

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY

JUNE 2025

177 ISSUE NO 50



WAGNER
SOCIETY
nsw



Le philtre d'amour 1972
Salvador Dalí 1904 – 1989

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 22 June	12.30pm DVD <i>Parsifal Act 2</i> 2.00pm Talk by Assoc Prof Stephen Mould on Carlo Felice Cillario and Wagner	Goethe Institut
Sun 20 Jul	12.00pm DVD <i>Parsifal Act 3</i> 2.00pm Talk by Prof Carole Cusack about <i>Parsifal</i>	Goethe Institut
Sun 17 Aug	12.00pm DVD H-J Syberberg's Parsifal	Goethe Institut
Sun 14 Sep	2.00pm WSNWS 45th Anniversary celebration concert. Works by Wagner and Strauss with soprano Alexandra Flood and pianist Thomas Victor Johnson	St Columba
Sun 12 Oct	12.00pm DVD TBC 2.00pm Talk by Esteban Insausti on Traditional vs Iconoclastic stagings of <i>Die Meistersinger</i>	Goethe Institut
Sat 15 Nov	10.00am – 4.00pm <i>Siegfried</i> Symposium	TBA
Sun 30 Nov	2.00pm Christmas concert with tenor Bradley Cooper and pianist Thomas Victor Johnson	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
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FOR YOUR DIARY

17 May – 24 June	Glyndebourne <i>Parsifal</i> Conductor Robin Ticciati OBE	Glyndebourne
28 May – 28 June	Two <i>Ring</i> Cycles at the Wiener Staatsoper conducted Philippe Jordan	Vienna
24 July – 26 Aug	Bayreuth Festival. Two <i>Ring</i> Cycles conducted by Simone Young AM 26, 27, 29, 31 July 15, 16, 18, 29 Aug	Bayreuth
13, 16 Nov	SSO/ Simone Young AM <i>Siegfried</i>	SOH

GENEROUS DONATIONS WERE RECEIVED SINCE MARCH 2025 FROM THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS:

Anonymous, Mitzi Saunders, Pam McGaw, Michael Chesterman and Helen Meddings

WE WARMLY WELCOME ONE NEW MEMBER WHO JOINED SINCE MARCH 2025:

1304 Donald Cooper

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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,

By the time this issue reaches you I will be overseas in the midst of two *Ring* productions (Basel and Vienna) as well as the new *Parsifal* from Frankfurt, amongst other delights. This will be the first time I will do back to back *Rings* (literally and physically). No idea how it will all turn out but it is very exciting. A good comparison if nothing else. And I won't be alone as I know there will be a cohort of members and Australians there as well. Looking forward to bumping into all those friendly faces in the next four weeks.

The next quarter sees the Society delve into *Parsifal* with a talk by Professor Carole Cusack and a showing of Syberberg's extraordinary film. Mike Day has also been showing DVDs of each Act, from different productions, as the pre talk "entertainment". This is by way of starting to engage with Wagner's last work as the Society heads towards a very exciting project in the years ahead (more on this much later). Bracketing these *Parsifal* events are two concerts - Richard Wagner's Birthday and the WSNWS's 45th. Two exclusive opportunities to hear great artists close up.

Yes, we are 45 years old! Not sure what to make of that since I have been a member for 37 of those years. One might think that in all that time the Society has started to repeat itself, in terms of events and material presented at events and the Quarterly. But if you look in the website (where all the Quarterlies and a majority of events are neatly reproduced) you will see that we haven't exhausted the topic just yet. We are always looking for new perspectives on Wagner's work. And please contact Mike, our wonderful Editor, if you want to share thoughts on productions or concerts or personal research on Wagner and related topics that can be published in the Quarterly. We encourage you to do so.

Further, I encourage you, our members, to let us know what you would like to hear and see in our events. We will be starting to plan 2026 soon, so it is a timely opportunity for you to have a say and contribute to building up the future programme. I know there are many organisations in Sydney which provide similar events for opera enthusiasts and I encourage sharing both content and presenters. Of course, our events are focused on Wagner and his time, but in order to understand that better you also need to be aware of the political/social/artistic context from whence Wagner sprang. I've tried to build up a series of talks from directors, scenographers and academics to provide a more rounded understanding of Wagner as a theatre animal and not just a composer. Would there be interest in having contemporary composers, writing for the stage (operas or otherwise), talk to us about how Wagner may have influenced the way they approach their work? This is a personal interest. I believe that if there was no Wagner, composers such as Philip Glass writing for the stage would not be possible. And I am fascinated by the ritual aspect of the work of Melbourne-based composer Mary Finsterer (*Biographica* and *Antarctica*). Would members be interested in hearing from composers? Please let me know.

PS. On a sad note we have just heard of the passing of Mailis Wakeham, a former Committee member and stalwart of the Society. Our condolences to her family.

With best wishes. Happy listening.

ESTEBAN INSAUSTI
President Wagner Society in NSW Inc

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR



Dear readers, Over the past several years I have occasionally included articles about, and images by, artists who dealt with Wagnerian themes in their work. I propose continuing to do this on a more regular basis and in future issues will include **Henri Fantin-Latour**, **Odilon Redon**, **Ferdinand Leeke** and several other important painters and illustrators. This issue includes a piece about **Salvador Dali**, who was devoted to Wagner's music, especially *Tristan und Isolde*, which this June celebrates 160 years since its premiere. I also feature the work of **Lorenz Gedon**, an influential artist and a friend and contemporary of **Cosima Wagner**. Thanks to **Dr Terence Watson** for his in-depth review of MO's *Die Meistersinger*. I encourage and welcome any contributions from members about any Wagnerian topics. I would be especially pleased to hear from anyone who was lucky enough to see the recent *Parsifal* at Glyndebourne. (Thanks to **June Donsworth** and **Robert Mitchell** for their impressions of **Barrie Kosky's** *Die Walküre* in London). Thanks to **Peter Bassett** for a

further installment of his Brisbane *Ring* Seminar texts. The September issue will feature *Siegfried*, in preparation for the **Simone Young AM**/SSO performances in November. Also in September we will be celebrating our 45th Anniversary and I would really appreciate any recollections from members about the early days of the Society. My gratitude as always to **Leona Geeves** for proofreading.

MIKE DAY | michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com

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FUTURE SOCIETY EVENTS

SUNDAY 22 JUNE AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

12.30PM DVD MET OPERA 1994 *PARSIFAL* ACT II | 64 MINUTES



This is one of the most important video versions of this masterpiece, with a splendid cast, an accomplished conductor and a classical staging. This production reminds us of a way to do opera which is staying more and more in the past, even in the Met. This production could be dusty for many of today's operagoers used to modern and reflexive ones. But it pretends to show the story in its original background, trying to be as close as possible to Wagner's libretto indications.

Act 2 is maybe the finest recreation in the show. The first scene shows a tower in which Klingsor is looking with his magic mirror and observing a tormented Kundry. The garden is a beautiful scene, with a sunset sky in brown tones, and the flowers in suggestive transparent costumes. When Parsifal has taken the Holy Spear from Klingsor the magic garden disappears and becomes a dark grey moor.

James Levine, as the great Wagnerian conductor he is, shows a complete command of

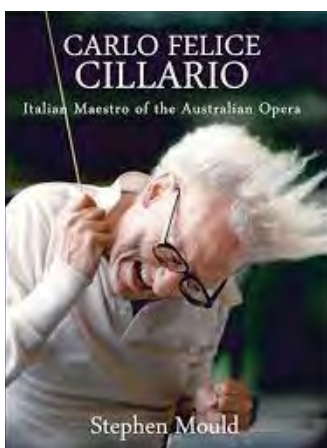
the score, in slow tempi but in a beautiful style. We can appreciate the solemnity the work requires. The chorus are also magnificent.

Siegfried Jerusalem sings the title role. He commands the character, portraying it with his good acting skills.

The veteran **Franz Mazura** was still able to sing an unforgettable Klingsor, and to show why he was a reference in this role. **Waltraud Meier** was 36 years old in this recording, and she was at her peak of her beauty and career. The voice has a beautiful and seductive mezzo-soprano sound with an attractive low register. Her acting is so accomplished that one can understand why she is regarded as a historical Kundry: her expressions of doubt and lack of certitude when she meets Parsifal for the first time, or her malevolent smile when Klingsor laments his castration or her lustful smile at seducing the hero. Supreme and unique.

<http://emocionesliricas.blogspot.com/2018/10/video-review-parsifal-from-metropolitan.html>

2.00PM TALK BY ASSOC PROF DR STEPHEN MOULD ABOUT CARLO FELICE CILLARIO AND WAGNER



Sydney-born, Assoc Prof **Stephen Mould** is a graduate of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. In 1985 he moved to London to continue his studies at the Royal Academy of Music. During this time, he was active as an orchestral and choral conductor and as a freelance répétiteur. In 1988 he was appointed Head of Music at the Lyric Opera of Queensland. In 1990 Stephen returned to Europe and was engaged as a conductor and musical assistant by a number of opera houses and festivals in Germany, Belgium, Norway and Italy. In 1996 he joined the music staff of Opera Australia. Subsequently, he has undertaken engagements for the Sydney Festival, the Melbourne Festival, Symphony Australia and the Sydney Philharmonic Choirs. He was also engaged for State Opera of South Australia's productions of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1998 and 2004) and *Parsifal* (2002). Stephen was Head of Music at Opera Australia between 2004 and 2008 and is currently Senior Lecturer in Conducting, Opera Studies and Répétiteurship at the Sydney Conservatorium, and Artistic Director of the Conservatorium Opera. Since publishing his book on Italian conductor **Carlo Felice Cillario** (1915 – 2007), Stephen has continued his research into Cillario (and Italian conductors generally) and Wagner,

and found some live recordings of Cillario's Wagner from Sydney and Melbourne. Stephen writes about his proposed talk; 'I'm aware that Cillario considered himself to be part of a rich heritage of Italian Wagner conductors and I've explored that and come up with some interesting material. I'm also aware that there were a considerable number of people in Australia who felt that he was a questionable choice for conductor of Wagner's later music dramas – including the *Ring*. I also would like to unpack some of the behind the scenes politics around the 1983-4 *Ring Cycle*, and even encourage some Q&A discussion, as I know that it remains a somewhat sensitive subject among many Wagnerians. Around 1968, Cillario was conducting all over the world. He had conducted a *Tosca* with Callas in 1964, and his career was thriving. He did not accept the engagement to come to Australia because of the *Tosca* at the Adelaide Festival. It seems that his decision was based upon the opportunity to conduct *Tannhäuser*. He made his Australian debut in Canberra, conducting it, with a chorus of about 25, and an orchestra of about 45 players.' Thus began a love affair between this eminent musician and Australia and its artists that endured for nearly four decades.

WAGNER SOCIETY e-news

Our regular Wagner Society e-news are emailed to members at the addresses they have provided. Occasionally some members do not appear to have received these emails. This could be because their email address has changed, or emails have been going into their spam or junk mail, or for some other reason. If you feel this applies to you, please let the Membership Secretary know by mailing contact@wagner.org.au and we will work to resolve this issue.

SUNDAY 20 JULY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

12.00PM DVD SALZBURG FESTIVAL 2013 *PARSIFAL* ACT III | 87 MINUTES

Christian Thielemann and the Dresden opera orchestra produce a performance where every detail is superlatively controlled, sober and transparent. Every word of the text is clearly audible. It is neither intoxicating nor transcendent, but it is beautiful, and as close to perfection as humans can get. The musicians have the flexibility, the fleetness and the modesty to breathe with the singers, and to step back when necessary.

Thielemann makes the most of this. The cast is uniformly solid, from **Wolfgang Koch's** sonorous Amfortas and self-assured Klingsor (why both roles?) and **Michaela Schuster's** flinty, impassioned Kundry to **Stephen Milling's** untiring, articulate Gurnemanz. In the title role, the late **Johan Botha** sings with marvellously easy, silver-toned lyricism, but refuses to act. It is a problem that no number of supernumeraries can solve.

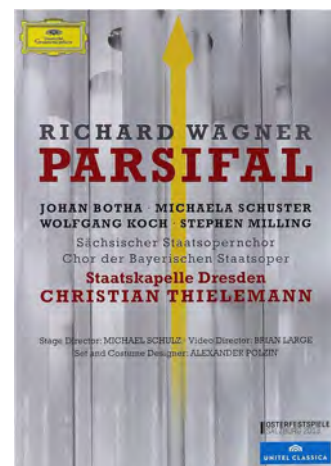
Sadly, none of these things can be said about **Michael Schulz's** stage direction. Sculptor **Alexander Polzin** has furnished him with three obscure sets (first act: vertical glass tubes, later smoke-filled; second act: Greek sculptures, some inverted; third act: an ice floe, with wolves) and hideous costumes. Schulz and Polzin explained in a programme

note that, since there is no clear way to interpret *Parsifal*, they will not even attempt the feat. The result is a helpless hotch-potch of images in which singers, dancers and supernumeraries all look suitably lost. The sets are neither of Wieland Wagner-ish abstract beauty nor represent anything real or historical. They provide atmospheric symbolic space for the characters to meet in.

However - one revelatory focus of the production is the spiritual recovery and cruel, final return to square one of Kundry. She is shadowed throughout by an actor Jesus from the cross who 'dies' with immense effect at the first musical peak of the Good Friday spell. He is replaced by an unmarked, reborn Christ who is then rejected and wounded by the revived Grail knight. Both Grail scenes are fully staged, rather than just stood and sung, and are almost unbearably moving.

In the closing applause, Thielemann and his orchestra received enthusiastic cheers, while Schulz and his team were booed with a unanimity that was both frightening and gratifying

<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/wagner-parsifal-1>

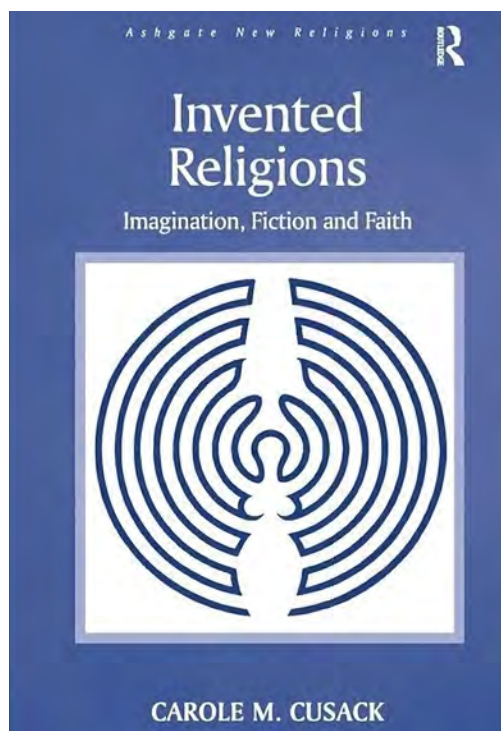


2.00PM TALK ON *PARSIFAL* BY PROF CAROLE M CUSACK

Carole M. Cusack (Professor in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney) trained as a medievalist and her doctorate was published as *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (Cassell, 1998). She now researches primarily in contemporary religious trends and Western esotericism. She is the author of several books, including *The Essence of Buddhism* (Lansdowne, 2001), *Invented*

Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith (Ashgate, 2010), and *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 2011. She edits the journals *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* (PDC, USA), *Literature & Aesthetics* (journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics), and *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia* (Daejin University, South Korea).

Abstract *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) and *Parsifal* (1882) are united by characters who are doomed to wander the earth as penance for unexpurgated sin (a blasphemous oath by the Dutchman, and Kundry's laughter at Christ on the cross). Both are identified with the Wandering Jew of Christian folklore, who mocked the crucified Jesus and was doomed to deathless wandering. Both are saved by Christ figures; Senta sacrifices herself to break the curse that binds the Dutchman, and Parsifal baptises Kundry, who dies a saved Christian, on Good Friday, the commemoration of Christ's atonement. The Jewish identity of the Dutchman and Kundry is a serious impediment; that Richard Wagner held antisemitic views is well-known. Yet what is more interesting is that over almost 40 years there is an explicit shift towards more conventional Christian imagery evident in *Parsifal*. Wagner thought his era was one in which religion had lost power and art was needed to replace it. Wagner is thoroughly modern for he, to quote David Huron, creates a "music of hunger, rather than of fulfilment" (2006). *The Flying Dutchman* is a symbolic opera; but *Parsifal* is a Bühnenweihfestspiel ("festival work for the initiation of a stage") intended to redeem its audience.





Parsifal opera film directed by **Hans-Jürgen Syberberg**, 1982
244 minutes **Armin Jordan** - Amfortas / Music Conductor;
Robert Lloyd - Gurnemanz;
Martin Sperr - Titirel; **Michael Kutter** - Parsifal 1; **Edith Clever** - Kundry; **Reiner Goldberg** - Parsifal (voice); **Aage Haugland** - Klingsor; **Karin Krick** - Parsifal 2; **Yvonne Minton** - Kundry (voice); **Wolfgang Schöevne** - Amfortas (voice)

REVIEWS:

The New York Times' **John Rockwell** wrote: "*Parsifal*, should enthrall both film lovers and Wagner fans. Mr. Syberberg's work represents not only the summation of his career thus far, but is as gripping, strange and, in the end, devotionally faithful a staging as any Wagner opera has received in our time."

Graham Bradshaw wrote in *London Review of Books*: "Using clever front projection techniques, [Syberberg] provides a rapid background commentary on the main dramatic action: this is sometimes contrived and disruptive, but more frequently suggests the reflexes and ricochets of a mind that is actively engaging with *Parsifal*."

"Undoubtedly the most stunning film of an opera ever made." (**Newsweek**)

"Unique...original and of great strength...never dull, always daring." (**Sunday Times**)

SYBERBERG'S *PARSIFAL*

By **Derrick Everett**

<https://www.monsalvat.no/syberberg-parsifal.htm>

Syberberg's monumental and celebrated film about Wagner's music-drama *Parsifal* was released to coincide with the centenary of Wagner's death. (Shown out of competition at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival) Syberberg made his film entirely in a studio, like his previous films *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* and *Hitler: A Film from Germany*. The resources of a film studio allowed Syberberg to film the opera against a constantly shifting screen of references and allusions shown by front-projection, thus imprinting his own vision of *Parsifal* and Richard Wagner in a manner of which a stage-director could only dream, whilst also having the other advantage of film, that of showing in close-up the emotion of the opera in the faces of his actors and actresses.

Syberberg worked on the project for several years before it could be realised. After completing *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, he searched for a project that would be, as he called it, less Syberberg. Almost alone among German artists, Syberberg has constantly sought to explain and uncover the romantic and irrational in German culture, now ignored or suppressed because of Hitler, the bitter flower of German irrationalism as Syberberg has called him. Wagner has always been a constant presence in Syberberg's films, both in *Ludwig* and *Hitler* (because of their respective obsession and passion for his music), and of course in *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* (1914-1975), where the unrepentant old lady talks on about the good old days at Bayreuth when the Führer made his annual pilgrimage to the shrine. It was inevitable that Syberberg should come to make a film about Wagner himself. His first idea was just that, a film about Wagner, but gradually the *Parsifal* project took root. He had intended to try to use

a recording from a Bayreuth performance as the soundtrack to his *Parsifal* film, but after the Winifred Wagner film, he was none too popular with the Wagner family, and permission for him to record in Bayreuth was refused.

A new recording of the opera was commissioned, with the Swiss conductor **Armin Jordan**, the Monte Carlo Philharmonic and singers of the calibre of **Yvonne Minton** (as Kundry), **Reiner Goldberg** (as Parsifal) and **Robert Lloyd** (as a youthful Gurnemanz). Syberberg wanted the soundtrack to be a separate entity and to use actors who would mime to the pre-recorded track, reasoning that actors were better capable than singers of giving the facial and bodily expression that film demands, and also wanting, for intellectual and aesthetic reasons, the voice to be separate from the body. However, this was not an absolute condition, and so both Robert Lloyd as Gurnemanz and **Aage Haugland** as Klingsor both sing and act their parts.

The Paradisiacal Man

Syberberg regards Kundry as the centre of the opera, and so chose for the part the outstanding German actress, **Edith Clever**. Her incarnation of Kundry as variously mother, seductress and penitent has been unanimously praised as a performance of hair-raising intensity. *Parsifal* himself is played by two people, first a boy (**Michael Kutter**) and then, after Kundry's kiss, by a girl (**Karin Krick**), a coup-de-theatre for which Syberberg gives no complete explanation, although he has said that it attempts to render *Parsifal* as a person with both masculine and feminine poles, which in the final act come together to create a paradisiacal man, an androgyne. He has also said that it counteracts Wagner's depiction of an exclusively masculine redemption. However, even as a device of staging alone, it works extraordinarily well when we hear Goldberg's voice come from Karin Krick, her face radiantly pure.



Significance Through Time

Syberberg considers *Parsifal* to be Wagner's testament, a vision of redemption emerging from his life and his work in music, and so, for Syberberg it is Wagner himself who is the subject in his staging of the opera, together with a century of Wagnerian thought, attitudes and reactions. Because of Wagner's looming presence over German and European culture, the whole of European civilisation is drawn into the film. Syberberg has said, 'Just as the composer was inspired by a legendary evocation of the Middle Ages in his desire to express ideas which were of his own time, I am basing my approach on the fact that the work is one hundred years old and I can therefore describe its significance through time. Hence Syberberg puts before us not just a film of the opera, but absolutely everything that *Parsifal* evokes in him. Whilst the music floods our hearing, Syberberg feeds our eyes with as much as he can crystallise of what effect that music, and that music's very existence, has had on him.'

The studio set is dominated by a huge replica of Wagner's death mask, becoming a mountain on which much of the action is staged, being Klingsor's tower, the flowery meadow and finally parting in two to reveal (Syberberg's vision of) the Grail. The density of allusion in the film is enormous and too much to comprehend in a single viewing: Caspar David Friedrich, Ingres, Goya, Dürer, Titian, Caravaggio and Bramante all figure in the imagery; the allegorical statues of the Synagogue and Faith on Strasbourg Cathedral are evoked; Amfortas sits on Charlemagne's throne from the cathedral at Aachen; Titurel lies in the crypt of Saint-Denis; scenes from various Bayreuth productions of *Parsifal* and the *Ring* appear; the 1882 production of the former is recreated in puppet form during the prelude, with both costumes and faces modelled from photographs; a casement of the room in the Palazzo Vendramin, where Wagner died, is used as a backdrop; heads of Aeschylus, King Ludwig II, Nietzsche, Marx and Wagner himself lie at the foot of Klingsor's throne; Mathilde Wesendonck and Judith Gautier are glimpsed among the flower maidens; the approach to the hall of the Grail is down a flag-lined corridor — a procession, backward in time, through the history of Germany into a world of myth; the destruction of Germany is evoked at the beginning with postcards of the ruins, and we see various puppets of Wagner, including a realisation of André Gill's caricature of Wagner hammering at a human ear.

The Heart of the Matter

Yet amidst the plethora of cultural and Wagnerian references and inferences, (a deliberate creation of a world apart, which Syberberg sees as the aim of artistic endeavour) the acting performances themselves are traditional. Although with his constantly changing backgrounds and artificial sets in which Syberberg attains the Brechtian distancing of a film like *Hitler*, the concentration of the camera on the performers' faces focuses the attention on the emotion at the heart of the opera. Syberberg often used very long takes, with a complex choreography of camera movements, to keep the attention on the drama, and to avoid breaking up the slow unfolding of Wagner's musical themes by cuts in the images. Hence Syberberg also allows Edith Clever's bravura performance to unfold, so that he lets us experience *Parsifal* with an intensity and directness not possible on the stage. As the New York Times said: 'It's as if Wagner's hypnotic

allure and **Brecht's** intellectualised alienation have been somehow mystically unified. In this immensely ambitious work Syberberg presents Wagner's life, music and thought. He also presents a critique of those same things, whilst mounting a sumptuous and resonant production of the opera that is a feast for the eyes and ears, a true Gesamtkunstwerk', or, as Newsweek said: 'The film performs the extraordinary feat of both splendidly presenting and forcibly challenging a consummate work of art.'

Themes of the Movie

Religious Processions

A recurring element of this film is movement in procession. Indeed, processions of knights are required by the score and Syberberg makes the most of these. Their first procession is that which follows Amfortas down to the lake and back again. In the Grail Temple, the knights march with their weapons and relics, such as chalices and even a statue of the young Parsifal, and the pages bear the bleeding wound. In the third act, this march becomes a procession of the living dead. Syberberg introduces other processions too, not required by the stage directions. Such as the pages with the dead swan, or the group that searches for and brings back the Grail, an enormous rock in the shape of a platonic solid. Where a stage production of *Parsifal* would be static, Syberberg introduces purposeful movement, with the camera also moving with the procession. In the transition scene of the first act, we follow Parsifal and Gurnemanz through a maze: moving in space, they seem to move backwards in time from the present, passing through the Nazi era on the way. In the transition scene of the third act, the path to the Grail Temple seems to pass through the sky.

A Leitmotif: Grails, Relics and Fetish Objects

One of the themes that repeatedly is heard through the many layers of Syberberg's film, like one of Wagner's Leitmotivs, is concerned with relics and fetish objects. The story of *Parsifal* was written down for the first time in the twelfth century, an age in which relics were a focus of religious devotion. These relics could be the remains of saints, or objects associated with them, or even with Christ himself: fragments of the True Cross, or phials of the Blood that was shed on that cross. Crusaders and pilgrims returning from the Holy Land brought back with them new objects of veneration, to be preserved by Christendom: such as the blade of the Lance that had pierced the side of Christ. Poets began to tell of one relic that surpassed all of these: the mysterious Grail. Syberberg shows us the Grail in its many forms: a chalice carried by a beautiful maiden, or a stone that fell from the sky. At the end of the opera, the true Grail is revealed to be none of these, but the union of male and female in the paradisiacal man.

Amfortas's wound too seems to be a religious relic, or perhaps a fetish object. The bleeding wound has become separated from Amfortas and pages carry it on a cushion. When the swan is killed by Parsifal, the Grail community immediately turns it into a relic. As they decay and fossilise, the knights try to preserve each other, bizarrely, in polythene sheets. There is a stench of decay. Syberberg seems to be saying something about the futility of trying to preserve the past, when we should be living in the present. At the very end of the film, Kundry shows us the greatest relic of all: preserved under a glass bell like an object in a museum, she cradles the Festspielhaus.

Parsifal

is not an opera in any conventional sense. Nor is it, despite the piety that audiences sometimes affect in its presence, a religious ceremony. It is best understood and appreciated as a solemn ritual of the aesthetic cult known as Wagnerism, whose grip on the musical public's imagination seems as strong today as at any time since the composer's death a century ago. The spell that *Parsifal* can cast in a glorious performance is difficult to explain to nonbelievers in the Wagnerian creed, but it rests heavily on the mesmerizing power of pure ritual and ritual's handmaiden, ecstatically solemn music.

Donal Henahan
<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/10/arts/opera-wagner-s-parsifal-at-the-met.html>

Above all else, *Parsifal* is a phenomenal piece of music. In *The Roots of Tragedy Friedrich Nietzsche*, a great friend of Wagner's before they fell out, explained one of Wagner's guiding principles; that there is a level at which music communicates with the brain directly in a way which cannot be expressed in words. Whether or not you are grabbed by the characterisation or story-telling in Wagner's libretto, the music moves and stirs you in precisely that non-verbal way that Nietzsche describes.

<https://bachtrack.com/review-parsifal-eno>

REPORTS ON RECENT WAGNER

WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH ON ZOOM FROM GERMANY (TBC)

5.00PM MIRKO ROSCHKOWSKI IN CONVERSATION WITH ROSS WHITELAW



This was a very entertaining casual chat with German lyric tenor **Mirko Roschkowski** and our secretary **Ross Whitelaw**, who met Mirko at Bayreuth last year. They chatted about Mirko's experience at Bayreuth and his hopes for the future. He was very animated when talking about his Bayreuth debut as Froh in *Das Rheingold* under the direction of our Patron **Simone Young** AM. He shared his experience of Simone actually singing the role of Loge in a rehearsal when the singer was indisposed. Mirko described Simone as 'sitting in the music'. He described the rehearsal period as very busy but one of calm and concentration, with time out to enjoy long walks around the town. He auditioned for Froh after **Katarina Wagner** had seen him as Lohengrin, and loves the role as it perfectly suits his voice. He has also sung Walter von Stolzing in *Meistersinger* and covered Eric in *Holländer*. He has not accepted offers to sing Parsifal or Tannhäuser as he needs to wait for his voice to develop. A recording of the conversation is available on our YouTube site.

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SUNDAY 23 MARCH AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

12.00PM DVD BADEN-BADEN
PARSIFAL ACT I

Festspielchor, Baden-Baden, **Deutsches Symphonie-Orchestra** Berlin. Conductor: **Kent Nagano**, stage director: **Nikolaus Lehnhoff**, set designer: **Raimund Bauer**. Parsifal: **Christopher Ventris**, Kundry: **Waltraud Meier**, Gurnemanz: **Matti Salminen**, Amfortas: **Thomas Hampson**, Klingsor: **Tom Fox**, Titurel: **Bjarni Thor Kristinsson**

This DVD was the first of three, each featuring a different act of a different *Parsifal* production, highlighting some of the greatest singers and conductors of the past decades. Members were impressed by the quality of the orchestral playing and the wonderfully intense performances by the stellar cast.

2.00PM TALK BY PROFESSOR EMERITUS COLIN MACKERRAS AO FAHA
'*PARSIFAL* REANALYSED'

Our distinguished guest **Colin Mackerras** gave members and guests a pleasant ramble through his knowledge of the history and philosophical ideas about *Parsifal*, his favourite Wagner opus, which was described by the composer as a Bühnenweihfestspiel (stage consecration festival drama), hard to pigeonhole as it is not really a Tragedy, and is definitely not a Comedy or a Romance. He thought that **Nietzsche's** view that the work was "too Christian and anti-sex" had some merit, although Colin thought that Wagner's promotion of the

Buddhist message of "Compassion as a specific moral response to the violent chaos of the world" was more important. Colin strongly disagreed with **Robert Greenberg's** criticism of the work as "antisemitic and racist propaganda." Colin played some sound bites of a few of the most outstanding singers of the roles. He especially recommended the 1951 Bayreuth Knappertsbusch recording. He loves the work because "it has a unique intensity of sustained beauty, including melody, orchestration and harmony."



Colin Mackerras



Michael Gleeson-White, June Donsworth, Colin Mackerras



Deanne Whittlestone, Mel and Sarah Penicka-Smith



Barbara Beasley, Leona Geeves

SOCIETY EVENTS

SUNDAY 13 APRIL AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

1.00PM ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting was chaired by President **Esteban Insausti**. The minutes of the 2024 AGM were accepted and the 2024 President's Annual Report was presented by Esteban and the 2024 Financial Report was presented by Treasurer **Danny May**. These were accepted by the financial members present. The retirement was announced of Membership Secretary **Julie Clarke**. **Melanie Penicka-Smith** was appointed as a new committee member. The other continuing committee members were confirmed. All relevant documents are available to members on our website.

New Committee member Melanie Penicka-Smith

Melanie Penicka-Smith is a Producer, Production and Stage Manager, International Tour Manager and Event Manager. As a freelance stage and event manager, Mel has worked in NIDA Parade Theatre, Sydney Opera House Concert Hall, The State Theatre, City Recital Hall, Sydney Town Hall and The Concourse. She has also stage managed events in MONA, Hobart, the Casula Powerhouse and in international venues including the Vietnam National Academy of Music, Hanoi, and Polskie Radio S.A, Warsaw.

With a passion for working with community, Mel and her wife **Sarah Penicka-Smith** have worked together commissioning & producing

new operas, creating & touring a pride choir, bringing high quality classical music into hospitals, working with community choirs, orchestras, & choral festivals, producing chamber & children's operas, leading international choir tours, & provided consultancy services to amateur & professional organisations.

With over 30 years' combined experience in the arts & event industries, Penicka-Smith Arts & Event Management combines Mel's dynamism, eye for detail & quick thinking with Sarah's vision, creativity, & communication.



Melanie Penicka-Smith
(grantlesliephotography)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDING DECEMBER 2024

This is the President's Report for the year ending December 2024. This year we are moving the date of the AGM closer to the ideal month of March – progress from the Covid years.

To start, I can confidently state that the WSNSW is in very good shape. We have maintained our **membership** (sitting at 230 including 8 Honorary Life Members, but there are still 52 members yet to pay their membership for 2025). We've had 13 new members since the last AGM and 21 discontinued members. We have sufficient funds to carry out our core services – put on events, publish the Quarterly and sponsor artists and projects – the Treasurer will speak to this later.

2024 was not a big year for productions of Wagner's works in Australia, with only the SSO continuing their *Ring* cycle under the magical baton of their Chief Conductor, and our Patron, **Simone Young AM**. Nevertheless, I think that everyone who attended those two performances of *Die Walküre*, particularly the second one on Sunday, more than made up for an entire year of Wagnerian drought. We were all very proud and happy for Simone Young to finally conduct at Bayreuth. There is no doubt now that she ranks amongst the elite of Wagner conductors and will be even more sought after in opera houses and concert halls around the world.

Our Society continues to be a part of the **Richard Wagner Verband International** (The International Association of Richard Wagner Societies) and the **Gesellschaft der Freunde von Bayreuth** (The Society of the Friends of Bayreuth). Though it seems that the only benefit we get from these associations is access to early tickets to the Bayreuth Festival, in reality if we didn't belong we would not be in touch with

the other 126 societies around the world or the powerful network that represents. Whilst the RWVI continues to modernise and morph to suit the times, we believe that it is worth our while to be a part of that. Through 2024 the rules for procuring tickets to the Bayreuth Festival changed, for the better, and 8 members will enjoy the fruits of this in July/August this year. I cannot say whether the rules/system will change again this year but the trend seems to be moving towards an alignment with how all the other opera houses and festivals sell tickets. Similarly, through our continued membership of the Gesellschaft der Freunde von Bayreuth (The Society of the Friends of Bayreuth). We managed to procure several tickets to the Festival through the Friends. And they remain the best source of information and help when you are there. So call in to their office (Festspielhügel 6, 95445 Bayreuth) and say hello. No other worldwide group of people share and enjoy such close friendships and focused attention on a subject.

Communication is a fundamental component of how the Society functions. We still have the printed **Quarterly** as our flagship publication, and it shall remain printed with back numbers in pdf available on our website. We changed the format a little and hope the membership likes it. Any correspondence on this to be directed straight to Mike. I thank all the contributors to the Quarterly, the checkers and the printer for getting the issues ready and distributed on time. The Quarterly under **Mike Day's** editorship continues to be one of the leading publications amongst the

"We were all very proud and happy for Simone Young to finally conduct at Bayreuth. There is no doubt now that she ranks amongst the elite of Wagner conductors and will be even more sought after in opera houses and concert halls around the world."



President Esteban Insausti

"We noted in the last Quarterly the passing of founding member and our second President, Richard King. He has left a bequest and a challenge to the Society which will become a reality in the not too distant future - the mooted Parsifal Project. At the moment we are awaiting the grant of probate from his estate, which Richard's executor and solicitors are working through."

Wagner Societies worldwide. It is a consistent mix of the serious and not so serious, as well as news both local and international.

We have embraced digital communications via our **E-News** as well as posts on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Whilst supplementary to the Quarterly the content in the E-News keeps us all informed about what is coming up and opportunities to see and hear great music in Sydney. In the second half of the year we embarked on upgrading and renewing our **website** (which is now available). It was a long process to get all the things we wanted into it with the project led by **Lis Bergmann** and **Dr Anish Nanda**, together with Danny May and a very brief cameo from myself. It was a big effort and I hope you'll agree that the results are very, very good. Big thanks to Lis and Dr Anish. I encourage you to explore it, the website belongs to you.

Donations through 2024 were outstanding. Your generosity, and in particular the generosity of several individuals, is inspiring and very encouraging. I hope this continues. The focus for donations in the second half of 2024 was on the **Meistersinger Syndicate** primarily to fund WSNSW member **Warwick Fyfe**, and **Deborah Humble** in their respective role debuts in Melbourne Opera's production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in February 2025. Our retiring Membership Secretary, **Julie Clarke**, championed this project and it is a testament to her energy that a substantial amount was raised. I would like to thank Julie for her time and contribution to the Committee and the Society. I have no doubt she will continue to be a very active member.

We noted in the last Quarterly the passing of founding member and our second President, **Richard King**. He has left a bequest and a challenge to the Society which will become a reality in the not too distant future - the mooted **Parsifal Project**. At the moment we are awaiting the grant of probate from his estate, which Richard's executor and solicitors are working through. There isn't much more I can report on in this regard. We have sought artistic advice from our Patron Simone Young, who responded very generously, and through her we started a conversation with the Sydney Youth Orchestra as a potential partner in the project. However, we cannot take this any further at the moment. The Society will seek to establish an independent structure to both

manage and protect any funds coming from Richard King's estate. Subsequent to that a production/artistic structure will also need to be established independent of the Society. We will endeavour to keep the membership informed.

In 2024 we **sponsored** the following artists: **Bronwyn Douglass, Chris Curcuruto, Edwin Spark, Amanda Windred, Laura Scandizzo** (for her performance with SUSO) and Deborah Humble (to assist in the study of the roles of Magdalena and Kundry). We continued to sponsor the Wagner Society in NSW Scholarship for Pacific Opera Studio.

We managed to conduct 11 live **events** and 3 zoom events through 2024. We had a focus on singers with Warwick Fyfe, **Simon O'Neill, Simon Meadows** and **Alexandra Steiner** (via zoom from Germany). Two great concerts were produced for Richard Wagner's birthday (**Valda Wilson** and **Eugene Raggio** sang accompanied by **Katherine Day** and **Thomas Johnson**) and the Christmas Event (**Amanda Windred** and **Celeste Haworth** sang accompanied by Yerim Lee). Thank you **Leona Gieves** for organising both. The DVDs we normally show before an event had a focus on **Richard Strauss**. We hosted a reception for all Wagner Society members from NSW and beyond during the SSO *Die Walküre* performances which was very successful. And we conducted the second symposium paralleling the SSO-Simone Young *Ring*. We had great talks from Dr **Antony Ernst** and Dr **Geoffrey Seidel** (my counterpart from South Australia) and via zoom from **Dr John Mastrogiovanni** (another counterpart from California) and **Christopher Cook** from the UK. We reminisced with **Michael Scott-Mitchell** and **Nick Schlieper** about **Elke Neidhardt's** Adelaide *Ring* from 2004. And finally we held the first Bloomsday-Wagner talk anywhere when I had a conversation via zoom with the erudite **Alex Ross** on all things **James Joyce**, Wagner and Leopold Bloom. Thanks for suggesting that crazy idea **Marie Leech**.

Finally I thank the Committee for all their hard work through the year. All in all it was a very successful year. I commend this report to the membership.

ESTEBAN INSAUSTI
President Wagner Society in NSW Inc



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.

SUNDAY 13 APRIL AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

2.00PM THE REAWAKENING OF THE GIANTS – HERMANN RITTER AND HIS VIOLA ALTA TALK AND PRESENTATION BY TOBIAS BREIDER AND SUSANNE POWELL

A large and enthusiastic audience enjoyed a very entertaining talk and recital by **Tobias Breider**, Principal Violist of the SSO, and pianist **Susanne Powell**. Tobias explained the history of the development of the oversized viola alta by virtuoso violist **Hermann Ritter**. **Wagner** was enthusiastic about its 'true alto' sound and commissioned six, even though Ritter was the only violist who could play it for the first performances of *Götterdämmerung*. Tobias demonstrated the sonorous qualities, and difficulty of playing, of the two instruments in

his care (named Fasolt and Fafner). Tobias is very tall with very long arms and he needs to go into training before performing because of the weight of the instrument and its longer strings, causing strain on his tendons. He produced beautiful sounds, closer to a cello than a violin.

The presentation was filmed as part of Tobias's research project. We were fortunate to have the well-known Randwick artist **Heidi Hereth** in the audience. She did some lovely quick sketches of the performers.

The program included the following works:

Wagner - *An den Abendstern*
Max Meyer-Olbersleben (1850-1927) - 2nd movement from Sonata Op 14
Hans Sitt (1850-1923) - 3 Fantasy Pieces
Liszt - *Romance Oubliée*



Sketches by Heidi Hereth of Tobias Breider and Susanne Powell (with page-turner Paul Ghica)



Tobias Breider



Kurt Looser, Helen Meddings



Renate Junker, Hannelore Laundl

WEDNESDAY 30 APRIL AT CELLOS, CASTLEREAGH BOUTIQUE HOTEL, SYDNEY

11.00AM MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE LATE RICHARD KING



The family of the late WSNWS founding member **Richard King** invited members to attend a celebration of Richard's life in the beautiful Art-Deco Cellos dining room in the Masonic Club. Three committee members attended and WSNWS supported singer, soprano **Ellen McNeil** and WSNWS member accompanist **Bradley Gilchrist** performed Wagner's *Im Treibhaus*, from *Wesendonck Lieder*, and Beethoven's *O wär ich schon*, from *Fidelio*. Brad also played the *Karfreitag Musik* from *Parsifal*. Thanks to **Leona Geeves** for organising the singers. The family was very appreciative.

WEDNESDAY 7 MAY ON ZOOM FROM TREVISO IN ITALY

7.00PM MARGARET PLUMMER CHATTED WITH ROSS WHITELAW



Mezzo-soprano **Margaret Plummer** shared her thoughts about her past, current and planned experiences in the operatic world. Sydney audiences saw her recently as the Prince in the OA's *Cinderella*. Margaret walked us through the demanding Bayreuth auditioning and rehearsal procedures and the necessary commitment to devoting three months to singing only a few lines as a Knappe and a Flower-maiden in *Parsifal*. Her persistence has reaped the reward of being given the role of Waltraute in *Die Walküre* in two years. Margaret relished, as most singers do, the wonderful acoustics of the Festspielhaus. She recalled lying on the stage and hearing the brass vibrating the stage floor from the pit below. An amusing observation was the experience of the waft of scent and aftershave that comes onto the stage from the audience when the curtain goes up. She described the audiences as passionate and engaged. She was very complimentary about **Simone Young**, who she described as fierce but fair and a 'gift in her life'. Margaret will be performing in the Simone Young/SSO *Götterdämmerung* next year. She enjoys

singing Wagner, and, as her voice naturally matures and becomes richer, she has hopes of singing Brangayne in about eight years. Also on her wish list is Octavian, which she has covered several times but not yet sung on stage. Octavian is the 'happy place' for her voice. She said that when singing Wagner and Strauss great attention needs to be paid to the text and the greater importance of consonants. She was full of praise for her American coach **Sherman Lowe**, who is based in Treviso. Margaret was a member of the OA chorus for many years until she won a scholarship in 2014 and moved to Vienna, where she was a member of the Staatsoper for many years. She is now freelancing but still performs regularly with the Vienna company, including the role of Adelaide in *Arabella* under **Christian Thielemann**. She loves Vienna and the great sense of collegiality of the ensemble. She will be a Norm there next year. This delightful conversation was recorded and will be available on our YouTube site in due course.

SUNDAY 25 MAY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

2.00PM WAGNER'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION - CONCERT BY **LIVIA BRASH** (SOPRANO) AND **EUGENE RAGGIO** (BASS BARITONE) ACCOMPANIED BY **THOMAS VICTOR JOHNSON** (PIANO)

THE PROGRAMME INCLUDED:

- **Livia Brash**
Dich, teure Halle from Act 2
Tannhäuser
- **Livia Brash and Eugene Raggio**
Scenes 3 and 4 from Act 2 *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*
- **Livia Brash and Eugene Raggio**
Scenes 4 (Sachs & Eva scene, ending with *O Sachs, mein Freund!*)
from Act 3 *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*
- **Eugene Raggio**
Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!
from Act 2 *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* Eugene Raggio
- **Livia Brash**
Du bist die Lenz from Act 1
Die Walküre

Over 60 members and guests celebrated the 210th birthday of **Richard Wagner** (1813-1883) with a wonderful concert followed by champagne, wine, and a delicious afternoon tea provided by the members. **Barbara de Rome** had baked a superb birthday cake, which was cut by our guest soprano, **Livia Brash**. She was joined by WSNSW member **Warwick Fyfe** in leading the singing of 'Happy Birthday Dear Richard'. The all-Wagner program was superbly

sung and acted and it was great to hear Livia and Eugene sing the roles that they had prepared for but didn't get to sing in the MO *Meistersinger*. (Livia had covered Elsa and Eugene had covered Hans Sachs). **Thomas Victor Johnson** was a very sympathetic accompanist and we look forward to hearing him as a soloist in our 45th Anniversary Concert on 14 September.



Eugene Raggio and Livia Brash



Agnes Insausti, Jacqui Sykes, Jill Sykes, Leona Geeves



Dr John Sanders, Dr Bill Brooks, Don Cooper



Thomas Victor Johnson



Thomas Victor Johnson, Livia Brash and Eugene Raggio with Brangayne wine gifts and Leona Geeves



Livia Brash and Warwick Fyfe



Barbara de Rome

OUR MEMBERS ABROAD

BARRIE KOSKY'S *DIE WALKÜRE* IN LONDON

WSNSW members **Terry** and **Julie Clarke**, **Robert Mitchell**, **June Donsworth** and **Glynis Johns** attended a performance of Berlin based Australian Director **Barrie Kosky's** production of *Die Walküre* at Covent Garden on 4 May.

Robert Mitchell reported: The second performance of this new production by Barrie Kosky confirmed what the critics wrote of the opening: 'thrilling' and 'triumphant'. From the first bars, **Sir Antonio Pappano** proves himself a true Wagnerian, in contrast to his conducting of the previous *Ring* production at the Garden. The storm rages from the pit, but once the cast begins its epic vocal journey, he becomes a true accompanist, supporting the voices and never overwhelming them. As the production will be shown in cinemas, it is difficult to write about it without spoiling the several surprises and coups de théâtre that Kosky and his set designer, **Rufus Didwiszus**, have pulled off. For those who saw *Das Rheingold*, the naked elderly lady is still making her presence felt, although more substantially than previously. Act 1 is set before a charred wooden wall with two doors and a discreetly placed protruding sword hilt. Siegmund (**Stanislaus de Barbeyrac**) and Sieglinde (**Natalya Romaniw**) are well matched visually and vocally - he a little lighter than expected. Hunding (**Soloman Howard**) is a domineering DV brute in police uniform with a voice to match. The singing is rapturous and the arrival of Spring and release of the sword theatrically surprising. Act 2 begins with a line of street lights diagonally bisecting an otherwise empty stage (except for the plentiful smoke). The stunning Brünnhilde (**Elisabet Strid**) runs on, nailing her top-Cs easily. Wotan (**Christopher Maltman**) is very much the successful businessman with an impressive voice and diction and Fricka (**Marina Prudenskaya**) a tall and elegant trophy wife, stunningly dressed (by **Victoria Behr**) and again ideally cast vocally. Mid-act,

the curtain falls with Brünnhilde continuing her reflections downstage. When the curtain rises again, the fallen tree trunk that featured throughout *Das Rheingold* is back in place. Its height, hollows and fissures are brilliantly employed by Kosky. The Act 3 ride is, again, on an open stage with a massive burnt tree. The space gives the Valkyries (including Australia's **Catherine Carby**) freedom to dash about energetically. There are several Brünnhildes from other productions amongst the eight. You can imagine the volume! Maltman's farewell to Brünnhilde is heart wrenching and the closing scene is as unexpected as it is spectacular. But has Kosky set himself a problem for Brünnhilde's awakening in Act 3 of Siegfried? That we will find out in March 2026. Throughout all the acts, Kosky has the cast totally engaged and convincing in their roles. The myriad musical details he finds ways to express in actions, both large and tiny, confirm him as one of the most musical and thoughtful opera directors of our age. Our little group of WSNSW members who met at each interval were divided in their reactions after Act 1, enthusiastic after Act 2 and totally enraptured by the end. 'Ring-nut' or not, this *Die Walküre* is a must see at the cinema. Can't wait!

Ed. Note: The live film of the production will be shown in Sydney at Palace Cinemas on 14, 15 & 18 June

June Donsworth sent some 'brief impressions': summing up a few of the scenes which for her were outstanding, both visually and with the singing and music and acting being skillfully coordinated:



Terry Clarke, Robert Mitchell, June Donsworth, Glynis Johns and Julie Clarke at *Die Walküre*

BARRIE KOSKY'S THOUGHTS ON *DIE WALKÜRE*

Quotes selected by June Donsworth from interviews with Barrie Kosky on this production

"Wagner was a despicable person, plus he was a genius"

"*Die Walküre* is a family drama, with references to Aeschylus, especially Agamemnon".

"It is a distillation of family relationships and human emotions, combining myth and reality"

"I want my singers to be portraying contemporary identifiable characters" (An actress plays Erda - an elderly frail naked woman who personifies Nature. She is dreaming the dream of her children, remembering a burnt world). "She is a 'Cassandra', "uttering true prophesies, generally of impending disaster, which are not believed."

"Concepts in the direction of Opera are meaningless unless they are related to what the singers are singing". (Kosky is very critical of many German Directors who impose a 'Concept' onto the plot of *The Ring* without any reference to the libretto and the music.

"In Act 2, Brünnhilde is a 16 yr old schoolgirl, romping around, interacting playfully with her father Wotan. This is the only time in the whole opera where Wotan actually seems happy".

"Brünnhilde undergoes a tremendous maturing during *Die Walküre*, starting in Act 3".

"Wotan's monologue in Act 2 is the key to the whole *Ring*. We see the extraordinary downfall of a megalomaniac man who makes a mighty big mistake".

"Fricka in Act 2 is a portrayal of wounded love. She outsmarts Wotan and checkmates him. At this point there is a silence in the music and then Wotan sings "I swear that I will obey your commands".

Kosky quotes **George Bernard Shaw**; 'There is not a note in *Die Walküre* which doesn't sharpen the drama.'

MARIE LEECH IN FRANKFURT

As part of an extended European cultural and spiritual pilgrimage, WSNSW Vice President **Marie Leech** attended the Frankfurt Opera's *Parsifal* in late May and was very impressed by the young conductor **Thomas Guggeis** and the Gurnemanz of **Andreas Bauer Kanabas**. Our President **Esteban Insausti** will be seeing this production in early June and will report for the September Quarterly.



PARSIFAL AT GLYNDEBOURNE

Glyndebourne's long awaited *Parsifal* opened on 17 May. The critics all praised the musical performances but not everyone was thrilled with the 'Cain and Abel' concept. A detailed report will be included in the September Quarterly.

'...bypasses much of its mysticism and magic, but it is moving and musically very special' – **The Guardian**

'an enthralling *Parsifal*'
– **The Financial Times**

'Incandescent singing and playing, but the production domesticates the numinous'
– **The Arts Desk**

'The idea of presenting the piece as a psychological and social drama is effective' – **The Gramophone**

'The production is occasionally baffling but its message of compassion is faithful to Wagner' – **The Standard**

'...staging offers much to surprise, provoke and often enlighten anyone ready to fall under the spell of Wagner's last music-drama' – **Bachtrack**



Parsifal (Daniel Johansson), Gurnemanz (John Relyea), Amfortas (Audun Iversen) and Titirel (John Tomlinson)

Act 1. In Hunding's house the initial scene with Sieglinde and Siegmund was acted out in slow motion, as it were. Sieglinde tends to the apparently wounded Siegmund, extracting a piece of metal or something from his foot, and then their slow recognition of each other, accompanied by silences and quiet strings, was breathtakingly beautiful. Hunding is tall and brutish, dressed in policeman type uniform with gun in holster and sang with deep menacing voice. He was horribly violent towards Sieglinde, slapping her and pulling her by her hair. Ordered by Hunding to give him dinner, Sieglinde and Siegmund, hastily assemble a table and chairs and the 3 of them sit down to eat. All this acted very believably, attuned to the music and words.

The arrival of spring and their young love was blessed by the naked Erda who showers them with flowers from an overflowing basket, Siegmund and Sieglinde singing with convincing rapture.

When Notung is revealed in the back wall by the lighting, Siegmund sings with great triumph and as he pulls on the sword, the back wall disappears and there is Erda with the extended Notung being pulled out from her stomach, leaving a trail of blood. I assumed the meaning of this was that Erda—Nature &/or Fate—had meant that Siegmund would acquire the sword meant for him in his hour of need. It was a dramatic end to Act 1.

Act 2. Brünnhilde acts very much like a teenager, (dressed in a blue-grey shift and shiny green coat flying out as she leaps around) with very natural and boyish interaction with Wotan.

The scene between Fricka and Wotan was stunning—a black limousine glides silently on to the stage, chauffeured by Erda (dressed in Limo-driver's uniform) and Fricka gets out to confront Wotan. She is slim and tall, long blonde hair, and purple

dress, acting her part of wounded wife and winning Wotan (besuited, pride wounded) over to her demands.

The horizontal tree trunk with hollows in it (from *Das Rheingold*) re-appears for the scene with Siegmund (in yellow hoodie and blue T shirt) and Sieglinde. His tenderly puts her to sleep in one of the tree's hollows.

Brünnhilde's appearance for her annunciation was delayed, with the music and tension mounting, until she finally appears out of one of the hollows in the tree trunk, the lighting accentuating her emergence. Her interaction with Siegmund was emotionally heightened by their lyrical voices and the orchestra, always respectful of their voices and the drama.

The last scene with Hunding brandishing an axe, then Wotan cradling the dying Siegmund with deep anguish in his voice, and the final banishing of Hunding who fell horizontally backwards into the void was dramatically and musically superb.

Act 3. The dead tree trunk has appeared again, but this time it is vertical, with treeless branches looking stark and cataclysmic, and a large hollow at the bottom of the thick trunk.

The final scene, 'Wotan's Farewell' was rewarding in every way - musically, vocally, visually and emotionally. Maltman forcefully sang his anger with Brünnhilde, and she her shock at his crushing banishment, then her pleading for some modification of her total humiliation, was brilliantly sung and acted. Wotan's tender placing her in the hollow of the tree trunk induced silent tears running down my face (a good sign that one has been really moved). Then Loge's lighting up the tree, branch by branch was a suitably stunning ending to what, for me, had been an immensely enlightening and moving and rewarding Valkyrie.



Sir Antony Pappano and Barrie Kosky

LOHENGRIN 175th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

LOHENGRIN PREMIERED ON 28 AUGUST 1850 AT THE STAATSKAPELLE WEIMAR UNDER THE DIRECTION OF FRANZ LISZT. LISZT CHOSE THE DATE IN HONOUR OF WEIMAR'S MOST FAMOUS CITIZEN, JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, WHO WAS BORN ON 28 AUGUST 1749.



Woodcut of *Lohengrin* Act I / William Heine's design, 1851

It was in August 1845 that Wagner had the revelation of the character of Lohengrin, while reading the anonymous German poem, and the *Knight of the Swan* by **Conrad of Würzburg**, while he was taking the waters at Marienbad. In September 1846, he "resolutely" undertook the musical composition, beginning with act three, which constitutes the core of the whole and which contains the musical motifs attached to the legend of the Grail. The musical composition was completed with the prelude on August 28, 1847, and the entire score was finally finalized on April 28, 1848 in Dresden. Wagner immediately got embroiled in the revolutionary stirrings of the 1848 Revolutions. In Dresden, barricades were erected and the king presented with demands for democratic reform. Wagner lobbied for the organization of a German national theatre, "which proposed that the director of such an institution be elected, that a drama school be set up, the court orchestra expanded and its administration put under self-management."

By June 1848 Wager delivered a fiery speech, denouncing the evils of money and speculation, immoralities he considered barriers to the emancipation of the human race. To be sure, Wagner was knee-deep in financial difficulties, as he was looking for the sum of 5,000 thalers to pay his creditors. He wrote ... "After rereading some passages from my *Lohengrin* - I usually never reread my works - I was seized by an immense desire to see this opera performed. I therefore address to you an urgent prayer: have my *Lohengrin* performed! You are the only man to whom I wish to address such a prayer; to no one else but you would I entrust the creation of this opera; it is you that I charge with it, without the shadow of fear or hesitation, with absolute confidence. Have it performed wherever you wish, it matters little, even if only in Weimar. Have *Lohengrin* performed; may its entry into my life be your work.... Farewell, my dear Friend, my brother."

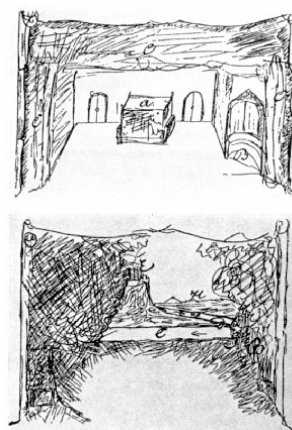
Editor's note: There will be more articles in future issues about *Lohengrin* and King Ludwig II, whose life was changed forever after he saw a production in Munich in 1861

Liszt's response has not survived, but by 1 July Wagner informs Liszt that he is fighting for life or death and that a selection from *Lohengrin* was scheduled for performance in September to mark the 300th anniversary of the court orchestra. Wagner did conduct excerpts from Act 1, but within a couple of months, his active role in the Dresden insurrection forced him to flee for his life. Prussian troops had started to assert control over the city

in May 1848, and Wagner first fled to Liszt in Weimar and subsequently made his way to Switzerland on a false passport. Also fleeing Dresden were Wagner's friends **Gottfried Semper** (1803 – 1879) and **Wilhelm Heine** (1827 – 1885). Semper fled to London, via Zurich. He was the architect of the Dresden Opera House, which was later to be the model for the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Incidentally, Semper also designed Wagner's conductor's baton. Wagner and Heine had rung the Dresden bells together and distributed pamphlets during the uprising. Heine fled to Paris and then New York, where he set up a studio. In 1853 he sailed with **Commodore Perry's** expedition to Japan and his later paintings were very influential in the growth of American *Orientalism*. He was a scholarship student with the distinguished Parisian scenic artist **Édouard Desplechin** (1802 – 1871), who had painted settings for the premiere of *Tannhäuser* in 1845. Heine had been assisting Wagner with the sets for *Lohengrin* before fleeing Dresden.. Wilhelm's father, **Ferdinand**, had been a friend and acting colleague of Wagner's step-father, Ludwig Geyer, in the Court Theatre in Dresden. Ferdinand also designed costumes and helped Wagner in staging *Rienzi*. In 'My Life', Wagner describes convivial evenings spent at the Heine's, along with Carl Maria von Weber. Wilhelm lived a fascinating life, exploring South America as well as Japan and fighting in the American Civil War.

Franz Liszt did everything he could to ensure the success of the creation of *Lohengrin*. He obtained from the theatre management a credit of 2000 thalers, which had never been seen before; he organised a press campaign, took personal charge of all the rehearsals, piano, choir, quartet, orchestra. The Weimar orchestra – thirty-five musicians – was

slightly expanded. Liszt was assisted by prominent theatre director, singer and composer **Eduard Genast** (1797 – 1866) and Wagner had some control by sending frequent instructions, sketches and suggestions by mail. After the opening Liszt wrote to Wagner: "*Our first performance was relatively satisfactory.... The Court, as well as the few intelligent people of Weimar, are full of sympathy and admiration for your work. As for the bulk of the public, they will certainly pride themselves on their honour, and will find beautiful and applaud what they cannot understand. Weimar is doubtless a little surprised to have such a work to perform.*" <https://richard-wagner-web-museum.com/publications/la-creation-de-lohengrin-a-weimar/>



Sketches by Wagner 1850



Franz Liszt c1850

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE 160th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE PREMIERED ON 10 JUNE 1865 AT THE KÖNIGLICHES HOFTHEATER UND NATIONALTHEATER IN MUNICH



Wagner 1865

First conceived in 1854, the music was composed between 1857 and 1859. It proved to be a difficult opera to stage, and Wagner considered various possibilities for the venue. In 1857 he was invited by a representative of **Pedro II**, Emperor of Brazil, to stage his operas in Rio de Janeiro (in Italian, the language of the Imperial Opera); he told **Liszt** he was considering settling in Rio, and that that city would be given the honour of premiering *Tristan*. Wagner sent the Emperor bound copies of his earlier operas in expression of his interest, but nothing more came of the plan. He then proposed that the premiere take place in Strasbourg, but the project failed to eventuate. His thoughts then turned to Paris, the centre of the operatic world in the middle of the 19th century. However, after a disastrous staging of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra, Wagner offered the work to the Karlsruhe opera in 1861. When

Wagner visited the Vienna Court Opera to rehearse possible singers for this production, the management at Vienna suggested staging the opera there but the tenor proved incapable of learning the role. Parallel attempts to stage the opera in Dresden, Weimar and Prague failed. Despite over 70 rehearsals between 1862 and 1864, *Tristan und Isolde* was unable to be staged in Vienna, winning the opera a reputation as unperformable. It was only after **King Ludwig II** of Bavaria became a sponsor of Wagner that enough resources could be found to mount the premiere in Munich. **Hans von Bülow** was chosen to conduct, despite the fact that Wagner was having an affair with his wife, **Cosima von Bülow**. Even then, the planned premiere on 15 May 1865 had to be postponed until the Isolde, **Malvina Schnorr von Carolsfeld**, had recovered from hoarseness.



King Ludwig II 1864



Act I set model 1865



Ludwig and Malvina Schnorr von Carolsfeld 1865



Angelo Quaglio the Younger 1865



Act III painting 1865

Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, the tenor, born in 1836, established his reputation at an early age, singing Lohengrin in a performance in 1861, which was seen by the young Crown Prince Ludwig. The most remarkable thing about this is that the tenor was only 25 when he sang Lohengrin, which is utterly miraculous, and goes beyond all vocal sense. The newly crowned King Ludwig II persuaded the composer not only that Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld should take over as Tristan but that his wife, Malvina, 10 years older, but still only in her mid-30s, should sing Isolde. She was a half-Portuguese, half-German soprano, devoting herself to furthering her husband's career. How a 28-year old could possibly sing the most exhausting role in all opera is a mystery, but Wagner was satisfied, especially after having personally auditioned the couple near Wiesbaden in 1862. Several performances followed soon after the premiere, and the tenor then sang Erik in *The Flying Dutchman* on July 1st. Tragically, this was his last Wagnerian role, as he died suddenly on July 21st, just after his 29th birthday. There was always speculation that the role of Tristan had killed him, since the weight and height of the part is unprecedented in all opera, and it is actually ridiculous that someone of that age could have sung the role at all, let alone four times in three weeks, but he was also seriously overweight and had suffered from a chill with rheumatic complications. Whatever the reason, it was a terrible blow to all concerned, and Malvina never sang again. She took up Spiritualism, and became obsessed with Wagner, being convinced she was destined to marry the composer. In her later years, she taught singing in Frankfurt and died at the age of 78 in Karlsruhe. [https://www.](https://www.edinburghmusicreview.com/blog/famous-opening-nights-tristan-isolde)

[edinburghmusicreview.com/blog/famous-opening-nights-tristan-isolde](https://www.edinburghmusicreview.com/blog/famous-opening-nights-tristan-isolde)

The next production of *Tristan* was in Weimar in 1874. Wagner himself supervised another production of *Tristan* in Berlin in March 1876, but the opera was only performed in his own theatre at the Bayreuth Festival after his death; **Cosima Wagner**, his widow, oversaw this in 1886, a production that was widely acclaimed.

The first production outside of Germany was given at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London in 1882; *Tristan* was performed by **Hermann Winkelmann**, who later that year sang the title role of Parsifal at Bayreuth. It was conducted by **Hans Richter**, who also conducted the first Covent Garden production two years later. Winkelmann was also the first Vienna *Tristan*, in 1883. The first American performance was held at the Metropolitan Opera in December 1886, conducted by **Anton Seidl**.

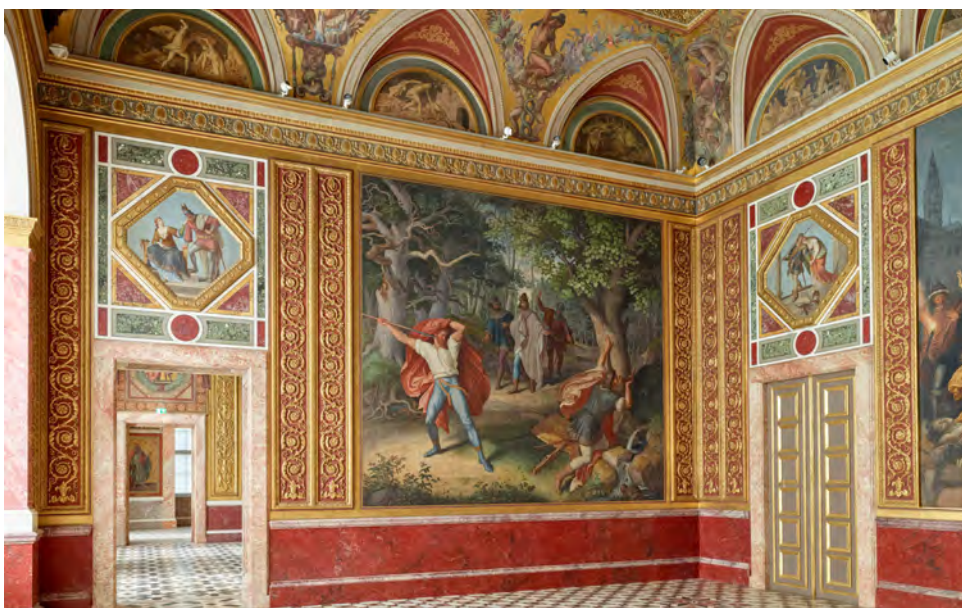
The set designer for the premiere was **Angelo Quaglio the Younger** (1829 – 1890). He was part of the Quaglio family originally from the town of Laino, between Lake Como and Lake Lugano, the son of **Simon Quaglio** (1795–1878), who practiced scene painting in Mannheim, Frankfurt, and Ludwigsburg. Simon's brother, **Angelo Quaglio the Elder** (1778–1815) was an architect and painter. Angelo the Younger was born and worked mainly in Munich, becoming known for his stage design, landscape and architecture paintings and engravings. He assisted Wagner in the premieres of a number of his works and was among the first designers to use built scenery instead of painted flats. He designed over 100 productions during his career.

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest achievements of Western art music, intriguing audiences with philosophical depths not usually associated with opera, and the "terrible and sweet infinity" of its musical-poetic language. Its advanced harmony, immediately announced by the famous opening *Tristan* chord of its prelude, marks a defining moment in the evolution of modern music, characterized by unprecedented use of chromaticism, tonal ambiguity, orchestral colour, and prolonged harmonic suspension. While these innovations divided audiences initially, the opera grew in popularity and became enormously influential among Western classical composers, providing direct inspiration to **Anton Bruckner**, **Gustav Mahler**, **Richard Strauss**, **Alban Berg**, **Arnold Schoenberg**, and **Benjamin Britten**. Other composers such as **Claude Debussy**, **Maurice Ravel**, and **Igor Stravinsky** formulated their styles in contrast to Wagner's musical legacy.

Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1784 – 1872)

The father of the first *Tristan*, **Ludwig von Carolsfeld**, was born in Leipzig. In 1811 he entered the Vienna Academy, from which **Johann Friedrich Overbeck** and others who rebelled against the old conventional style had been expelled about a year before. Schnorr followed Overbeck and the other founders of the Nazarene movement to Rome in 1815. This school of religious and romantic art tended to reject modern styles, attempting to revert to and revive the principles and practice of earlier periods. The second period of Schnorr's artistic output began in 1825, when he left Rome, settled in Munich, entered the service of **Ludwig I** of Bavaria (Ludwig II's father), and transplanted to Germany the art of wall-painting which he had learned in Italy. He showed himself qualified as a sort of poet-painter to the Bavarian court; he organized a staff of trained executants, and covered five halls in the new palace – the "Residenz" – with paintings illustrating the *Nibelungenlied*. In 1864 artist **Michael Echter** (1812-1879) painted a further 30 murals in an additional corridor at the Residenz based on Wagner's Ring text, which were destroyed in WWII.



Julius Schnorr Von Carolsfeld Munich Residenz murals



Postcard of a Michael Echter mural

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE AND SALVADOR DALÍ 1904 – 1989



Detail from *A Chemist Lifting...*



The Lovers Condemned



Bacchanale



Tristan and Isolde 1944

Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dalí i Domènech, Marquess of Dalí of Púbol known as **Salvador Dalí** was born in Figueres in Catalonia. His father, **Salvador Luca Rafael Aniceto Dalí Cusí** (1872–1950) was a middle-class lawyer and notary, an anti-clerical atheist and Catalan federalist, whose strict disciplinary approach was tempered by his wife, **Felipa Domènech Ferrés** (1874–1921), who encouraged her son's artistic endeavours. Dalí received his formal education in fine arts in Madrid. Influenced by Impressionism and the Renaissance masters from a young age, he became increasingly attracted to Cubism and avant-garde movements. He moved closer to Surrealism in the late 1920s and joined the Surrealist group in 1929, soon becoming one of its leading exponents. His best-known work, *The Persistence of Memory*, was completed in August 1931. Dalí lived in France throughout the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939) before leaving for the United States in 1940 where he achieved commercial success. He returned to Spain in 1948 where he announced his return to the Catholic faith and developed his «nuclear mysticism» style, based on his interest in classicism, mysticism, and recent scientific developments.

Wagner was Dalí's favourite composer, and the painter's connection to Wagner was personal and deeply rooted. As a child, Dalí would listen as his father sat by the family phonograph listening to *Lohengrin* – while Dalí's uncle, **Anselm Domènech**, was active in the Barcelona Wagner Association. Dalí's admiration for Wagner was lifelong, and he incorporated Wagner's work into his art and theatre designs. In his painting *A Chemist Lifting with Extreme Precaution the Cuticle of a Grand Piano* (1936), Dalí included a profile of Wagner. Dalí's Dalí Castle in Púbol has a fountain with busts of Wagner and has recordings of Wagner's operas, including *Tristan und Isolde*, which played on the day of his death in 1989.

Description of the artwork

The figures depicted on this canvas were painted by Dalí in 1944 for the production of the ballet *Mad Tristan* to music by Wagner. *Mad Tristan* was the third ballet that Salvador Dalí created in collaboration with dancer and choreographer **Leonid Massine**. The precursor to the production was *Bacchanale* to music from the first act of *Tannhäuser*. The libretto and designs were by Dalí, and the costumes were sewn by **Coco Chanel**, using real ermine and precious stones. The war prevented the premiere of *Bacchanale* in Paris, and the "first paranoid performance" was shown in 1939 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The second venture of Dalí and Massine, the ballet *Labyrinth*, was released in the same place in 1941, after which the artist again turned to Wagner's music, creating *Mad Tristan*. Tristan, in Dalí's view, was so distraught with love that he saw in Isolde "a praying mantis devouring its half." While creating the backdrop for the final scene of *Mad Tristan*, the artist depicted a bleeding hero wearing a dandelion beret. The wound on his shoulder is crawling with ants. A princess is reaching out to the knight with both hands, a cart sticking out of her back. The stage is framed by two crutches. By the time *Mad Tristan* was staged, Massine had left the Russian Ballet of Monte Carlo, whose repertoire included *Bacchanale* and *Labyrinth*, and worked with Ballet International. It is not known how the backdrop ended up in the Metropolitan Opera's props warehouse, but it was there that it was discovered in 2009. It was sold to an anonymous collector in Switzerland, and the amount of the deal is still unknown. The great work, which has not appeared in public since 1944, could have been forgotten behind closed doors, but instead has received a completely unique life. It became the backdrop for an acrobatic circus troupe. The Swiss owners of the painting contacted the Finzi Pasca Company of Lugano, which directed shows for Cirque du Soleil and Cirque Eloise, also for the closing ceremony of the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics. The collectors loved the performances and gave the directors complete freedom to use the backdrop. It became part of the machinery of *La Verità*, which premiered at the Théâtre Maisonneuve in Montreal on 17 January 2013. After that, the performance was shown on both continents - in Europe and America.



Brooch (Leah Gordon jeweller)

LORENZ GEDON 1844 – 1883



Lorenz Gedon

Lorenz Gedon was an architect, painter, decorator and sculptor who belonged to the great 'Munich School', which, considering only art, valued to the same degree all the paths which lead to it. So he brought the same interest, the same respect for form to all his productions, when it came to modelling subjects for a pendulum or drawing cartoons for a ceiling, as when carving a figure in stone, or for building a palace. He was one of those who made the greatest progress in German art in the decorative sense, and his name will certainly occupy the first place in the history of this modern Renaissance which took off in the 1870s.

Lorenz Gedon was the impresario and main creator of a great festival and exhibition which took place in 1876. The "Allgemeine deutsche Kunst- und Kunstindustrie-Ausstellung alter und neuer deutscher Meister sowie der deutschen Kunstschulen" (Exhibition German general art and artistic industry of old and new German masters as well as German art schools), had set itself the goal of popularizing the "German Renaissance", a historicist revival of German art of the 16th century.

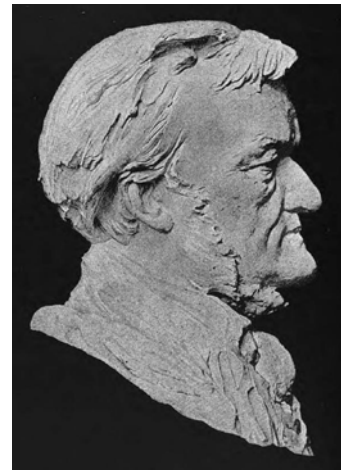
Gedon worked as an (interior) architect and craftsman; he designed ceremonial sleighs

for **Ludwig II**, the interior design of the Wahnfried Villa for Richard Wagner (with set designer **Paul von Joukowsky**), and the Schack Palace in Munich; castles, bourgeois houses, paddle steamers and large exhibition events. He largely contributed to making Munich a production centre of the German Renaissance.

The use of the most modern technologies for this retrograde cult of decoration was not seen as a contradiction at all. Renowned Munich artists willingly participated in the second International Electricity Exhibition in Munich. **Oskar von Miller**, the organizer of the exhibition and future director of the Deutsches Museum, remembered Gedon's contribution: "Gedon created (...) an old chapel full of atmosphere, in which a mannequin dressed as a cardinal was kneeling before the altar, which he had lit by an arc lamp through a faint slit.

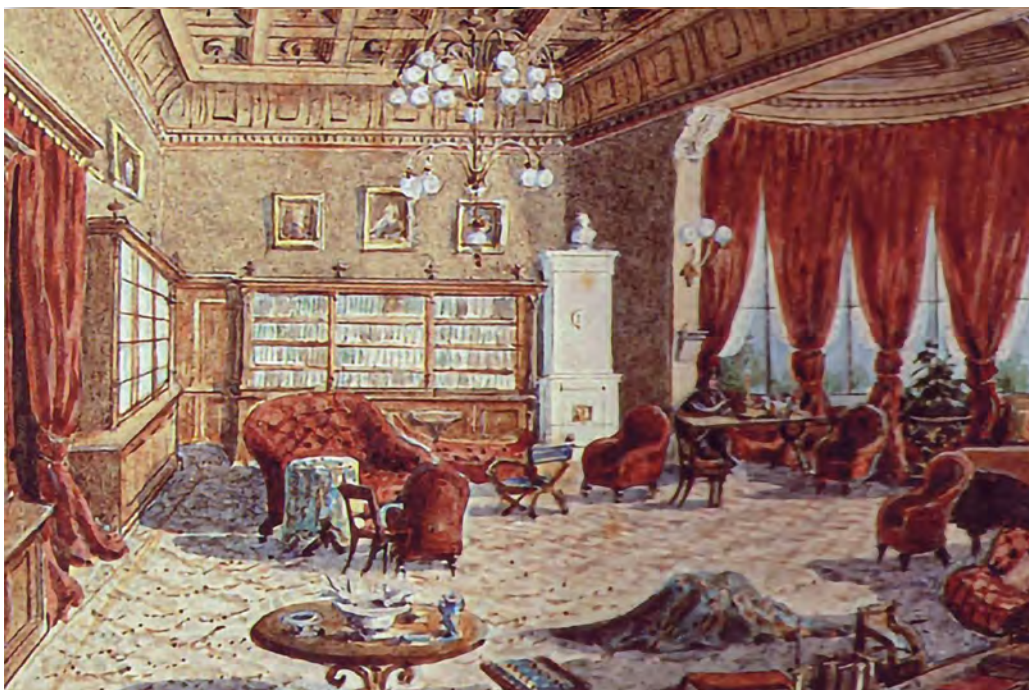
He died young in 1883, aged only 44.

Lorenz Gedon created several portrait busts of Richard Wagner. The 1881 bust shown here and on the back cover is on display at the Nuremberg City Museum.



Wagner 1883

"He was one of those who made the greatest progress in German art in the decorative sense, and his name will certainly occupy the first place in the history of this modern Renaissance which took off in the 1870s."



Villa Wahnfried 1874



Wagner 1881

DR TERENCE WATSON REVIEWS MELBOURNE OPERA'S *DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG*

16 AND 18 FEBRUARY 2025

Performers

Hans Sachs, **Warwick Fyfe**; Walther von Stolzing, **James Egglestone**; Sixtus Beckmesser, **Christopher Hillier**; Eva (Pogner's daughter), **Lee Abrahmsen**; David (Sachs's apprentice), **Robert Macfarlane**; Magdalena (Eva's companion), **Deborah Humble**; Meisters: Veit Pogner, **Steven Gallop**; Fritz Kothner, **Michael Lampard**; Kunz Vogelsang, **Henry Choo**; **Konrad Nachtigal**, **Darcy Carroll**; Balthasar Zorn, **Bradley Daley**; Ulrich Eisslinger, **Christopher Busietta**; Augustin Moser, **Asher Reichman**; Hermann Ortel, **Michael Honeyman**; Hans Schwartz, **Alex Pokryshevsky**; Hans Foltz, **Peter Tregear**; Nightwatchman, **Henry Shaw**; Apprentices: **Amanda Windred**, **Breanna Stuart**, **Lily Ward**, **Leah Phillips**, **Josh Erdelyi-Gotz**, **James Penn**, **Timothy Daly**, **Hartley Trusler**, **Daniel Felton**, and **Finn Gilheany**.

Creative Team

Conductor: **Anthony Negus**; Melbourne Opera Chorus and Orchestra; **Raymond Lawrence**, Chorus Master; Director, **Suzanne Chaundy**; Set Design, **Andrew Bailey**; Costume Design, **Karine Larché**; Lighting Design, **Philip Lethlean**; Movement Director, **Lisa Petty**.

Melbourne Opera has continued its superlative tradition of performing Wagner's canonical artworks at high standards in all aspects of performance and production. No other opera company in Australia can boast of a continuous record of, and commitment to, performing Wagner's artworks as part of its regular repertoire, rather than as occasional forays. Melbourne Opera steers a solid middle path between extravagant, ideologically driven interpretations and safe, conventional ones. Their financial and administrative arrangements mean that they have considerable freedom to experiment. Their commitment to productions that will appeal to the experienced Wagnerian and the novice—the operatic *Lehrjahre*in* and the knowledgeable *Wanderjahre*in*, so to speak.

The surprising choice of Melbourne's Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens resulted from the closure of State Theatre in April 2024 for a major refurbishment that will, with luck, conclude in December 2026. The Australian Ballet and Opera Australia have been performing at The Regent Theatre, which means that other companies have had to take up other venues, with Melbourne Opera rather at the lower end of the performing food chain. Hence their production of The Ring Cycle in Bendigo and now *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in the Exhibition Building. While not a conventional performing space, especially for opera, the management and creative teams considered that it could be adapted for a stage, orchestra pit, and seating, along with lighting and sets.

Though not four operas over four days and nights, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* offers similar challenges because of its length, Wagner's demands on singers and orchestral players, a complex story, and somewhat ambiguous characters. The creative team, the backstage workers, and the performers solved the many tests of adapting this artwork to work in the large open spaces of the Building. The accompanying

image shows the backstage area, a view that we almost never see for any performance we attend.

That the audience entered behind the stage meant that we needed to exercise an even greater suspension of disbelief. Rather than trying to minimise this kind of spoiler alert, Suzanne Chaundy built into the festival concept: One of the challenges of using a non-traditional venue is to create a functioning performance space within it which serves and enhances the requirements of the storytelling. We are building a functioning theatre space in the Royal Exhibition Building, with a raised and raked seating bank which allows for a pit type structure for the orchestra and a raised stage.

The Royal Exhibition Building is the overriding visual presence, and all design elements support that. We are keeping props and furnishings to an absolute minimum as the space itself provides extraordinary atmosphere. The opera is set during a festival, and our presentation will mimic that festive environment. The aim is that this is an absolute opera event! (All quotations of Chaundy's views are from the Director's "Die Meistersinger with a bit of a Larrikin Edge" in the program.)

At the Saturday seminar, Chaundy said that, since there were no wings, the comings and goings of the singers would be visible to most of the audience, also contributing to the festival atmosphere. She suggested that this would help focus our attention on the work of performers on the stage to bring their characters and stories to life.

The seating was arranged in "stalls" immediately in front of the stage and pit; most of the seats were in bleachers behind the stalls. On both occasions, I was about halfway back on the centre aisle.

Some people in the stalls said that the sound was a little muddy, but, for me, the acoustics were admirable—clear, quite focused, and a little reverberation from the dome to add warmth. Most of the singers sang, when they could, from centre front stage, perhaps to keep an eye on the conductor Antony Negus, and perhaps because that was sweet spot for projecting their voices. The orchestral clarity enabled me to focus as much on the clever game Wagner was playing with themes from this artwork and quotes from some of his others as on the musical quality overall. There were times when some singers' voices were hard to hear over the orchestral forces, but that is true for almost all the Wagner artworks I have attended. Lee Abrahmsen and James Egglestone were a fine match, vocally and physically, making one of the more credible pair of lovers in Nuremberg I have seen.

The dome added considerable heft to the three big choral moments in the artwork. The chorus was off-stage for the imitation Lutheran hymn in the church—*Da zu dir*



Seating & view of set for Act 1

der Heiland kam (When the Saviour came to thee, but their sound was powerful. In Act 3, for the *Wach' auf, es naht gen den Tag* (*Wake up, the day is approaching*), using Sachs's text but Wagner's music, the chorus was on stage and their sound on the opening phrase was goosebump making—more powerful than in Act 1, and beautifully nuanced. It seemed that their placement on the stage, just under the dome enhanced the sound dramatically. The third big choral moment came when the townspeople acclaimed Sachs— (*bricht schnell und heftig in jubelnder Bewegung aus*) *Hans Sachs! Nein! Das war schön erdacht! Das habt ihr einmal wieder gut gemacht!* ((jubilantly) *Hans Sachs! No! You thought it out excellently! / You've made everything right again now!*).

Their final chorus, repeating Sachs's provocative paean, brought the performance to a thrilling conclusion: 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! The politics informing this passage was one of the major themes of the Saturday seminar. For me, the passage is only one aspect of the somewhat incoherent politics, or better ideology, informing Wagner's *Weltanschauung* and his speculative essays and artworks.

The simple, all-purpose superstructure of the set, visible in the above image, not only allowed for fast scene changes (unhanging one set of flats and hanging the next set), but was also, according to Chaundy, a gesture towards Wagner's knowledge of Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre in which many of his plays were performed: 'The 'skeleton' of our design is reminiscent of the Globe Theatre, where audiences would gather in daylight to watch Shakespeare's profound tales of the human condition unfold. Every aspect of the design has been created in harmony with the colour palette of the Royal Exhibition building interior. We are working with the vast space, light and beauty the building provides.

This open staging and the informal interaction between performers and audience members contributed to the festival atmosphere, with many people taking advantage of the relatively warm and sunny days (on Sunday and Tuesday, at least) to eat and drink outside, walk around the building, stop and chat, etc. From this perspective, the team's gamble paid off. It made the experience memorably unique. Unlike the atmosphere in the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, where it can be a little oppressive with bejewelled people in haute couture and attitude, here it was informal, very friendly, relaxed, genial, and genuinely excited—increasingly so, as the performance continued.

The Royal Exhibition Building was a solidly permanent container for the temporary stage, and had been the setting for many major cultural and political events during its opening celebrations:

On 9 May 1901 the Royal Exhibition Building hosted the opening of the first Federal Parliament. Prime Minister **Edmund Barton** wanted it to be as inclusive as possible. No other public building could accommodate such a large group of people, and the organisers were eager to make the occasion spectacular and memorable. The Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York visited Melbourne for the event, creating great excitement....¹

There were surprising (to me) numbers of Wagner pieces played during the opening ceremony and afterwards:

The musical offerings of the Exhibition provided both unsurpassed pleasure and educational opportunity for the Victorian public. New music was composed by the Centennial Orchestra's conductor [and Musical Director of 1888-89 Symphony Concerts] **Frederick Cowen** [1852-1935] and performed alongside traditional composers. There were performances of all the **Beethoven** symphonies, and symphonies by **Schubert, Brahms, Schumann** and **Wagner** were premiered. [...] An *Argus* review of an October performance of music by Wagner, **Mozart** and **Delibes** was deemed to be 'very interesting' with 'showy movements being encored and repeated,' which in doing so 'gave great satisfaction to [the] large evening audience'.

The Centennial Orchestra performed (for the first time for many Australian audiences) 'serious' musical pieces.... Beethoven's 'Pastoral Symphony' and Wagner's Overture to 'Tannhaeuser' [sic], noted as being widely popular in Europe, were very popular with Melbourne audiences, a sign that Australian audiences were developing a 'love for, the best music'.... Two months into the Exhibition, The *Argus* reported that 'the general public, amongst whom were many excursionists, were treated to well-practised and highly finished performances of the following well known selections, namely: Prelude to Longengrin [sic] and overture to Tannhaeuser by Wagner; the Ballet Air no. 1, from Rosamund Music, by Schubert; The Hungarian Rhapsody no. 3 in D, the Turkish Rondo from a pianoforte sonata by Mozart; and also music by Delibes.'²

The sets and costumes reminded me a little of the Otto Schenk production, which, I think, was broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera in its 2021-22 season: www.metopera.org/user-information/old-seasons/2021-22-season/die-meistersinger-von-nurnberg

While the Metropolitan Opera has more money, a bigger stage, and huge auditorium, Melbourne Opera has energy, commitment, community engagement, and, in this case, a very impressive building to contain its more human-scale production. This human focus was one of Chaundy's particular aims:

"While the Metropolitan Opera has more money, a bigger stage, and huge auditorium, Melbourne Opera has energy, commitment, community engagement, and, in this case, a very impressive building to contain its more human-scale production."



Backstage

“Unlike Wagner’s operas which are more mythical in content, *Meistersinger* is about ordinary people – humans exercising control over their own fates. The genius in *Meistersinger* is the subtlety and gentle exploration of human foibles and internal turmoil which Wagner’s music and libretto elevates to become revelatory.”

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It can be argued that this artwork is strongly “mythical.” While not featuring gods and overtly super- or supra-natural elements, Wagner is still mythologising Nuremberg and Hans Sachs. Part of this impulse in the artwork comes from Wagner’s belief that all great art is mythological, depending on archetypes for its power to engage those who attend to it. In this artwork, Wagner can be understood as projecting aspects of himself (the archetypes with which he identifies) into the three main male protagonists, and perhaps other aspects into Eva. However, the overt narrative places the artwork firmly in an ostensibly historical period in an identifiable city, with known figures. Chaundy, therefore, works within a naturalistic tradition, which includes the possibility of highlighting the comic, or just plain silly, actions and words of some of the characters, as well as their pathos and pain, and their hopes for love.

Special mentions should be made of the contributions of Lighting Design, **Philip Lethlean**; Costume Designer, **Karine Larché**; and Movement Director, **Lisa Petty**. The way in which Lethlean integrated the lighting of the set with the colours and existing lighting effects in the Building was subtle and emotionally engaging. I particularly liked the way the huge fantail window at the far end of the hall, behind the set, glowed over the whole event until late in the evening, adding depth and stature, along with the central pillars and dome, to the simple set. I gathered that Larché was brought in very late in the development of the production, but with her extensive experience in costume design in other artforms, she produced a mixture of haute couture (for Eva’s exquisite gown for the competition); ordinary clothes for apprentices; more than sensible work clothes for Magdalena; elegant outfits for Walther; and a mixture of work clothes and house garments for the Mastersingers; and then their weirdly papal looking white with gold trim kaftans for the competition. Only Beckmesser’s costume disappointed for similar reasons as I explain below that his entire presentation disappointed.



Petty must have had fun choreographing the riot scene in Act 2, with such a small stage for it. Most of the “riot” was made up of most of the townsfolk awkwardly and aimlessly biffing at each other in amateur attempts to “fight.” Petty’s focus was on a few of the apprentices to whom she gave more potentially dangerous fisticuffs to perform, with some well-aimed punches to stomachs and kicks to groins. Otherwise, her directions for stage movements were unobtrusive, assisting the main characters to move naturally. The apprentices were given the chance to dance on three occasions before their ceremonial moment in Act 3. This reflects Wagner’s response to the demands of the Paris Opera for a ballet in Act 2 for the Jockey Club to ogle their special dancer: here, their dancing arises naturally from the apprentices’ spontaneous high spirits and their dramatic situations.

The ensemble’s main characters worked very well together. Within Chaundy’s low-key, naturalistic approach there were many instances of interactions that told us much about the characters. I especially liked Sachs and Beckmesser shirtfronting each other at the end of the poem-pinching episode. Magdalena’s and David’s still blooming romance was sweet and unaffected as they gently tested how far they could express their love publicly.

The sentimental heart of the artwork is split between Sachs and Eva and Walther and Eva. Unlike the awkward triangle at Zurich between the Wesendoncks and Wagner, which structures *Tristan und Isolde*, this triangle seems to align with Wagner recognising that he is now an older man whose appeal to younger women is declining. This doesn’t stop him fantasising himself into Walther and his love for Eva. Such psychological dynamics help to explain the poignancy of Sachs’s slow conceding of the emotional battlefield to Walther for the best interests of Eva.

As Walther von Stolzing, James Egglestone looked the part – tall, handsome, elegant; like the portraits of Friedrich von Schiller, the figure Wagner hero worshipped and wished he looked like (he had a portrait of Schiller in his study in Tribschen, then in Bayreuth). Egglestone carried off his aristocratic heritage with flair, marking him as apart from the *Bürger* and the *Volk*. That he wanted to become a *Bürger*, as Pogner says is surprising: “...von Stolzing, Walther, from Franconia, / well known to me from letters and documents. The last of his line, / he recently left his estate and castle / and came hither to Nuremberg / to become a burgher here.”³

On this basis, we could assume that he had come to Nuremberg to find a wife to continue his line: perhaps because his aristocratic and *bürgerlich* neighbours thought him too eccentric for their daughters because of his habit of wandering through forests singing with the birds? He is not poor, since Pogner has come to his aid: “I gladly helped you with the sale of the estate, / now I’ll equally gladly receive you into the guild.”

At the beginning of Act 1, Walther makes it clear to David that he has never heard of Mastersingers or singing competitions, but after hearing that Eva is destined to be married to one of them, he proclaims: “This is the right place for me. / I freely admit, what drove me / from the country to Nuremberg / was only my love of Art. / If I forgot to tell you that yesterday, / I must today be bold and proclaim it out loud: / I should like to be a Mastersinger.” This is an

exaggeration he thinks will smooth his way to Eva, but he is caught out as soon as he discovers how hard it is to become a Mastersinger, and that he would have to prove his credentials in a contest. Perhaps it was *Schicksal*, Destiny, that determined that he should arrive in Nuremberg the day before the contest?

Eva is a fine example of a *bürgerliche* daughter, and Abrahmsen captured her quality very effectively with believable switches from flirting to seriousness, from clever planning to psychological insights. She embodied Eva's intelligence, sensitivity, independence of mind, but also her willingness to conform to some social customs, including obeying the right man as husband. In her introduction to the glorious quintet in Act 3 (sung beautifully by Abrahmsen), she shows she has both the innate poetic and musical skills to improvise, and a knowledge of the Meistersinger rules, probably gained from listening to her father and his friends construct their mastersongs. She is, then, a perfect complement to Walther. She can also be read as Wagner's ideal partner of whom Cosima von Bülow came to be a pale, but satisfactory substitute (for Mathilde Wesendonck, that is). It is a curious moment in Wagner's life that Cosima visited the Wesendonck's in their Zurich villa while Wagner was living in the cottage in the grounds and working on his *Meistersinger* artwork. Once Cosima von Bülow showed more than a passing interest in him, he almost instantly forgot the love of his life, Mathilde.

Warwick Fyfe seems to have found a role that fits him like one of Sachs's well-made shoes. The role gave him considerable scope for the comic talents that he has shown in his talks to the Wagner Society in NSW, for instance, as well as to inhabit a character who is a flawed human being, not an imperious, and flawed, god. Chaundy's interpretation gave him many opportunities to engage in facial and body gestures and expressions commenting on the action around him, especially when encountering Sixtus Beckmesser. Fyfe showed much of his ability to convey pathos, pain, love, and despair in his farewell to Brünnhilde in Act 3 of *Die Walküre*. Here, such emotions are also called for continuously in between the comic moments.

It is not hard to recognise in the historical Sachs aspects of Wagner's character. Sachs was famous as the author of *Knittelverse* (doggerel verse), mastersongs, and *Fastnachtsspiele* (carnival plays), ...a comic tradition carried over from the mid-15th century. They were based on forms of monologue and dialogue and were part of the spirit of misrule and social inversion of carnival celebrations at Shrovetide (though order is always restored by the end). Its form in the 16th century altered to a certain extent to include more dramatic and plot devices, rather than simply a series of speeches, although the plays now often included an introductory monologue from one of the characters. The content of the plays also changed: although the humour often continued to be coarse and explicit, they also now incorporated more serious elements, especially as Sachs began including Reformation ideas in his *Fastnachtsspiele*. Right (and wrong) relations between the sexes continued to be a popular theme.⁴

There are elements in Wagner's libretto that seem to point to this tradition, especially the restoration of order with Walther winning the competition and its prize. Sachs was also the

author of controversial pamphlets in support of the views of Luther. In his famous 1523 poem *Die Wittenbergisch Nachtigall, die man jetzt horet überall*), written in Luther's honour, which Wagner quotes at the beginning of the artwork:

Sachs accused the pope and his servants of using their powers to exploit and oppress simple Germans, depriving the laity of the gospel, and enacting a tyranny over both the conscience and pocketbooks of common folk. This blistering attack on the upper echelons of the Church was placed alongside a dramatic vision of Luther as a liberating figure who was not only in the right, but also simply could not be stopped. The work was as resonant as it was inflammatory, published as it was in the atmosphere of religious turbulence in Nuremberg.⁵

It is likely that Wagner expected his German audiences to know this backstory, which would have made the artwork more radically political than it seems to most Australians today. The question then might be whether that sectarian politics is relevant to contemporary Australian, or world, conditions? Sachs's stand against a powerful, totalitarian religious power could be interpreted as a stand against all authoritarian regimes and personalities.

The other main character to consider is Beckmesser. With his characterisation I have major reservations and must register my disappointment at another demeaning portrayal. He is, after all, a Mastersinger, the Town Clerk, and a *Bürger*, that is, he is a full citizen of Nuremberg. Wagner gives him foibles and flaws, as he does with each of his main characters. Because he is a distant relative of Shakespeare's Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, we should also remember that his overweening pride and belief in his attractiveness does not detract from the humanness with which Shakespeare endows the character. Even if Beckmesser were to be a caricature of the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, Wagner's aesthetic enemy, there is no evidence to suggest that Beckmesser should therefore be reduced to the status of a buffoon. There is plenty of comic and satiric content in Beckmesser's character and behaviour to highlight without denying the humanity he shares with all the residents of Nuremberg. Fortunately, Christopher Hillier was allowed to sing in his normal voice and not in some parody of Jewish cantorial singing. One

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18 February 2025—curtain call

Lis Bergmann's summary of our updated website:

I am very pleased to announce that the new WSNSW website is live.

It is the original web address:
<https://wagner.org.au/>

It's been a long process but we are so pleased it has been completed. Many thanks to:

- **Dr Ashish Nanda** for his valuable hard work in creating the website
- **Danny May** for his vision, skills and support
- **Esteban Insausti** for his support, and the front page header
- **The Committee** for its support.

Features of the new website:

1. The same content as the old website
2. A much more contemporary and professional appearance and much more dynamic
3. Greater security incorporated to prevent hacking
4. The Home page is now quite striking
5. A new pdf Sponsorship application form which applicants can now write on
6. A new payment option for joining/rejoining - to pay online by card
7. The Events home page highlights the next two events and the program for the year, and can highlight up to 6 events on this page.
8. Each new event will retain its webpage which couldn't be done before, with updates (e.g. links to program, photos etc) (Ed. Note: all past events are listed in detail)
9. Quarterlies plus President's reports no longer require a login to access.
10. The current year's Quarterlies will not be online until the following year so as to encourage joining the WSNSW
11. In the media galleries, on computers, photo captions are clearly visible when you move your cursor on to the photo. In addition, a slideshow of photos will appear when you click on a photo.
12. For mobiles, you need to touch a photo which starts the slideshow with captions.

of my benchmarks for this role is John Pringle in Australian Opera's 1990 staging with Donald McIntyre as Sachs.

Robert Macfarlane, as Sachs's apprentice David, made the most of the comic elements of his character, as well as the pathos of his young love for Magdalena. His voice is strong throughout his *Fach*, and he employed it effectively to characterise the young man on the verge of ending his *Lehrjahre*, as both cobbler and artist, and beginning his *Wanderjahre*, though there is no hint in the artwork that he is about to leave Nuremberg to hone his craft by wandering around the German countryside. It is Magdalena, Deborah Humble, who will ensure that he stays at home—and her employer, Herr Pogner, who will undoubtedly ensure he is gainfully employed. Humble brought to this role her typical insight in the character, giving her a satisfying level of commonsense, and compassion for her mistress and her lover as well as for her own bumbling lover. Her voice was a rich and expressive as ever, and her stage presence showed her extensive experience in opera.

All the Mastersingers were effective in their roles, offering little quirks and mannerisms to differentiate them. Steven Gallop as Veit Pogner is the mastermind of the entire plot, though he loses control over it as Sachs takes over to ensure it reaches his desired end. Gallop had the voice and gravitas appropriate to a wealthy *Bürger* used to being in control. It was a pleasure to hear the return of other Melbourne Opera stalwarts, such as Bradley Daley, Michael Honeywell, and Peter Tregear as Mastersingers, which they indeed are. The other Mastersingers brought a range of vocal colour and costume to their roles, as well as creating a genial collegiality. Among their ranks were several up-and-coming singers whom I will be happy to hear and watch in future productions.

The final “character” to consider is the chorus, or *Volk*, as Wagner describes them. However, *das Volk* is a loaded term in Wagner's ideology. It is intended to convey a mystical, essentialist understanding of a specific cohort of people. It is independent of, and above, the mere historical instantiations in some residents of Nuremberg in the mid-16th century. In Wagner's speculative essays, *das Volk* is given the role of endorsing the true products of *heil'ge deutsche Kunst*, which generally means all his artworks. In *The Artwork of the Future*, he proclaims:

Who, then, will be the Artist of the Future? The poet? The performer? The musician? The plastician [painter/sculptor]—Let us say it in one word: the Folk. That self-same Folk to whom we owe the only genuine Art-work, still living even in our modern memory, however much distorted by our restorations; to whom alone we owe all Art itself [TAWF 204-05].

In the explication of this gnomic expression,

the Mastersingers are one group of the Artists of the Future of their time, at least Sachs and Walther, whose task it is to tell the stories of *das Volk* to it, to identify their deepest anxieties and resolve them in a new vision of themselves in a (Wagnerian) work of art.

However, we still do not know who *das Volk* might be in their Nuremberger clothes. In translations of Wagner's libretto, that term is usually neutrally translated as “the people,” as in Pogner's Act 1 explanation of his strange prize: “[the Mastersingers] permit the people to listen / to the open singing with their laymen's ears.” We might ask Pogner who constitutes the people. He offers an answer in Act 2, when he explains to Eva that on St Johannestag, “Nuremberg, the whole city / with burghers and commoners, with guilds, people, and high council [*Gemeinen, mit Zünften, Volk und hohem Rat*], / shall assemble before you....” This is an interesting sociological analysis of the social structure of Nuremberg. It suggests that Pogner adheres to a traditional, Christian, hierarchical understanding of people in their proper places. *Gemeinen* is problematic because its translation depends on what view one might have of the those who constitute this group. In general, in the 16th century, it connoted a commonality, a community, but it also had connotations of common, low, nasty, and, in Wagner's time, despicable, indecent, scoundrel. We can assume that no Nuremberg *Bürger* fitted into the latter cohort, but what about the underclasses, the servants, the serfs, the farm managers, the innkeepers, the roadmenders et al?

If *Gemeinde* is interpreted as communal, community, then *Meistersinger* fits into Wagner's preoccupation with the relationship between an Artist and her audiences—to what community does she belong; is she welcome in any community; does the general community's values accord with hers or do theirs need to be reconstructed along the lines she values. If this is the case, then we can understand Sachs's grasping of the opportunity Beckmesser inadvertently presents to him, when he pinches the poem, as Wagner's stratagem for signalling to his audiences that not only a major aesthetic renovation, but also a profound moral reformation is occurring before their eyes, and they are implicitly solicited to join in.

Australian Wagnerians, and the country in general, is fortunate to have an opera company that has dedicated itself to productions of some of the western canon's greatest artworks to such high standards. The Company's achievement in this case is more remarkable because the work was cast entirely from Australian performers, and most of their other Wagner productions have also drawn heavily on local talent.

Terence Watson 4 May 2025

Endnotes

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- 5 Wood, Thomas. “Hans Sachs in Oxford I: Historical Context” in *History of the Book Exploring the World of Books at Oxford*, pages 6-7. URL= <https://historyofthebook.mml.ox.ac.uk/sachs1524-1/>, accessed 24/2/2025.

THE *RING*'S WESTERN MYTHS AND EASTERN BELIEFS

Part 1 of the text of Peter Bassett's talk in the Third Brisbane *Ring* Symposium on 16th December 2023



Funeral pyre of the Buddha. Gandhara 2nd Century

Many people would regard the fusion of western myths and eastern beliefs as dramatically unworkable and contradictory. But actually, it is something that is typically Wagnerian. We find it throughout the *Ring* from the second act of *Die Walküre* onwards and especially in the closing pages of *Götterdämmerung*, and also in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*.

In the Prose Edda of Iceland and the Norse *Völsungasaga*, both written in the 13th century, Brynhild ends up on Sigurd's funeral pyre. In Wagner's 1848 sketch for '*Siegfried's Death*', which takes the story further, she is seen as a proud Valkyrie rising above the flames and leading Siegfried heavenwards to his place in Valhalla. There is no cataclysm, and the old order of gods survives. Then, in 1851, another Norse idea was introduced - Ragnarök ('Twilight of the Gods') - in which the gods are destroyed, although, according to the old poems, this occurred not after a hero's funeral but after a great battle with the powers of evil (the frost giants, a fearsome wolf and sea monster) and when the flame giant Surt set the heavenly rainbow bridge alight as the blazing world sank beneath the ocean. Wagner could have followed those old Norse precedents, but he chose not to.

In the mid-1850s, something else caught his attention – an account of the death and cremation of the Buddha. When the sage entered Nirvana (which, according to Wagner's later text, was also Brünnhilde's destiny) the earth trembled and firebrands fell from the sky, the heavens were lit up by a preternatural fire and the rivers boiled over. It's not hard to recognise in a conflation of these images, the stage directions at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Nor is it difficult to understand why Wagner, in a rare example of motive-labelling, referred to the exquisite closing theme (first used as Sieglinde's paean to Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*) as 'the glorification of Brünnhilde' or 'the theme in praise of Brünnhilde'. By renouncing desire and achieving wisdom through love, Brünnhilde had revealed the path to Nirvana, a path that would be expressed definitively in the Christian/Buddhist syncretism of *Parsifal*. That's why it is Brünnhilde, not Siegfried, who is the real hero of the *Ring*, and why she is given the task of bringing the whole story to a close.

So, where did Wagner's interest in eastern ideas and philosophies come from? In his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, he describes how, as a little boy living in Leipzig, he had met the composer **Carl Maria von Weber**, who visited the family home on a number of occasions. In 1805, Weber had composed a Chinese Overture using a genuine Chinese theme, and, a few years later, this overture was used as incidental music for **Friedrich von Schiller's** play *Turandot*.

Both Weber and Schiller loomed large in the Wagner family's thinking. The young Richard was greatly impressed by Weber's music, especially *Der Freischütz*, echoes of which can be found in the Third Act of *Siegfried* in the scenes of the forest by night and the forest murmurs. Schiller had been an acquaintance of the scholar **Adolf Wagner**, Richard's uncle, and as a seven-year-old, Richard played a minor role in Schiller's play *William Tell*, along with his sister **Klara** and **Ludwig Geyer** who would become their stepfather. But it was *Turandot* that brought genuine Asian musical themes to this early 19th century German world, and the young Richard came to know it.

Schiller had based his *Turandot* on a Commedia dell'arte play by **Carlo Gozzi**, first performed in Venice in 1762. In 1872, **Cosima Wagner** wrote in her diary: "In the evening we return to our good Gozzi and read his *Turandot* with great interest." So Wagner certainly knew the story which inspired as many as twelve operas, including Puccini's in 1924. The tale originated in Persia, and its principal source was a collection called *The Thousand and One Days*, or *The Persian Tales*, a counterpart to *The Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*. For close on a thousand years, the story of an irresistible princess of China and her fatal challenges to unwanted suitors had been known in Persia – now Iran. 'Turandot' is a Persian name meaning 'the daughter of Turan' - Turan being the Persian name for central Asia. Persia fell to **Genghis Khan's** Mongols in the thirteenth century and, in the following century, to the Tatar ruler **Timur**, known to Europeans as Tamerlane. This Timur was a military genius (albeit a brutal one) who died during a campaign against the Ming dynasty. The Timurid dynasty survived until 1857 as the Mughal dynasty of India.

Which brings us to India and, in particular, to the opera *Jessonda* by the German composer **Louis Spohr** which Wagner admired greatly and conducted numerous times at Magdeburg, Königsberg and Riga in the 1830s. Written in 1822, this opera is set in Goa, and the plot involves the heroine, Jessonda, facing suttee - being burned to death on the funeral pyre of her husband, the former Rajah. (Thoughts of Brünnhilde's immolation come to mind.) Louis Spohr had lived in a spare room of the Geyer family home in Dresden when Richard was a boy and, much later, he conducted the earliest performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* in Kassel. In his autobiography, Spohr recalled a dinner party attended by the young Wagner.

"We were most pleased with Wagner" wrote Spohr, "who seems every time more and more amiable, and whose intellectual culture on every variety of subject is really wonderful."

In 1837-38 Wagner began work on, but didn't finish, a comic Singspiel called 'Men's Cunning is Greater than



Meissen Chinoiserie porcelain



Hafiz 14th Century



Hindu funeral pyre

Women's Cunning, or The Happy Bear Family'. It was based on Women's Wiles, one of the Tales from a Thousand and One Nights. He changed the setting from Baghdad to 'a large German town', the story was Europeanised, and some of the characters were loosely modelled on Richard's family members. This was his first personal engagement with the literature of the East, and it wouldn't be his last.

In Saxony in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, there was a general fascination with the orient - its art and architecture, objects d'art, literature, religions and philosophies. And this was the physical environment in which the young Wagner discovered the world of his imagination. Today, we can differentiate

easily among Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Persian cultures, but in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, such differences were only vaguely understood in the west, and national boundaries were not as we know them today. When people spoke of, say, 'the Indies', they were often lumping together all sorts of eastern cultures and traditions. This seems strange to us now, but in those days, it was a fact.

As a child living in Dresden from 1814 when his mother married Ludwig Geyer, Richard Wagner knew 'Pillnitz Castle', the summer residence on the Elbe of the Electors and Kings of Saxony. Geyer's theatrical troupe performed there before Geyer died when Richard was just eight years old. The various buildings at Pillnitz, surrounded by a large public park, are notable for their chinoiserie decoration. The grounds feature a Chinese garden and a Chinese Pavilion, and the interiors include paintings of Chinese and Japanese scenes. The great trading companies of the 17th and 18th Centuries brought Chinese and Japanese export porcelain to Europe for the collections of kings and connoisseurs. These exquisite and, for a long time, mysteriously made objects inspired the founding in 1710 of Europe's first hard-paste porcelain factory at Meissen in Saxony at the initiative of Augustus the Strong.

Wagner wasn't interested in comical and patronising orientalism of the kind that inspired other works, including Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*. Instead, even as a young man, he was drawn to a school of thought that linked German intellectual achievements with those of ancient India and Persia. His interest had been stimulated by **Hermann Brockhaus** who had married his sister **Ottilie** in 1836. Hermann was appointed



Goethe: West-Eastern Divan 1814



Pillnitz

to the chair of ancient languages and literature at Leipzig University, specialising in Persian and Sanskrit.

In the early 1850s, Wagner wrote to his former assistant **August Röckel** languishing in Waldheim Prison after the failed Dresden uprising, about the poetry of the 14th Century Persian mystic, **Hafiz**, whose works were then being edited by Hermann Brockhaus, saying:

"Study Hafiz thoroughly; he is the greatest and most sublime philosopher. No one has ever been so cognizant of the Great Thing [he meant 'love'] as positively and incontestably as he. There is only one thing which he eulogizes: and everything else is not worth a brass farthing, no matter how high and sublime it may call itself. Something similar will also become manifest in my Nibelungen." Perhaps he had the following words of the poet in mind when working on the text of *Das Rheingold*: "Man of self, raised up with endless pride, we forgive thee - for love's to thee denied".

"My sleep is dreaming, my dreaming brooding, my brooding the mastery of knowledge". With these words, Erda addresses the Wanderer in Act Three of *Siegfried*, and her words associate her with the eastern practice of meditation. She implies that, through contemplation or meditation it is possible to abandon the world of the mind and senses - the world of time and space - and achieve wisdom. Wagner believed that Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian mystics all shared this understanding. Wotan thinks that success, life and power are all that matters, but Erda tells him that all things that are, will end; he is not the ultimate controller of his fate. Hafiz describes the futility of resisting an appointed destiny and offers only one solution: "Cast the world aside, yes abandon it". In 1882, Wagner observed: "The greatest heroic power lies in resignation". And that, of course, is what ultimately occurs to Wotan.

In 1814, **Goethe** had been drawn to the poetry of Hafiz and used it in his collection of twelve lyrical poems *West-Eastern Divan*, symbolizing exchanges and mixtures between the orient and the occident.

Philologists like Brockhaus had discovered that Sanskrit - the liturgical and scholarly language of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism - had much in common with European languages; all are members of the Indo-European linguistic family. Some went further, arguing that there were also cultural connections via a common Indo-European ancestry.

The blending of Christian legends and sacraments with Buddhist legends and teachings is an extraordinary idea, but Wagner saw no conflict in this at all. There were, after all, many common elements in Christian and Buddhist morality, if not theology. Wagner cited contemporary research "proving that pure uncontaminated Christianity is no more and no less than a branch of that venerable Buddhist religion". The philosopher **Arthur Schopenhauer** had subscribed to this view as early as 1813, the year of Wagner's birth, writing: "Whatever anyone may say, Christianity has Indian blood in its veins". But he went further, saying: "We find what we have called 'the denial of the will to life' still more fully developed, more comprehensively expressed, and more vividly presented in the ancient Sanskrit writings than could be done in the Christian church and the western world. ... [this] is perhaps to be ascribed chiefly to its not being restricted by an element quite alien to it, as is Jewish doctrine within Christianity." That was Schopenhauer in 1813.

Part 2 will be in September Quarterly

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Lorenz Gedon (1844-1883) Bust of Wagner 1881 Nuremberg City Museum

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