore I say to you:
honour your German Masters,
then you will conjure up good spirits!
And if you favour their endeavours,
even if the Holy Roman Empire
should dissolve in mist,
for us there would yet remain
holy German Art!

During the Nazi era, the Nazis used the final address of Sachs as an excuse to promote German chauvinism and aggression and, unfortunately, many people since the second world war have misconstrued this final speech as a hymn to German supremacy and a justification for Germans to oppress "inferior races". However, if you know German and read the words of the libretto or read a literal translation, you will realise that no such sentiments are in Sachs' exhortation to Walther and the citizens of Nuremberg.

"In my view, to misuse *Die Meistersinger* as a prop for complacent, arrogant nationalism is to betray the grossest ignorance of its true nature. One would have to be deaf, blind, and utterly unperceptive to take this sublime depiction of human gaiety, with its utopian potential, and read a pogrom or a Party rally into it. Any attempt to force the work into an ideological mould is bound to be a distortion."

Wolfgang Wagner in his autobiography *Acts*

In *Die Meistersinger*, innovation wins out over blind pedantry and resistance to change. This is the actual message of the opera.

Robert Berger
(Quora.com)

A MEISTERSINGER WITHOUT NUREMBERG - 'NEW BAYREUTH' 1956 -7



Act I Bayreuth 1956



Act II Traditional Bayreuth design



Act III set model of first Bayreuth staging 1888



Act II 1956



Act II 1957

When the Bayreuth Festival reopened in 1951 with **Wieland Wagner's** landmark production of *Parsifal*, the director's principal artistic aim was to rid his grandfather's operas of any references to German nationalism and its disturbing links to the Third Reich. Year after year, Wieland applied his sanitising approach to all his new productions. The results created a style that, at first, met with strong audience and critical resistance, but ultimately came to be accepted as the preferred way to stage Richard Wagner's operas in the 20th century.

When it came time to stage *Die Meistersinger*, Wieland's directorial style met its greatest resistance. This was an opera that was rooted in German history and tradition and set in one of the most important and historic places in the nation. The city had not only been the centre of the German Renaissance and home of painter Albrecht Dürer, but also the national shrine of the Nazis who held their annual party congresses there from 1933 to 1938. The city was also the birthplace of the 1935 "Nuremberg Laws" that deprived German Jews of their civic rights. Due to its strategic importance, it was heavily bombed during the war and largely destroyed. It was also the seat of the postwar tribunal for war crimes. Wieland had to somehow eliminate all of the recent negative connotations in order to present the work in a new light.

The conservative faction at Bayreuth always feared the inevitable time when Wieland Wagner would decide to mount a New Bayreuth-style production of the beloved, and very German, *Meistersinger*. In 1951, Wieland Wagner wrote in his essay "Tradition and Innovation" that "*Die Meistersinger* calls for a certain naturalism, imposed by a historically fixed time, a geographical place, and human beings of flesh and blood." The director's earlier point of view, however, was not too much consolation, especially for those who had actually experienced one of Wieland's recent productions. During the months before the 1956 summer unveiling the very worst was expected.

At its premiere, the first act of the new production was greeted with much approval. Nuremberg's beloved St. Katharine's Church, the fabled meeting place of the Meistersinger singing school (which was completely gutted by fire during the Allied air-raids of World War II) had been faithfully and lovingly recreated. When the curtain rose on Act II, however, the smiles that had greeted the start of the opera disappeared. Instead of the expected narrow street, Wieland offered an empty stage with a kidney-shaped performing space (perhaps a giant footprint, after all Hans Sachs is a cobbler), adorned by a giant ball of leaves and flowers that hung above the characters with a magical-realism defiance of the laws of gravity. The linden and elder trees in Wagner's own stage directions, and in Sachs's monologue were nowhere to be found. Neither could one find Hans Sachs's shop, nor Veit Pogner's house.

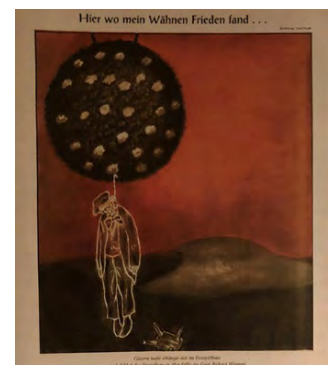
Act III was the unkindest cut of all. Instead of the familiar meadow with the visible ramparts and towering spires of the city in

"I have never come across an audience with so much hatred, so much anger, such a thirst for revenge. They take everything personally. It makes you a little bit scared, and it's really quite terrifying."

(Lance Ryan on the audiences at Bayreuth)

"I was bowled over. It was the year after Wieland Wagner had died; to be able to see his productions was a total knock-out. These bare stagings, where everything was done with lighting. The light changed with the music, and the shadows and patterns seemed as archetypal as the music itself. Nobody had done that on the stage before. I thought it was extraordinary and wonderful."

(Patrick Carnegy to The Guardian)



A caricature showing the spirit of Richard Wagner committing suicide by hanging himself from the famous Wieland Wagner floral ball. Just another example showing how detested this production was by the conservative factions at Bayreuth, and the extent that many went to mock its innovation.

"Act III was the unkindest cut of all. Instead of the familiar meadow with the visible ramparts and towering spires of the city in the distance, a section of a steeply-raked stadium, filled with a uniformly dressed chorus, was revealed. The main action, which was highly stylised, took place on a circular performance area. There was no procession of guilds, or coloured streamers. The audience was shocked."



Act III 1956

the distance, a section of a steeply-raked stadium, filled with a uniformly dressed chorus, was revealed. The main action, which was highly stylised, took place on a circular performance area. There was no procession of guilds, or coloured streamers. The audience was shocked. Immediately the word spread that Wieland Wagner had staged a "Meistersinger ohne Nürnberg;" a Meistersinger without Nuremberg. Of course, Nuremberg, as Wagner knew it, was no more. It was too much for the German post-War public to take. For the first time in its history, there was booing at the Festspielhaus.

In the days that followed the German press lambasted the new production. The Bavarian Justice Ministry deemed Wieland's work a scandal and argued that the Festival should no longer receive public financial support. The right-wing German Party even went on to suggest that the Nazi label "Entartete Kunst" (Decadent Art) be resurrected to discredit the new production.

Taking into account what Wieland Wagner was trying to achieve, this production was an artistic triumph. By destroying the expectations of the right-wing Wagnerites, the pre-War staging orthodoxy embraced by the Nazis was abolished. As a result, this production ranks as Wieland's most overtly political rumination on Richard



Act III 1957

Wagner's work. The production played for six seasons, and as was Wieland's wont, he constantly altered and developed his ideas over the years. Towards the end of the run, interestingly enough, the third act acquired a backdrop with the skyline of Nuremberg.

Ultimately, Wieland caved in. The stark 1956 Act II set went through a transformation. One year later the 1957 Act II set had acquired somewhat of a semblance of a street. The giant footprint, kidney-shaped stage was still there, but the floral ball was raised so it no longer dominated the setting. In addition, abstract Nuremberg buildings were added on either side of the stage.

Also, the much debated third act, which had garnered the title of "The Meistersinger without Nuremberg" went through some changes. Version 2.0., one year later, eliminated the two aisles of steps, although it kept the stadium-like seating where the chorus sat. A chandelier was added to the set, and this gave the decor a much-needed sense of warmth. The pageantry of the pre-War productions remained missing. Arguably the most important change was the addition of Hartmann Schedel's famous lithograph of the city of Nuremberg.

<http://www.wagneroperas.com/index1956meistersinger.html>

IN MEMORIUM

Tony Jones – An Erudite Man - 22 April 1950 to 21 September 2024

It was a stifling sultry day in Bayreuth during the controversial 'Rosalie' Ring. Tony's face when he was served a pork knuckle for lunch was a picture. 'I thought I had ordered a salad', he said devastated and confused.

We mourn the passing of Tony who died on 21 September after a protracted period of dealing with the awful Lewy Body dementia.

Tony was the epitome of a Renaissance Man; a successful businessman, a thinker, an elegant dresser and a supporter of the arts; as a doner, a strategic planner at the Sydney Opera

House, involvement in the Sydney Theatre Company and Sydney Film Festival, a member of the Board of Sydney Dance and as a Committee Member of our Society.

Tony loved the world of opera and, particularly Wagner and it was a delight to watch him respond to the increasing vicissitudes of dealing with German directors at Bayreuth.

We particularly loved his valiant attempts to rationalise the Castor Ring but we recall with affection his enthusiastic responses to the Francesca Zambello Washington Ring and his

incisive musings about the Australian Ring Cycle productions.

After the death of our much loved and admired Jane Mathews, someone asked where does all that intellect and enthusiasm go? The same can be said about the essence of Tony.

Tony, your past colleagues, friends, Julian and Norman will miss your generosity of spirit and we hope you are enjoying Franken Iphöfer Silvaner wines somewhere.

**John Studdert and
Dennis Mather**

A RING WITHOUT BOUNDARIES PART 2

The text of the second half of **Peter Bassett's** talk at the first Brisbane *Ring* Symposium on 2nd December 2023

In our modern digital world, we now function as individuals in a way that earlier generations might find hard to understand. Digital science has become a sort of latter-day *Tarnhelm*. Not only does it transport ideas with unprecedented speed and freedom, but it also creates new human forms - 'cyber-communities'. These communities don't exist in any physical sense, but only in cyber-space. A parallel world now exists, in which people who have never seen each other and are dispersed around the globe, pursue daily relationships, conduct business and create works of art. These are simply communities of minds.

Wagner's dramatic vision and highly expressive music seems to have been waiting for modern technology. His imagination wasn't of the ordinary kind. As a boy, he had had nightmares about inanimate objects such as pieces of furniture coming to life, and he had no difficulty animating the ancient and mythological worlds that he read about. He learnt some Greek, not for scholarly purposes but in order to imagine the heroic figures of antiquity speaking to him in their own voices. He imagined that he actually met and spoke with Shakespeare! He was thirty before he began seriously to study Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* and the Scandinavian myths and *sagas* but, again, he felt that the inhabitants of those legendary landscapes were speaking to him with familiar voices. This sense of 'virtual reality' stayed with him throughout his creative life.

Far from being simply a folk tale or a fairy tale set to music, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is an allegory or, if you like, a parable. And as with all parables, there are deeper meanings beneath the surface. Take, for instance, the all-powerful ring made by Alberich when he steals the Rhinegold and renounces love. That's what the myth says, but, in reality, the golden ring is nothing but - well - a golden ring! It symbolises the power of self-delusion, prejudices, superstitions, and beliefs. Those who possess it are powerless to do anything with it. Alberich has it taken from him by Wotan; Wotan loses it to the giants, and the giant-turned-dragon Fafner can't even use it to protect himself. Brünnhilde loses it to Siegfried-in-the-form-of-Gunther, and Siegfried doesn't *attempt* to use it at all. In fact, he just wants to give it to the Rhinemaidens, until they ridicule him. So, it is a band of gold - nothing more. But what matters is what the characters *think* it represents. A good example is the musical expression of the golden ring as Hagen imagines it. In just four bars this tells us a lot - not about the ring itself but about Hagen as a personification of evil.

Nothing remotely like the *Ring* had existed before in the European operatic tradition, although parts of the story had been used in earlier dramas. In the 16th century, the historical Hans Sachs had written a seven-act tragedy on the legend of Siegfried, and in 1854 Heinrich Dorn (Wagner's rival at Riga and Dresden) composed *Die Nibelungen*, based on the medieval *Nibelungenlied* and featuring Wagner's niece Johanna in the role of Brünnhilde. Even Mendelssohn and Schumann contemplated operas on the subject (although

they didn't pursue them) and, in the 1860s, the French composer Ernest Reyer wrote *Sigurd*, based on the *Nibelungenlied* and the Icelandic Eddas.

Paradoxically, Wagner's ground-breaking drama drew on some of the deepest wellsprings of European culture, and one the first influences on the *Ring* (well beyond the boundaries of Norse and Germanic legends) came from ancient Greek drama, performed outdoors. His original plan was to complete the entire work within three years and then give three performances in a temporary wooden theatre in a meadow near Zürich. The audience would be seated in the open field and, afterwards, the wooden theatre would be pulled down, and that would be that! Needless to say, things didn't work out quite this way! Not three but twenty-six years elapsed between the first sketches and the final notes of the *Ring*.

When Wagner drew on a legend or poem, such as the *Nibelungenlied* or Gottfried's *Tristan* or Wolfram's *Parzival* for his dramatic framework, he then clothed it with metaphysical and philosophical ideas that belonged to quite another age or culture - say, from Feuerbach or Schopenhauer, or Buddhism, or the revolutionary movements of industrial Europe. In this way, he gave the old stories new potency and created wonderfully rich vehicles for musical expression. So, it's a mistake to see the *Ring* as simply northern mythology or a folk tale, or *Parsifal* as simply a romance of the grail. Each has been transformed into something quite new. This is no longer opera as entertainment; this is opera as revelation!

There were biblical influences at work too on the *Ring*. Wagner's views on Christianity were far from orthodox, as can be seen in his embryonic *Jesus of Nazareth* of 1849. But he was capable of using orthodox biblical references when this suited him. He'd been

"Wagner's dramatic vision and highly expressive music seems to have been waiting for modern technology. His imagination wasn't of the ordinary kind. As a boy, he had had nightmares about inanimate objects such as pieces of furniture coming to life, and he had no difficulty animating the ancient and mythological worlds that he read about."



Rosario La Spina as Sigmund, Brisbane 2023

raised in a conventional protestant household and certainly knew his way around the scriptures, leaving copious notes on a copy of the bible that was recovered from his Dresden library. Not surprisingly, these influences also went into the melting pot of ideas when he came to work on the *Ring*.

In Brünnhilde's announcement to Sieglinde that she will bear a son and shall call him Siegfried, we find echoes of the annunciation in Luke's Gospel, in which the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son and will call him Jesus. The Gospel announcement is followed by the Magnificat, in which Mary praises God for exalting her. In *Die Walküre*, Sieglinde exults: *O hehrstes Wunder!* ("O sublime miracle!") And proceeds with her own Magnificat, praising Brünnhilde for being the bearer of such news. In this instance, Siegfried, like Christ, symbolises hope and life amidst hopelessness and decay, and just as Mary fled into Egypt to protect the infant Jesus from the wrath of Herod, so Sieglinde will flee into the forest to protect the unborn Siegfried from the wrath of Wotan. The Christ/Siegfried parallel was certainly in Wagner's mind. He referred to it in his essay *Die Nibelungen* of 1849, and noted the compatibility of the old Frankish religions with Christianity. His exact words in 1849 were: "The abstract highest god of the Germans, Wotan, did not really need to yield place to the God of the Christians; rather he could be completely identified with him".

So, Wagner was already predisposed to the notion that Christianity shared common ground with other, earlier beliefs when, in 1854, he encountered the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer maintained that "Christianity had Indian blood in its veins", and the more Wagner thought about this, the more he was convinced

that it must be true. In 1855, he wrote to Liszt citing modern research as having established conclusively that Christianity "Is no more and no less than a branch of the venerable Buddhist religion which, following Alexander's Indian campaign, found its way, among other places, to the shores of the Mediterranean". Cosima later recalled her husband telling her: "By giving much attention to Buddhism one learns to understand Christianity, and people were now beginning to realize that the greatest heroic power lies in resignation."

Whether or not Buddhism did, in fact, have any influence on Christianity, all that matters for our purposes is that Wagner believed that it did, and this belief shaped his works. This was a turning point for him, and the results can be seen not only in the *Ring* but also in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*. We can say that Sieglinde's response to Brünnhilde in Act Two of *Die Walküre* is not just an expression of joy, but an outburst of religious ecstasy!

Many of the details in act one of *Die Walküre* can be traced to the Icelandic *Saga of the Volsungs*, dating from the 13th century. But, again, Wagner introduced notions that sprang from a different cultural milieu and were beyond the boundaries of legend. Not the least of these is the mutual compassion that ignites the relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde and blossoms into full-blown love. The overwhelming force of this love reflects the influence of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, whose ideas led Wagner in 1852 to draft an ending to the *Ring* (not the final one) in which Brünnhilde specifically rejects possessions, wealth, and divine splendour in favour of the redeeming power of love. Although Wagner's philosophical allegiances changed in the mid-1850s, he didn't reject Feuerbach altogether, and it is compassionate love that leads to Brünnhilde's defiance of Wotan, Sieglinde's escape, Siegfried's birth, Brünnhilde's mortality and, ultimately, the downfall of the gods. Love is a prime catalyst for change in the *Ring*, and it flickers into life on a stormy night in front of Hunding's hearth. It marks not only the onset of spring and the relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde, but also the essential transformation of old myths into new.

Schopenhauer believed that willing, wanting, longing, craving are not just things that we do: they are things that we are. They are the source of our unhappiness and all the evil and strife in the world. We can only avoid this destructive element in our nature by achieving a state of detachment, akin to the Buddhist notion of *Nirvana*, the extinction of desire and illusion and the attainment of absolute peace of mind. The arts - and music in particular - can help, in a temporary way, in achieving this state of detachment.

During the last three decades of his life, Wagner became more concerned with metaphysical issues than with political ones. In his greatest works - those written after the mid-1850s - he looked inwards at human nature, rather than outwards at human society. And this is the idea

that is ultimately expressed in the dramatic closing pages of the *Ring*.

The waters of musical appreciation have been muddied (at least in the popular mind) by a phenomenal amount of, often trivial, material on Wagner's personal life and opinions. His comments in voluminous correspondence and other writings flew like chips of marble from the sculptor's block. But ultimately, he was a creative artist of great ability and originality, and it's in this light that he should be judged. As he himself put it in his essay *A Communication to My Friends*: "The artist addresses himself to feeling and not to understanding. If he is answered in terms of understanding, then it is quite clear that he has not been understood."

So, what does all this mean for the stage director who would like to approach the *Ring* in his or her own way? While the Scandinavian and Germanic myths provided the primary sources and motivation for the *Ring*, by the time it was finished they shared the limelight with Greek mythology, nineteenth century social and political ideas, the philosophies of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, pre-Freudian psychology, and aspects of Christianity and Buddhism. Truly, this *Ring* had no boundaries. I suppose a director could take a cue from any of these strands and create a production that would have dramatic validity.

But, with the *Ring*, it is probably best not to try and spell things out in detail; it is better to leave them for the imagination of the audience. This is certainly the view expressed by director **Chen Shi-Zheng** who has compared his task to that of a Chinese painter; knowing where to provide detail, and what to leave to the imagination. Wagner put it this way: "I believe," he wrote, "that a true instinct has kept me from too great definiteness; for it has been borne in on me that an absolute disclosing of intention disturbs true insight. What you want in drama - indeed in all works of art - is to achieve your end, not by a statement of the artist's intentions, but by presenting life as the result, not of arbitrary forces, but of eternal laws."

That makes sense to me, and I believe it is what we are discovering in the Brisbane production. We are dealing with events that take place over a considerable period of time and in widely divergent settings. How much time elapses between *Rheingold* and *Walküre*? Who can say? Decades? Centuries? Millennia? Time means nothing in Walhalla. If time doesn't mean anything, then perhaps space doesn't mean anything either. The *Ring* can be set anywhere, for its themes belong nowhere and everywhere. The richness and diversity of its sources make it one of the most adaptable and resilient of operatic works.

By the time we get to *Götterdämmerung*, the orchestra has become the dominant medium of expression, and nowhere is this more so than in the closing moments of this miraculous work, when the physical world dissolves and music alone transports us to quite another plane of awareness.

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