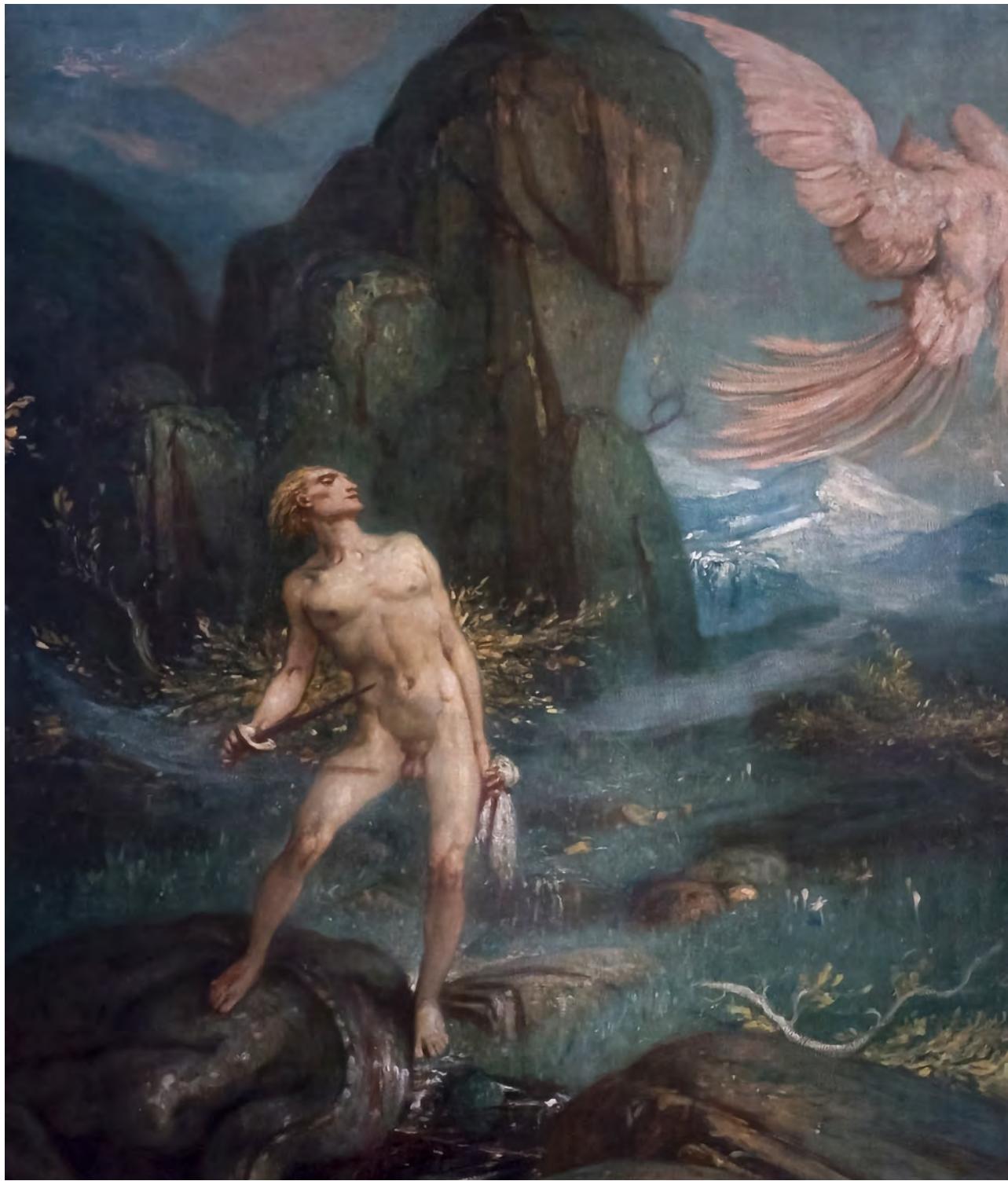


CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

# WAGNER QUARTERLY



SEPTEMBER 2025 | 178 ISSUE NO 51 CELEBRATING 45 YEARS



**Siegfried and the Magic Bird** c 1930 Charles de Sousy Ricketts 1866 - 1931

# COMING SOCIETY EVENTS 2025

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

2026 EVENTS WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN THE DECEMBER QUARTERLY

2025	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
Sun 14 Sep	2.00pm WSNSW 45th Anniversary celebration concert. Works by Wagner, Schumann and Strauss with soprano <b>Alexandra Flood</b> and pianist <b>Thomas Victor Johnson</b>	St Columba
Sun 12 Oct	12.30pm DVD Glyndebourne <i>Die Meistersinger</i> Act II 2.00pm Talk by <b>Esteban Insausti</b> on Traditional vs Iconoclastic stagings of <i>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</i>	Goethe Institut
Sat 15 Nov	10.00am – 6.00pm <i>Siegfried</i> Symposium and reception for visiting members of other Wagner Societies	Goethe Institut
Sun 30 Nov	2.00pm Christmas concert with tenor <b>Bradley Cooper</b> and pianist <b>Thomas Victor Johnson</b>	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](http://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 \$12

## GOETHE-INSTITUT ADDRESS

90 OCEAN STREET  
WOOLLAHRA  
(CORNER OF JERSEY ROAD)

## FOR YOUR DIARY

13, 16 Nov 2025	SSO/ <b>Simone Young AM</b> <i>Siegfried</i>	SOH
March 2026	La Scala <i>Ring</i> with <b>Simone Young AM</b> . Dir <b>David McVicar</b>	Milan
17 Mar – 6 Apr	Royal Opera <b>Barrie Kosky's Siegfried</b>	ROH London
16 – 31 May	Deutsche Oper <i>The Ring</i> with <b>Sir Donald Runnicles</b>	Berlin
July - Aug	150th anniversary of first Bayreuth Festival	Bayreuth
Sep - Oct	Staatsoper <i>Ring</i> with <b>Christian Thielemann</b>	Berlin
5 Sept	Singapore Opera <i>Siegfried</i>	Singapore
12, 15 Nov	SSO/ <b>Simone Young AM</b> <i>Siegfried</i>	SOH

**GENEROUS DONATIONS WERE RECEIVED SINCE JUNE 2025 FROM THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS:**

Anna-Lisa Klettenberg

**WE WARMLY WELCOME NEW MEMBERS WHO JOINED SINCE JUNE 2025:**

Harriet Cunningham 1305, Sandra Oldis 1306, Carole Cusack 1307. We also warmly welcome back rejoining member Adrian Read (1077) Our current membership is 209, incl. 9 Honorary Life Members.

## COMMITTEE 2025- 2026

<b>President:</b>	Esteban Insausti   0412 282 070
<b>Vice President 1:</b>	Mike Day   0413 807 533
<b>Vice President 2:</b>	Marie Leech   0418 679 626
<b>Treasurer:</b>	Danny May   0414 444 100
<b>Secretary:</b>	Ross Whitelaw   <a href="mailto:ross@karos.com.au">ross@karos.com.au</a>   0416 253 161
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<b>Members:</b>	Robert Mitchell   <a href="mailto:robert.mitchell47@gmail.com">robert.mitchell47@gmail.com</a>
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<b>Webmaster:</b>	Lis Bergmann   <a href="mailto:lisbergmann89@gmail.com">lisbergmann89@gmail.com</a>
<b>Public Officer:</b>	Alasdair Beck   0414 357 441

## Patron

Ms Simone Young AM

## Honorary Life Members

Professor Michael Ewans  
Mr Horst Hoffman  
Mr Roger Cruickshank  
Dr Terence Watson  
Dr Dennis Mather  
Ms Leona Geeves  
Mrs Barbara Brady  
Ms Lis Bergmann  
Ms Margaret Whealy

## 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

Registered Office:  
75 Birtley Towers, Birtley Place  
Elizabeth Bay NSW 2011  
Print Post Approved PP100005174

# PRESIDENT'S REPORT

## DEAR FRIENDS,

Having just returned from two *Rings* (in Basel and Vienna), I am still hungry for more. Probably not alone in feeling that way. What is it about Wagner that makes us so greedy for more? Surely sitting in a theatre for 15 hours over four evenings should be enough music, staging and drama for anybody? But not for the "Ring nuts". For me, the interest lies in the challenge of a production that I've not seen before. The ideas or interpretation that the production team poses. And of course, the music. The music becomes second nature but also gets into your very being and doesn't leave you. Well not easily. And so the November *Siegfried* with the SSO under our Patron Simone Young can't come fast enough. Nor her leading the La Scala company in March 2026 – an event that many of our members are already committed to attending.

Whilst overseas I met many of our members and other Wagnerians from many parts of the world. This is one of the great pleasures of our little tribe. The comradeship, the exchange of ideas, restaurant recommendations, tips about interesting exhibitions or places to visit whilst in another city, plus that feeling of a shared experience. Currently there is a cohort of members enjoying the last ever cycle of the Valentin Schwartz Ring, amongst other works, at Bayreuth conducted by Simone Young.

45 years ago, in Bayreuth, a similar cohort of Wagnerians decided to establish what we now know as The Wagner Society in NSW Inc. After receiving a blessing from Wolfgang Wagner

himself, our Society began its journey as a functioning community of likeminded people. Our mission "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", has been constant and successful. At our next event on the 14th of September we will celebrate our birthday and commit to continue the work started by that group of NSW Wagnerians in Bayreuth nearly half a century ago.

As we look forward to the last quarter of events culminating in the Siegfried Symposium and the End of the Year Concert, the Committee has turned its mind to 2026. We hope to bring you a list of events for 2026 in the last Quarterly for the year (December issue). In 2026 again we will face little Wagner on our stages – the SSO's *Götterdämmerung* notwithstanding. The news out of Opera Australia regarding new appointments, whilst promising, will not bear fruit until the following season and beyond. One to keep our eye on, and reserve judgement for the time being. Hopefully there will be better news from Melbourne Opera. Regardless, we will all need to travel to feed our voracious Wagner fix – Milan, Singapore.....

With best wishes. Happy listening.

## ESTEBAN INSAUSTI

President Wagner Society in NSW Inc

## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR



Dear readers, this month we celebrate our 45th Anniversary so I'm including some historical notes and tributes from sister societies. At our celebration party on 14 September we hope to welcome some of the original foundation members. Sadly, many have gone to Valhalla. I'm very grateful to **Mairwyn Curtis** for her piece about the legacy of her mother **Rita Hunter**, who contributed greatly to the society in its first years. Mairwyn will be a guest at the celebration. This issue also features articles about *Siegfried*, in preparation for the **Simone Young**/SSO performances in November. For more *Siegfried* background, I refer readers to articles in past Quarterlies; *Dragons* in September 2021, *Valkyries* in December 2021, and *Siegfried* in September 2022. Back copies of all WSNSW newsletters are available on

our website. The December Quarterly will be a bumper Christmas stocking special – overflowing with light hearted and amusing Wagnerian bonbons. You'll find swan maidens, French cartoons, silk knickers and other (somewhat Queer) delights. Members are invited to submit their favourite Wagner jokes. Example: "My dog likes classical music Whenever she hears it, she's always wagner tale." Thanks to our committee members for their reports of the various productions they attended recently in Europe. Thanks to **Peter Bassett** for the final installment of his Brisbane Ring talks. Thanks to **Lis Bergmann** for her updating of the WSNSW swan logo, and my gratitude, as always, to **Leona Geeves** for proofreading

MIKE DAY | michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com

## 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](mailto:contact@wagner.org.au) and we will work to resolve this issue.

## QUARTERLY HIGHLIGHTS

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# THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW INC 45<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

## THE FORMATION OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW

Following the Bayreuth Festival performances of the **Pierre Boulez/ Patrice Chéreau** Centenary Ring in late August 1980, there were discussions in Bayreuth and London by several people who had attended the Festival and were interested in having a Wagner Society in Sydney – to support the wider education of artists and audiences regarding Wagner's works with possibly the opportunity to collectively apply for tickets to performances in Bayreuth. The Foundation meeting attended by 15 people was held at the Print Room Gallery, Woolloomooloo on 26 October 1980. At this meeting an interim committee was formed to report back and the Society's Swan Lines logo was designed by interim secretary **Michel Arnould**.

By early 1981, the Wagner Society of NSW had been established as an

unincorporated association. Its first public function, a film evening showing documentaries on Bayreuth and the *Ring* centenary, was held on 9 March in the AMP Theatrette and was a huge success. The first Annual General Meeting, at which the interim committee stepped down, a new committee was elected and the Constitution was adopted, was held at the Concordia Club, Stanmore on 22 May. **Dr Leonard Hansen** became the Society's first President and **Sir Charles Mackerras** its first Patron. **Dr. Susan Kelly** was Vice President, **Richard King**, treasurer and **Clare Hennessy**, secretary. Other committee members included **Cedric Falconer, Ian Hopkins, Margaret Suthers, Jean-Louis Sturop and Janet Wayland**. Founding Members were each presented with a book "The Wagner Family Albums" and Wagner's birthday was celebrated after the meeting, with German food and wine.

In September the distinguished musician **Werner Bauer** MBE was made an Honorary Life Member.

The first multi-page Quarterly Newsletter (No 4) was published in September 1981 and has flourished. Every issue is available to members on [wagner.org.au](http://wagner.org.au). At the end of the first year the Society had 75 members. In 2025 we have 220 members. Of the original active members in the first year, sadly, only **Clare and Margaret Hennessy** and HLM Professor **Michael Evans** are still with us. The Society was established as an incorporated association on 15 December 1986 (with alteration of the original Objects and Rules accepted on 31 August 1987). New Rules were adopted in 2005 and the original logo for the Society was replaced by the current one in 2013.

## WAGNER SOCIETY IN NSW PRESIDENT'S REPORT, SEPTEMBER 1981

There is no doubt that the return to Australia of our Patron, **Sir Charles Mackerras**, to conduct the Wagner concerts, has been one of the most exciting happenings on the local musical scene for many years. The music-loving public reacted instantly and wholeheartedly, buying up all the Sydney tickets weeks in advance, and surprising the A.B.C. and Opera management with its enthusiasm. In Melbourne also the response was excellent, the Town Hall on both nights rippling with feverish excitement, which was echoed by the outstanding performances given by the orchestra and soloists. The spontaneity of the final ovation was a gauge of the intense pleasure and warm appreciation of the near capacity audiences. **Miss Rita Hunter** was presented with a bouquet of flowers on the opening night of her tour, with the best wishes of the Wagner Society. At the luncheon in Melbourne

given by the Wagner Society in her honour, she thanked us for our support and said that she in her turn, would do all she could to encourage a fully-staged Ring cycle in Australia and hoped that she would be able to take part in it. Also at the luncheon, a nucleus of Melbourne Wagner Society was formed. In this way the interests of a much larger number of Wagnerites can be served, and the objects of the Society can become more of a reality, due to the greater support of an increased membership. Already there are quite a few new members from Victoria, and for this we have largely to thank **Mrs Jill Sinclair** and the Friends of the Australian Opera in Victoria for their encouragement, support and warm hospitality.

It has been very pleasing to the Committee to see such a good response to the functions held this year. Since the

A.G.M. we have had a music appreciation day. Committee-man **Jean-Louis Sturop** has big plans to make these events even more exciting, and deserves your continuing support. The talk by Mr **Werner Baer** M.B.E. on July 6th entertained a crowded W.E.A. auditorium with the witty and erudite performance that we have come to expect from this learned musician. Our thanks go to him and his assistant for the night, **Tony Healy**, for all the hard work that went into the presentation. Members can enjoy more lectures on the Ring by Mr Baer by joining his W.E.A. classes. Your Committee hopes you will all enjoy the remaining functions for this year, and that you will make someone happy next year – and help your Society – by taking advantage of the special Christmas gift membership vouchers now available.

### LEONARD HANSEN

## A NOTE FROM PETER BASSETT



Here is a photo taken in Hamburg in 2011, when I was there leading a tour for Renaissance Tours for a new production of the *Ring* conducted by **Simone Young**. I first met Simone on that occasion, and she came to an all-day *Ring Symposium* that I'd organised. Simone acted as accompanist for **Deborah Humble** who was Erda in the Hamburg *Ring* production and who sang a number of pieces for us in the Symposium. Simone and her husband **Greg Condon** also joined us for dinner one evening. As you can see in the photo, many of those attending were members of the NSW Society (and still are) and, in the front row of the photo are: **Robert Mitchell, Peter Bassett, Simone Young, Deborah Humble, and Christopher Lawrence**. Robert and Christopher were leading two other Renaissance groups on that occasion – it was a very large tour, spread over three hotels!

## SOME MESSAGES FROM OTHER WAGNER SOCIETIES



### THE RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA (FORMED IN 1986)

Congratulations to the Wagner Society of NSW on your 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary! Our members are often travelling east and always enjoy news about your events.

**ROBERT LAWRENCE**

President, The Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia (Inc.)



### THE RICHARD WAGNER ASSOCIATION (SINGAPORE) (FOUNDED IN 2012)

On the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Wagner Society in New South Wales, we extend our warmest congratulations and deepest admiration on behalf of the Richard Wagner Association (Singapore).

For nearly half a century, your Society has embodied the spirit of Wagnerian excellence—cultivating appreciation for his music, supporting generations of emerging artists, and creating a rich and enduring cultural community. Your thoughtful programming, scholarly engagement, and generous mentorship have inspired not only audiences in Australia but Wagnerians around the world.

As fellow members of the international Wagner family, we at RWAS are proud to stand alongside you in this shared mission. We look forward to deepening our ties and exploring new frontiers of collaboration—especially as we enter a new era of leadership.

May your celebration be filled with music, fellowship, and pride in all that your Society has achieved.

With admiration and friendship,

**MAESTRO CHAN TZE LAW**

President

**MATTHEW CHUA**

Vice President, Richard Wagner Association (Singapore)



### THE RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY (VICTORIA) (FOUNDED IN 1981)

45 Years is a wonderful achievement. Congratulations Esteban and all your Committee and members on reaching 45 years as a vibrant Wagner Society. Through the years all WS NSW Committees have provided wonderful celebrations of Wagner's music and supported known and emerging artists bringing Wagner to a wider audience.

Gut gemacht,

**FROM SHIRLEY BREESE,**

President, The RWS of Victoria, 2012 - 2016



### THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN QUEENSLAND (FOUNDED IN 1999)

Congratulations to the Wagner Society in New South Wales on the occasion of its 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary! The NSW Society has set benchmarks in Australia and elsewhere for the advancement and appreciation of the art of Richard Wagner and for the support of performances of his works. I have greatly enjoyed speaking at the Society's meetings over the years and contributing to its Quartetlies and other publications, and I wish its wonderful committee and members continued success in the years ahead!

**PETER BASSETT** (President)

**"For nearly half a century, your Society has embodied the spirit of Wagnerian excellence—cultivating appreciation for his music, supporting generations of emerging artists, and creating a rich and enduring cultural community. Your thoughtful programming, scholarly engagement, and generous mentorship have inspired not only audiences in Australia but Wagnerians around the world"**

## MESSAGE FROM PAST PRESIDENT HLM ROGER CRUIKSHANK (2002 – 2011)

Congratulations to the Wagner Society in NSW Inc. on its 45th anniversary.

From its beginnings, when a group of regular Bayreuth pilgrims from Sydney was having dinner with **Wolfgang Wagner** after a performance of *Das Rheingold*, and he suggested that they form a Society on their return home, to its current position as a strong, vigorous, Society about to commission a Wagner performance thanks to a generous legacy, the Society's history is almost itself operatic.

It survived its own Alberich moment midway to this milestone, when a beloved former officeholder stole much of the Society's gold over more than a decade. There followed a period of wandering in the desert, after which the Society was re-invigorated first by the presidency of **Hon Jane Mathews AO**, and now by **Esteban Insausti**, well on his way to being its longest-serving president.

The Society's Newsletter, now the Wagner Quarterly, is internationally recognised as one of leading publications of any Wagner

Society in the Wagner-Welt, thanks to its many editors, including the **Hennessy Twins (Margaret and Clare)**, **Ian Hopkins** and **Margaret Suthers, Richard King** and **Janet Wayland, Barbra Brady, Terence Watson** and now, **Mike Day**.

Yet for me the glory of the Society has always been its members, united in their differences by their love of Wagner's music and writings, and their love-hate for modern productions of these works. My fondest memories of my time being active in the Society, are always of the members, the friends I made, and their extraordinary and often unusual revelations at performances.

Looking ahead to 2030, the Society will celebrate its 50 years since the first meetings, and I hope to be able to attend the celebrations and reminisce with other members about the glorious music we have loved, the meetings and productions we have enjoyed (or not) and how it has enriched our lives.

**ROGER CRUIKSHANK**

Fritterhaus, Waverley, South Taranaki 4510, NZ



# THE LEGACY OF RITA HUNTER CBE

**My very earliest memory of Wagner is so deeply embedded in me, it feels mythical. I was just 18 months old, sitting in a high chair in the prompt corner of The London Coliseum, while my mother, the dramatic soprano Rita Hunter, was singing Brünnhilde *Die Walküre*. According to her, I sat there as quiet as a mouse. That is, until Act 3 started. It was very obvious that The Ride of the Valkyries stirred something in me.**

The late, internationally acclaimed dramatic soprano **Rita Hunter** CBE (1933 – 2001) was an important contributor to the life and vitality of the Wagner Society from its formation; attending functions and performing during its early years. She was awarded Honorary Life Membership in 1985 for her services to Wagner performances in Australia. Her daughter, **Mairwyn Curtis** (née Hunter-Thomas) sent us this account of caring for her mother's legacy. Raised behind the scenes of some of the world's great operatic performances, Mairwyn is now the custodian of an extensive private archive dedicated to her mother's career. She is currently working to preserve and digitise this extraordinary legacy, ensuring it continues to inspire future generations.

**IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A VALKYRIE: A DAUGHTER'S JOURNEY THROUGH WAGNER AND LEGACY BY MAIRWYN CURTIS**

This year marks the 45th anniversary of The Wagner Society in New South Wales. A remarkable milestone for a community deeply committed to one of the most profound bodies of work in musical history. For me, this celebration is more than a nod to history. It's personal. Wagner, to me, has never been just music. It has been a soundtrack, a pulse, a companion, and an inheritance.

My very earliest memory of Wagner is so deeply embedded in me, it feels mythical. I was just 18 months old, sitting in a high chair in the prompt corner of The London Coliseum, while my mother, the dramatic soprano **Rita Hunter**, was singing Brünnhilde *Die Walküre*. According to her, I sat there as quiet as a mouse. That is, until Act 3 started. It was very obvious that The Ride of the Valkyries stirred something in me. My legs and arms began moving uncontrollably. It was as though the music had reached into my tiny body and awakened something elemental. Even before I could speak, I was responding to Wagner.



Rita Hunter with WSNSW HLM pianist Werner Baer MBE at the 1985 Annual Dinner. Rita is wearing a gown designed and made by WSNSW founding member and secretary Michel Arnould, who also designed the WSMSW original swan logo.

Growing up, Wagner wasn't just a presence. He was practically a family member. His music was always playing: on stage, on record and constantly a part in many family conversations. It shaped the rhythm of our lives and, as I grew older, what had once been background noise transformed into something deep and profound. His works became a source of strength, curiosity, and emotional connection — especially as I came to understand more about my parents' devotion to their art and to each other.

My father once made a promise to my mother's parents and one he took very seriously. He swore that he would record everything Rita ever sang. At the time, perhaps no one realised quite what this would mean. But record, he did. Tirelessly. Obsessively. With the precision of an archivist and the love of a devoted husband. As a child, I didn't fully grasp the importance of what he was doing. I just knew there were always tapes, cameras, microphones, and scribbled notes. But as I grew older, I began to share in his passion. I saw what he saw & heard what he heard: a living history that needed preserving, a legacy too valuable to fade into memory.

The archive that grew from that promise is staggering. Now that both my parents are gone, I am its keeper. What began as a heartfelt promise has become a formidable and humbling responsibility. The collection contains over 3,000 audio cassettes, more than 1,000 video tapes, hundreds of photographs, performance programs, reviews, and countless other pieces of memorabilia. To my knowledge — though I say this cautiously — it might be one of the most extensive personal archives dedicated to a single singer. It's certainly among the most personally meaningful. And it is mine to care for. I honour the foundation of that archive. The passion and love that built it, the music that inspired it, and the world I was born into. Wagner was not just performed in our house, he lived there. He resounded through the walls, echoed in conversations, and shaped the very essence of our family dynamic.

But the story doesn't end there. Far from it. While I may not be a Brünnhilde, the daughter of one still has work to do and as the keeper of the flame, it is my duty to do so. It's one thing to love music; it's another to be responsible for preserving an entire legacy. The weight of that responsibility is both daunting and beautiful. After my parents passed, I became the sole caretaker of a vast and intricate collection. Each item is a time capsule. Not only capturing Rita's artistry but also the story of opera itself during a golden era. It is a privilege to hold it all in my hands. And it is often, very overwhelming.

But time is not kind to analogue materials. Reel to Reels disintegrate, Audio cassettes degrade, video tape loses fidelity, and paper yellows and crumbles. Digitisation is no longer optional. It is essential. That's why I've taken on the task of transferring, remastering, and cataloguing this entire archive myself. Every tape is a story waiting to be rescued. Every label, every scribbled note from my

Mother and Father, every audio dropout or hiss. It's all part of a rich, irreplaceable tapestry. If I were to outsource the entirety of this digitisation process professionally, it would cost somewhere in the region of half a million dollars. I don't know about you, but I am certain I do not have that kind of money floating around — so I am doing it all myself here at home, slowly, painstakingly, and with a growing sense of reverence. Some days I'm elbow-deep in cables and software. Other days I sit in silence, tears in my eyes, listening to a recording I haven't heard since childhood.

This process has been more than just technical work. It's been emotionally and physically healing. After losing my mother, I retreated from the world of opera. It was too raw, too painful. The music that had once been the background of my life now carried too much emotional pain. I avoided performances, recordings — even conversations about the subject. I wasn't ready.

And then, one day, something shifted.

I found myself listening to one of Mum's final performances of *Die Walküre*. One of her last Brünnhilde's in Sydney. Her battle cry rang out, full of fire, fury, and brilliance. It was as if she reached out through time and music and reminded me that the work wasn't finished. That grief, while powerful, couldn't be the end of the story. I realised I wasn't done and that I couldn't remain in hiding. There was still so much to do.

In that moment, Wagner helped me find my way back.

Hiding from life, and from legacy, was not an option. There were recordings to rescue, stories to tell, and a new generation to inspire. My work with the archive became more than a duty; it became a calling. Of course, not everything has survived. Despite the enormous scope of the collection, there are still some pieces whose absence weighs heavily on me. One that lingers in my thoughts more often than I care to admit. Rita Hunter singing Odabella in Verdi's *Attila*. It is a significant piece. Not only in the musical history of Sadler's Wells, but in my Mother's legacy. And yet, it remains elusive. I have searched high and low, through official channels and quiet corners of the operatic world, only to encounter roadblock after roadblock. There is a strong possibility that a recording still exists. For reasons outside my control, I have not been given the chance to hear it. Neither did my mother. She went to her grave knowing that it was out there but never heard herself as Odabella, except in the moment she gave voice to the role in 1963.

That truth saddens me more than I can express. And yet, I still hold hope. That performance, like so many others, deserves to be heard again. And it belongs not in silence, but in the ongoing celebration of a remarkable career. This is not just about one recording. It's about a shared responsibility. To protect, preserve, and pass on what we can, while we still can. Let us work together, not in opposition, to ensure Rita Hunter's contribution to the world of opera isn't lost in a sea of forgotten reels, mountains

of tea chests and dusty shelves, or worse, disintegration due to the passage of time.

This archive is more than a tribute. It is a labour of devotion. A testament to love: the love between my parents, the love of music, and the love of legacy.

As we celebrate the 45th anniversary of The Wagner Society of New South Wales, I find myself reflecting on how Wagner's music has shaped not only the society's history, but my own. From the prompt corner to the digitisation station, from high chair to archivist's chair, the music has followed me, challenged me, comforted me and called me to action. My story is one of inheritance, but also of responsibility. And if this article inspires just one reader to dust off an old tape, share a lost recording, reach into an old tea chest filled with non-digitised media, or look at a collection of programs and see treasure instead of clutter — then it will have been worth writing.

Because every legacy needs its keeper.

MAIRWYN CURTIS

**My father once made a promise to my mother's parents and one he took very seriously. He swore that he would record everything Rita ever sang. At the time, perhaps no one realised quite what this would mean. But record, he did.**

## NEWS LETTER NO. 1, 5<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 1981



THE WAGNER SOCIETY  
(Patron - Sir Charles Mackerras)

Registered Office - 141 Dowling Street, Woollahra, 2011  
Phone enquiries - 358.1919 (Bus. Hours)

NEWS LETTER

NO.1  
5th February 1981.

Dear Music Lover,

Since our first public meeting on 28th October 1980, the steering committee has been working steadily on the many small details of administration and organisation, and we are now established as an unincorporated society, with our own constitution. At the same time it has been possible to devise a most interesting program for the coming year.

As our membership is still fairly small, our first function will be a rather low-key affair, to test the public's reaction to the society's existence, and to not over-extend ourselves financially. It will take the form of a short film night, on Monday, 9th March at 6.00p.m. The venue is the A.M.P. Theatrette, Circular Quay, and the film covers the Bayreuth Centenary. There will be no entrance fee charged, but a small donation towards the cost of refreshments will be appreciated.

The first Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held at 7.00 p.m. on Friday, 22nd May, when elections will be held for Committee. The members of the interim Committee will stand down, and whilst making themselves available for re-election, they will encourage interested and enthusiastic subscribers to stand for office.

After the business of the meeting, at about 8.00 p.m., a celebration party will be held in honour of Richard Wagner's Birthday. Presentations will be made on this occasion to the foundation members who have so generously helped the Society in its infancy.

The long awaited concert performance of *Grüterflümmern* is coming this year and to prepare us for it an evening is being arranged on Monday, 6th July. Mr. Werner Baer, Sydney's foremost Wagner authority, will give a talk on the musical analysis of this great work. An accomplished musician, Mr. Baer will illustrate his explanation of the important themes on the piano. *Grüterflümmern* is being performed on September 30th and October 3rd and the Wagner Society will be making block bookings for its members' benefit. On the Saturday performance which starts at 4.30 p.m., in the long first interval, a light meal has been arranged in a private room at the Opera House for Wagner Society members. It is hoped our Patron, Sir Charles Mackerras, will be able to join us on this occasion and meet members of the Society. Members should let the Committee know as soon as possible of their intention to attend these performances — as well as those of *Die Walküre* in Melbourne on 25th and 27th August — so that tickets can be organised.

Note these dates in your diary now so that you do not miss out on these exciting events. More details will be sent in future News Letters. The Committee is confident that the formation of the Wagner Society has been worthwhile and will fill a big need in the local music scene.

Leonard Mannen - President. Sue Kelly - Vice President. Richard King - Secretary/Treasurer.

# FUTURE SOCIETY EVENTS

## SUNDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 2.00PM, ST COLUMBA, OCEAN ST, WOOLLAHRA

WSNSW 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION CONCERT AND PARTY

Works by **Wagner, R Strauss, R Schumann, C Schumann** and **Betty Beath** with soprano **Alexandra Flood** and pianist **Thomas Victor Johnson**. Followed by cake and bubbles



Lyric coloratura soprano **Alexandra Flood** is one of Australia's most exciting young talents. She made her professional debut at the 2014 Salzburg Festival and has since graced opera and concert stages in leading roles the world over. A recent addition to the Vienna Volksoper principal soloists, Alexandra has made thrilling debuts in recent seasons as Pamina, Musetta, Gretel, Clorinda, Fantasia and Anna Reich to name just a few. Equally at home on the concert stage, Alexandra regularly appears with leading international orchestras and ensembles across the globe. 2025 concert highlights include a return to the Opéra de Dijon for *Carmina Burana*, a solo recital with Southern Cross Soloists at QPAC in Brisbane, her upcoming debut with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and performances of Mozart's *Requiem* in London. On the opera stage, Alexandra reprises Musetta in a new production of *La bohème* at Festival Musica in France, Frasquita in Lotte de Beer's *Carmen*, and makes her debut as Olympia in *Les contes d'Hoffmann*.

Alongside her busy performance schedule, Alexandra is Artistic Director of the Queensland Art Song Festival, an educational initiative focused on bringing performance and practice opportunities in classical art song to young Australians.

On her Facebook page on 12 June Alexandra posted:

'Last week I had the immense honour of giving my Adele debut in *Die Fledermaus* at the Volksoper. I've been waiting a while for this (I first performed "Mein Herr Marquis" in the local Eisteddfod!) and she just feels like the perfect fit. There are high expectations (vocal, stylistic, text and \*especially\* humour) but I received so much support from colleagues both off and on stage that the show just felt so organic. It was a classic repertoire debut: no stage rehearsal, never once sung with orchestra, never seen the set, met the woman playing my sister a few minutes before going on stage). And it was thrilling.'



Thomas last performed for WSNSW at Wagner's birthday concert in May, where he was received with great enthusiasm. Winner of the Richard Bonynge Accompanists Award at the 2018 Sydney International Song Prize, Thomas is in high demand as an insightful, refined and sympathetic collaborative artist. He is a graduate of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where he studied piano performance and accompaniment.

After four seasons as a music staff member at Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Thomas returned to Australia in 2023 where he is engaged as a repetiteur with Opera Australia and is a staff vocal coach at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Together with his husband Paull-Anthony Keightley, he is a co-founder of vioro.co.



## 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 12 OCTOBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

### 12.00PM DVD DIE MEISTERSINGER ACT II

Glyndebourne Opera and director **David McVicar** had a huge success with this beautiful production in 2011. Designer **Vicki Mortimer** updated the setting to Wagner's own time, creating a naturalistic vision of a German town. The set design was described as "ingenious" and contributed to a production that was praised for its style, intelligence, and insight.

**Vladimir Jurowski** ("a Wagnerian of considerable stature") conducts an 'exhilarating' London Philharmonic Orchestra and the largest ever Glyndebourne Chorus in

'an account to treasure' of Wagner's rich score that 'nicely judges the work's ebb and flow'. The cast is led by the 'supremely elegant singing' of an 'extraordinary' **Gerald Finley** – a mesmerising mixture of 'sadness, anger, nobility, passion and resignation' as cobbler Hans Sachs. He's matched by **Johannes Martin Kranzle** – 'very much Finley's equal in subtlety' – as Beckmesser. **Marco Jentzsch** is a passionate Walther and **Anna Gabler** a gentle Eva, with **Topi Lehtipuu** as Sachs' high-spirited apprentice David and **Alastair Miles** as 'wonderfully lugubrious' Pogner.



### 2.00PM TALK BY WSNSW PRESIDENT ESTEBAN INSAUSTI ON TRADITIONAL VS ICONOCLASTIC STAGINGS OF DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG

Esteban reprises his presentation given at the Meistersinger Symposium in Melbourne earlier this year. His paper has been updated and revised for the Sydney event to include some commentary on the new production that opened in Bayreuth recently. In the talk Esteban gives historical context to the politics that accrued in and around Meistersinger, particularly in the post First

World War period as Germany lurched from monarchy to democracy and into autocracy. The New Bayreuth reaction in 1956, perhaps iconoclastic, perhaps not, opened the scenographic and dramaturgical conversation that is still running today. A cycle of reaction, erasure, restoration, revisiting and renewal that runs parallel to contemporary political and societal "norms".



## SUNDAY 15 NOVEMBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

### 10.00AM – 6.00PM SIEGFRIED SYMPOSIUM FOLLOWED BY RECEPTION FOR VISITING MEMBERS OF OTHER WAGNER SOCIETIES

We continue our series of Symposia held in conjunction with the **Simone Young**/SSO Ring performances.

The symposium will feature papers from **Peter Bassett** (Wagner's *Siegfried* and the Power of Nature), **Livia Brash** (on Brünnhilde - TBA), **Professor Carole Cusack** (*Siegfried*

the Failed Hero, Brünnhilde the Redeemer of the World) and **Dr David Larkin** giving us an insight into the music of *Siegfried*. A fifth very exciting speaker is yet to be finalised – but it is someone closely associated with the concert performances. As with our previous symposia, in parallel with the SSO-Simone Young performances, the day will be catered

with enough breaks for participants to continue conversations in the foyer and terrace of the Goethe Institut. The day will conclude with some much needed drinks and further mingling and informal discussion.

## SUNDAY 30 NOVEMBER AT ST COLUMBA, OCEAN ST, WOOLLAHRA

### CHRISTMAS CONCERT WITH TENOR BRADLEY COOPER AND PIANIST THOMAS VICTOR JOHNSON

WSNSW supported Sydney born tenor, **Brad Cooper**, studied at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, the National Opera Studio in London, and with **Marilyn Horne** at Music Academy of the West, California, and continued his development into the German repertoire under the guidance of **Siegfried Jerusalem**. He is a dynamic performer, equally excited to engage in a wide range of genres, from Opera to Crossover, from Classical and Romantic to Modern. His MAGIC FLUTE WORKSHOP has brought the fantastical world of Opera to thousands of children in Australia, his choral project, TERRA AUSTRALIS, introduced hundreds of students in Ohio to Australian Music, while his Pitch & Present – Opera Edition inspires corporate professionals to use their voice to be truly heard. WSNSW has recently agreed to sponsor Brad to undertake further study of the major Wagner roles.

Recent seasons have seen Brad appear as Siegfried in Melbourne Opera's *Ring Cycle*, Apollo in **Strauss'** *Daphne* for Scottish Opera; Agamemnon in **Ernst Krenek's** 1930 opera *Leben des Orest* and Siegmund in *Die Walküre* for Theater Münster; Albert Gregor in **Janáček's** *Věc Makropulos* and Aegisth in Strauss' *Elektra* for Mainfranken Theater Würzburg. In the 2024/25 Season Brad returned to Mainfranken Theater Würzburg as Giasone in **Cherubini's** *Medea* and Tambourmajor in **Alban Berg's** *Wozzeck*, while in London he undertook the title role of Siegfried for London Opera Company at St John's Smith Square. In 25/26 Brad will be singing Tristan for Theater Münster and Florestan and Canio for Mainfranken Theater Würzburg. Brad has also been engaged as Walter von Stolzing at Longborough in 2027 and Siegfried for Grange Park Opera's 2028/29 production of the Ring under **Anthony Negus**.



# REPORTS ON RECENT WAGNER

## SUNDAY 22 JUNE AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

### 12.00PM DVD MET OPERA 1994 PARSIFAL ACT II

Members enjoyed this traditional, languorous, musically glorious and very beautiful looking production with the incomparable Waltraud Meier at the peak of her powers.

### 2.00PM TALK PROF STEPHEN MOULD ON CILLARIO AND WAGNER



Stephen Mould

Stephen's talk was a very entertaining tour de force – a combination of deep knowledge, passion and humour by a master communicator. Without benefit of music clips or images (due to technical shortcomings in the venue), Stephen informally explained the history of Maestro Cillario's engagement with Wagner's operas in Australia over the course of nearly thirty years. Cillario was asked to conduct all of Wagner's works from *Holländer* to *Parsifal*, starting with *Tannhäuser* in

1968. Over more than 30 years, he did, in fact, conduct all of them on stage or in the concert hall, apart from the ill-fated *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, (cancelled in 1985, largely due to poor production and the unsuitability of the Opera Theatre). Cillario conducted around 1020 opera performances in Australia, 108 of which were of Wagner's works.

The audience engaged with Stephen, obviously enjoying talking about the golden years of opera in Sydney, with exceptionally talented singers working in harmony with Cillario.



Terence Watson, Barbara Beasley



John Hughes, Stephen Mould, Hermes de Zan, Robert Mitchell

Following **Pierre Boulez's** initiative, Cillario helped change the mindset that Italian conductors can only conduct Italian works. Cillario was a passionate Wagnerian, starting from when he was about seven, attempting to play music from *Die Walküre*. Cillario studied music in Bologna and was based there for most of his professional life. (Wagner was made an honorary citizen in 1872 and there has been a long tradition of excellent Wagnerian performances in that city). The afternoon finished with the usual delicious afternoon tea – many thanks to those who contributed a plate.

## SUNDAY 17 AUGUST AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

### 11.00PM DVD H J SYBERBERG'S PARSIFAL

This was a highly anticipated screening of Syberberg's 1982 masterpiece. Several audience members were uncertain about the meaning of much of the symbolism in this very layered interpretation, but all agreed that the singing and acting were of the highest standard.

## IN MEMORIUM

### Vale Rosemary Gunn

Over a four decade career with Opera Australia, the Scottish born Australian mezzo-soprano, **Rosemary Gunn**, won the hearts of both colleagues and audience. She was a valued member of Opera Australia's Principals and was an excellent singer in a wide range of repertoire. Rosemary joined the company in 1972 and, in 1977, won both the Pan Pacific Final of the Metropolitan Opera Auditions in Honolulu and the Sydney Sun Aria. Her roles with Opera Australia included Amneris, Brangäne, Fricka, Octavian, Ruggiero, Marina, Adalgisa, Orlofsky, Meg Page, Suzuki, Magdalena, Dorabella, Mallika, Iolanthe, Kate Pinkerton, Giovanna, Tessa, Wellgunde, Third Lady, Antonia's Mother, Nicklausse & The Muse, and many other roles. She retired from performing professionally after a season of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 2008. She was married to bass-baritone **Graeme Williams** who was a long-time chorister with Opera Australia. Sadly Graeme died soon after Rosemary. Our condolences go to their family for their loss.



Rosemary Gunn as Queen of the Fairies in *Iolanthe*

# SOCIETY EVENTS

## SUNDAY 20 JULY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

### 12.00PM DVD SALZBURG FESTIVAL 2013 PARSIFAL ACT III

Members were enraptured by the exquisitely beautiful musical interpretation by **Christian Thielemann** and the Dresden opera, with a faultless cast. The reception of the actual production, sets and costumes was not as enthusiastic. It is eccentric, to say the least. Saving graces were the wonderful film direction and camera work, which concentrate on the essential moments of action (or inaction). Despite the shortcomings it is a very moving production.

### 2.00PM TORTURED IMMORTALITY REDEEMED BY LOVE: WAGNER'S THE FLYING DUTCHMAN AND PARSIFAL: A TALK BY PROF CAROLE M CUSACK



Wagner, the Flying Dutchman  
Frances Broomfield 2001

Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, **Carole Cusack** delivered an insightful, yet entertaining lecture highlighting the similarities and difference between two of Wagner's most pivotal and enigmatic characters. *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 Flying Dutchman* has little obvious Christian content, despite being based on Christian folklore, whereas *Parsifal* is inspired by medieval chronicles and Christian symbols. Wagner thought his era was one in which religion had lost its power, and art was needed to replace it.

He seems to have viewed an aesthetic version of the medieval as a solution to the ills of modernity, which included democracy, the extension of rights to all races and creeds and the loss of prestige in high culture after the industrial revolution, which resulted in banal commercial forms for consumption by the bourgeoisie. His assessment of his own genius, the profundity of his operatic works, and the sacred pretensions of his purpose-built Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, led him to believe that the Gesamtkunstwerk could function as religion in modernity. Interesting insights included Carole's view that *The Flying Dutchman* should be popular with young modern audiences, with their taste for Gothic un-dead/ghost stories, whereas *Parsifal* has a problem because of the treatment of Kundry and the encouragement of celibacy.



Maria Callas as Kundry 1949

"Only the profound hypothesis of reincarnation has been able to show me the consoling point where all converge in the end to an equal height of redemption, after their divers life-careers, running severed side-by-side in time, have met in full intelligence beyond it. On that beautiful Buddhist hypothesis the spotless purity of Lohengrin becomes easy to explain, in that he is the continuation of Parzival - who first had to wrest to himself his purity."

**Wagner in letter to Mathilde Wesendonck**



Tim Green, David Geer, Helen Meddings



Esteban Insausti and Prof. Carole Cusack



Prof. Carole Cusack, Glynis Johns, Lynne Williams



# OUR MEMBERS ABROAD

## BAYREUTH FESTIVAL NEWS

The proposed appointment in July of **Dr. Matthias Rädel** as General Manager of the Bayreuth Festival has been welcomed by Festival director **Prof. Katharina Wagner**: "Dr. Matthias Rädel is an extraordinary personality in cultural management. Since 1999, he has shaped the Deutsche Oper Berlin in a significant way – initially as Head of Controlling, today also as Deputy Managing Director. In this dual role, Dr. Rädel combines economic precision with a deep understanding of the complex challenges of an internationally important opera house. He embodies in a special way the connection between theory and practice, between management and culture, between administrative responsibility and intellectual aspiration. His work is characterized by integrity, strategic thinking, strong communication skills and a clear foundation of values. Both inside and outside the house, he is regarded as a reliable and valued partner – for artists as well as for colleagues in administration and cultural policy."



## BAYREUTH

### 2025

Our secretary, **Ross Whitelaw** hosted a small gathering on 15 June for some of those going to Bayreuth this year. In attendance were **Aliro** and **Monica Olave**, **Robert Foster**, **Sarah Weate**, her partner, **Magennis** and friend, **Harriet Cunningham**. All except Ross will be going to the first cycle. Some had been before and for some it will be their first experience on the Green Hill. Tips and stories were swapped over drinks and nibbles.

Pictures displayed in a Bayreuth barbershop window photographed by Ross Whitelaw this August



## DR LOURDES ST GEORGE AT THE RECENT BAYREUTH RING

WSNSW member **Dr Lourdes st George** and her husband **Spencer White** have written to us about how privileged they felt to be in Bayreuth for the final, on 20 August, of **Simone Young's** performances as the first female & Australian conductor of the *Ring cycle*. "It was a proud Aussie moment when she was met with thunderous applause and standing ovations !! She was able to drive the orchestra forward with sensitivity to the singers, but also was able to create a menacing atmosphere when needed. She was praised for allowing the singers to fully inhabit their roles".



Simone Young and orchestra curtain call

# WSNSW COMMITTEE MEMBER ROBERT MITCHELL REPORTS ON TANNHÄUSER AT WIENER STAATSOPERA MAY 29, 2025

Following a splendid reading of *Das Rheingold* on May 28, **Philippe Jordan** once again led the Vienna orchestra and cast in an outstanding performance, this time of the new production of *Tannhäuser*, its third of nine performances this year. With no access to a director's note (this writer travels light and cannot carry thick bilingual printed programs), **Alfred Mayerhofer**'s costumes appear to place the production in the 1930s, but the presence of TV sets in Act 3 may push it into the '50s. The sets by **Momme Hinrichs** don't clarify matters. The 'Venusberg' scene takes place in a down-at-heel cabaret joint. (A New York matron in the audience described it disapprovingly as a shabby Folies Bergère.) Berlin-based, WSNSW supported, prize-winning Australian soprano **Tabatha McFadyen** is now choreographer of choice to German-based American director (du jour) **Lydia Steier**. McFadyen fills the stage with scantily clad dancers and dishevelled chorus members, dressed by costume designer **Annemarie Bulla**, to great effect. Venus (**Ekaterina Cubanova** singing gloriously), flies in on a sequined quarter moon dressed as a showgirl with feathered headpiece and train. As the argument between Venus and the disillusioned Tannhäuser (**Clay Hilley** - more on him later) sees their relationship breaking up, so too does the set. A quick drop of a wall cleverly transports Tannhäuser to earth for scene two. So far the sets, costumes and actions seem logical in the context of the libretto and score. But now, why is the shepherd boy presented as two characters? Number one, the on-stage cor anglais player, is dressed as a clown sitting on a plastic kiddie car; number two, a soprano (female) is dressed as a quasi-angel and suspended behind a panel that opens at the top of the wall. At least the hunting party that discover Tannhäuser is dressed appropriately. At the end of the act, the wall flies out to reveal the Venusberg in ruins. Act 2 is set in a far from teure (precious/dear)-looking restaurant/bar on three stepped levels, with a stage and catwalk to one side where the song contest takes place. **Malin Byström**, as Elisabeth, greets the room with ravishing tone and presence. **Günther Groissböck**, as Landgraf Hermann, embodies the role with gravitas both physically and vocally. The large, elegantly dressed chorus and extra chorus greet Hermann with beautifully rich blended tone crowned with stunning top Cs from the sopranos. The problem of updating is circumvented when the contestants (Tannhäuser's hunting mates) appear in medieval costume over their modern dress, made all the more incongruous and somewhat comical with bobbed blond wigs. The tension in the room builds as Tannhäuser's stanzas grow more passionate, although some background actions by the minor characters tend to distract. But cleverly managed appearances by Venus and her fellow showgirls add to his motivation to reveal his secret. Following his disgrace in the eyes of the assembled citizenry and the off-stage presence of the pilgrims, a waiter rushes in and presents Tannhäuser with a box containing a pre-used pilgrim's cowl. Too obvious? Act 3 returns us to a version of the deconstructed cabaret. The large arch that moved around in Act 1 and formed the proscenium of the stage in Act 2 now represents an entrance to the other side from Act 2. Three silent men sit watching individual

TVs, while a pile of odd-shaped TVs show a weeping Madonna statue. Byström sings a beautifully modulated 'prayer', removes her purple gown and exits up a long mid-stage staircase in her petticoat. **Martin Gantner**, as Wolfram, confirms the beauty and sincerity of his singing with his 'evening star' aria. The male pilgrims sing magnificently as they cross the stage through the ever-present arch. After describing his failure to achieve salvation, Tannhäuser and Wolfram exchange a brotherly kiss. During an extended orchestral passage two men in tails dance passionately together at the top of the staircase, but Tannhäuser's attempts to return to Venus are thwarted by the invocation of Elisabeth's name. Her covered body is borne down the staircase and Tannhäuser falls apparently lifeless to the floor. As the off-stage pilgrims sing of the miracle of the sprouting staff, Elisabeth descends the stairs in white and Tannhäuser rises. They embrace with a kiss. Curtain. Hmm. The role of Tannhäuser is up there with Siegfried as a mountain to be conquered. It is very long and has a wide range both musically and emotionally. It is both declamatory and lyrical. Clay Hilley certainly has the range and stamina for the role. Although, as a 'big' man he several times flourishes a white handkerchief, alla Pavarotti, to wipe the perspiration - no, sweat - from his face. But unlike Siegfried, Tannhäuser is not a hero and Hilley's vocal portrayal misses many of the lyrical opportunities the role offers, opting for the declamatory. Has he sung too many Siegfrieds? His tone quality is basically beautiful and not shouty. If only he would let it sing more, with some less aggressive onsets. In some ways this is a minor quibble. Never once did his voice betray fatigue or show strain.

## Wagner and Love

Love is one of the central themes in Richard Wagner's work—and life—to the extent that it not only permeates almost all of his operas but, in most cases, serves as the central theme, structuring and elevating his discourse to the highest emotional and intellectual levels. However, love in Wagner should not be understood in terms of romance—the sentimental and sweetened emotion typical of romance novels or melodrama—but rather through the intensity of the philosophy of his time: an absolute concept that transcends the human and governs the forces and order of nature. In *Tannhäuser* love is presented as a volcanic energy, with a sexual intensity so strong that it both scandalised—and thrilled—the first audiences. In *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, love is the force that restores order in a corrupted world, which can only regenerate through its destruction and rebirth by means of true love. And what can be said of *Tristan und Isolde*? Here, love transcends the physical, becoming a metaphysical power that goes beyond the material world and can only be attained beyond death—understood as a sublime state superior to life and reality. Similarly, love is the force that governs the world in *Lohengrin*: when love exists, life thrives; when love becomes a doubtful, relative, or disregarded concept, decadence and oblivion follow. <https://www.liceubarcelona.cat/en/lohengrin-production>



Ekaterina Cubanova as Venus

## ESTEBAN INSAUSTI REPORTS ON THE BASEL RING

**Musically I didn't find this *Ring* compelling, although the orchestra hiding under the stage played very well. And the sound (not amplified as I suspected) from under there was very good, muted but clear and like in Bayreuth not able to overwhelm the singers.**

Wagner's *Ring* is a work that can withstand much interpretation. I have seen many different "takes" on it since my first live *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1992. The Basel production attempt is a new angle that at first puzzled me but by the end had me nodding my head in (semi) approval. Benedikt von Peter presents the *Ring* from the point of view of Brünnhilde. Brünnhilde looking back, remembering, dreaming of the past to explain, or maybe resolve for herself, what happened to her family. This a family with more trauma and baggage than your average Classical Greek tragedy sitcom. This is a fresh take on the work. Making Brünnhilde the real hero, the centre and focus, is not without precedent. If you take Tcherniakov's Berlin Staatsoper *Ring*, Brünnhilde is central and, going against the libretto, survives the end by walking out on the Institution and her mother (Erda, played as a dystopian Aunt Lydia). Escape, survival, that is what I thought at first, as Brünnhilde began a narration about her family before the E minor chord began. And it did turn out that way, 14+ hours later, at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, as everyone, except Wotan and Alberich, left the stage via the auditorium, rejecting Wotan (and the ring which he got back, again against the libretto), leaving two old men sitting opposite each other across the family table to ponder what they had achieved. Not a bad image that. And if you allow yourself to accept the concept then this *Ring* provides much insight and fodder for discussion. Alas, if you are a novice, or don't know the story too well, this *Ring* will confound and confuse you even before a note is played.

The set was minimalist but not simple. It was a dreamscape. A toy house, stripped of external walls, dominated stage right. A single tree (at first) was in the "backyard". I assume this to be the World Ash Tree (Yggdrasil), much abused by Wotan (and others as we'll see in *Götterdämmerung*). At the beginning of *Das Rheingold* it had a swing hanging from one of its branches. The other key element of the set, which became a constant, was a long table. The family dining table is a key memory and fundamental to the rituals of family life. The scene opens to the celebration of Siegfried's 5th birthday (yep, if you missed that or didn't pick up on it, you were in trouble even before the E minor chord started its magic). Not only that but Siegfried's father, Siegmund is there, catatonic, sitting glumly at one end of the table, everyone actively avoiding him (wonder why?). When Wotan arrives, the party begins. Wotan presents Siegfried with a toy theatre including puppets and dolls, with which he proceeds to tell the story of, yes, the Rheinmaidens and Alberich (a big toad). Giant puppets then come into the scene and the "real" *Ring* story begins to play out on stage. Of course at the time, none of this made sense. Specially as there were two more Brünnhildes around, a very young one and a teenage one, along with the mature one (on stage literally ALL the time). What becomes crystal clear as the action progresses is that the father-daughter bond between Wotan and Brünnhilde is fraught. This is made explicit in that critical (and for me central) scene between Erda and the Wanderer in Act 3 of *Siegfried*. Abuse and trauma reek from almost every scene.

There are recurring images through the whole production: A young and teenage Brünnhilde taken away from her mother (Erda in the house, not underground) by Wotan and sat on a horse (Grane); Wotan appearing with either the young or teenage Brünnhilde at key moments to taunt or remind the adult one about who is in control; The use of dolls or puppets by all the principals - I am told this is a way for psychologists to allow young children to "act" out abuse or trauma; The use of a trap (hole) near the tree to literally bury bodies and evidence in the backyard. This same trap is also the gateway to Nibelheim. These are some of the images that I noted, there may be others that emerge from future viewings of this production (yes, it is possible that I may return to it, which breaks my policy on 'no repeat Rings'). One comment on the rituals around the dining table, apart from being a common human trope. It reminded me of a brilliant production of the *Oresteia* (Trafalgar Studios) in which the action was punctuated by a family meal around the table and how the family dynamics and mood changed as the action progressed. The director also has the tendency to show us what the situation is rather than what the libretto says. Of course Wagner uses the music to tell us what really is going on. The end of Act 1 of *Die Walküre* is a case in point. The twins don't escape. Well clearly they are trapped between the wills of Wotan and Fricka. But for Wotan to tie Siegmund down and Fricka to order Hunding to take Sieglinde away must have confused most (I was until I rationalised it much later). They didn't get to have sex and therefore beget future "hero" Siegfried. Here the sin between the twins

happened long before (5 years before). This is part of the family stain. Certainly the contretemps between Wotan and Fricka. Not just serial unfaithfulness (was Wotan doing it with the Norns during Siegfried's 5th birthday party?) but incestuous twins. As punishment, or to try to give the situation an air of respectability, Sieglinde is married off to Hunding, Siegmund is left to mull over things and Siegfried is brought up by Wotan.

And here is the other key family strain - Brünnhilde being Wotan's favourite is expected to look after young Siegfried whilst Daddy goes off to do things. She becomes Siegfried's nanny/protector/friend/god aunt/champion. Of course she falls in love with him from the very beginning. Of course the family protects Siegfried from everything (to maintain his innocence). For Brünnhilde the strain of responsibility, the lying, the assumed covering for Daddy, Wotan's abuse of her mother (Erda), the militarisation of her sisters (the Valkyries) into his Death Cult, all this amounts to a clear case of child abuse and trauma which spills into defiance in Act 2 of *Die Walküre* with the consequences we are familiar with. Wotan not so much demotes his daughter from preferred status as traps her in a domestic situation that she will find it hard to break out from. The flames around her rock are not necessary. I also liked touches such as all the sisters supporting Waltraute's visit to older sister. Or the consistency of retaining the Rheinmaidens as giant puppets (from the Dreamtime, not real, not family). Of course all this focus on Wotan's family downplays the importance of Alberich and Hagen. Even to the point of Alberich and Wotan fighting for the ring at the very end of the tetralogy. Wotan in this production is a manipulative abuser. Charming maybe, but dangerous and out of control. How he murders both Siegmund and Sieglinde is callous. He also murders Hunding. And as a bookend parallel to the beginning with a birthday cake, in the end Wotan brings a model of Valhalla (was it a cake too?) to Siegfried's funeral (played as flashback to his inglorious sheltered life) which is set alight. Again that final tableau of the cast led by Brünnhilde walking away from Wotan who finally, in defeat and rejected, sits opposite Alberich across the family table with the embers of the family home and empty chairs - stunning.

Musically I didn't find this *Ring* compelling, although the orchestra hiding under the stage played very well. And the sound (not amplified as I suspected) from under there was very good, muted but clear and like in Bayreuth not able to overwhelm the singers. The singing was generally very good. To me only the Wotan and Brünnhilde had voices that could fill a bigger theatre. What was remarkable about this production was the acting, the personenregie, and commitment by some of the principals to be available and on stage for the entire cycle. Every character was well defined and acted. In conclusion not a great or perfect *Ring* but a very interesting and remarkable one that has challenged my thinking and whetted my appetite for these kinds of different perspectives. Well worth the effort and time spent in Basel. Written on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June on a train between Frankfurt and Vienna (the other *Ring* of the trip).

## Cast

Woglinde  
**Harpa Ósk Björnsdóttir**  
 Wellgunde  
**Valentina Stadler**  
 Flosshilde  
**Sophie Kidwell**  
 Wotan  
**Nathan Berg**  
 Donner  
**Michael Borth**  
 Froh  
**Ronan Caillet**  
 Loge  
**Michael Laurenz**  
 Fricka  
**Solenn' Lavanant Linke**  
 Freia  
**Lucie Peyramaure**  
 Erda  
**Hanna Schwarz**  
 Alberich  
**Andrew Murphy**  
 Mime  
**Karl-Heinz Brandt**  
 Fasolt  
**Hubert Kowalczyk**  
 Fafner  
**Runi Brattaberg**  
 Erste Norn  
**Marta Herman**  
 Zweite Norn  
**Jasmin Jorias**  
 Dritte Norn  
**Sarah Marie Kramer**  
 Siegmund  
**Ric Furman**  
 Brünnhilde  
**Trine Møller**  
**Basel Symphony Orchestra**  
 Conductor  
**Jonathan Nott**  
 Director  
**Benedikt von Peter**  
 Sets  
**Natascha von Steiger**  
 Costumes  
**Katrin Lea Tag**  
 Lighting  
**Roland Edrich**



Das Rheingold

# JULIE AND TERRY CLARKE REPORT ON GLYNDEBOURNE AND LONGBOROUGH

## **PARSIFAL MEETS BACHESTER BY WAY OF THE CHERRY ORCHARD** GLYNDEBOURNE, JUNE 2025

### Cast

Gurnemanz

**John Relyea**

Kundry

**Kristina Stanek**

Amfortas

**Audun Iversen**

Parsifal

**Daniel Johansson**

Titurel

**John Tomlinson**

Klingsor

**Ryan Speedo Green**

London

Philharmonic

Orchestra

Conductor

**Robin Ticciati**

Director

**Jetske Mijnssen**

There can be few more agreeable places in the world than Glyndebourne on a perfect English summer day. Strolling around the lake with a glass of English sparkling wine and the prospect of five hours of *Parsifal* is honeydew and the milk of paradise. Following their recent successes with productions of *Meistersinger* and *Tristan und Isolde*, we eagerly anticipated Glyndebourne's first-ever staging of *Parsifal*.

Certainly, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, under the ebullient direction of **Robin Ticciati**, played beautifully, and the singing was uniformly excellent. The choreography of this complex work was also impressive, with the chorus drilled to come and go with military precision. However, for those familiar with *Parsifal*, this production was at times confusing, to say the least. **Jetske Mijnssen**, the young Dutch director—whose previous experience lies largely in baroque opera—was new both to *Parsifal* and to Glyndebourne. She reimagined the piece as a Christian family drama set in the 1880s, heavily influenced by **Anton Chekhov**. The setting was a large, black room in a country house.

**Act One** saw Gurnemanz appearing as an Anglican priest in full cassock and dog collar. During his lengthy narration, we were treated to a dumb show featuring a young Amfortas and Klingsor—now brothers—fighting for the affections of a young Kundry. During the scuffle, Klingsor stabbed Amfortas in the side with a small dagger. Kundry was no wild woman, but rather a buttoned-up Victorian matron in a long black dress with a bustle, carrying a tray of afternoon tea for Titurel. The latter

silently directed traffic throughout the entire first act. There was no procession of knights. Instead, a regimented troop of pompous butlers entered with a table, a platter of bread, and a small silver goblet to represent the Grail. Gurnemanz, Titurel, and Amfortas appeared as Church of England clerics in surplices and chasubles, enacting the ritual of Holy Communion with Parsifal as the fourth member present. Parsifal, however, refused the bread and wine—signalling his lack of understanding. The butlers, now dressed in surplices like student priests, took communion in pairs before turning on Parsifal, assaulting him and leaving him wounded on the ground. To add insult to injury, Gurnemanz then banished him.

**Act Two** retained the same set, now featuring a stylised tree at centre stage. Klingsor was portrayed by a young black man, and Kundry continued in her role as a Victorian governess. The Flower Maidens were Kundry clones in black dresses with bustles and red hair, which they let down in an attempt to seduce Parsifal. They sang beautifully, nonetheless. Kundry's seduction attempt involved removing her black dress to reveal an equally modest nightdress. Parsifal rejected her advances with apparent ease. Klingsor returned—not with a spear but the same small dagger. In the ensuing hand-to-hand fight, Parsifal disarmed him, then helped him to his feet, and the two walked off arm in arm.

**Act Three** returned to the large black room, now dilapidated. Elderly figures wandered about, including an aged Klingsor, Kundry, and perhaps even Herzeleide. Yet the main characters had not aged at all. There were no screams from Kundry—only another tea tray for the suffering Amfortas. Parsifal entered arm in arm with Klingsor, both identically dressed. Titurel's coffin was paraded around Amfortas's bed by a Victorian funeral procession complete with cloaks and top hats, before disappearing offstage. The small dagger, standing in for the spear, had been hidden away in a box by Kundry and thus could not be used. While Parsifal sang of healing Amfortas's wound, Klingsor embraced Amfortas in a hug—whereupon the latter appeared to die. The final image was of a sorrowful Parsifal, Kundry, Gurnemanz, and Klingsor standing around the bed of the dead Amfortas.

According to the programme notes, Mijnssen sees *Parsifal* as the outsider in a dysfunctional family—the only one capable of resolving their shared pain. He is not so much a holy fool destined for divine enlightenment through compassion, but rather a catalyst for reconciliation in a troubled household. This was a carefully considered production, featuring moments where the onstage action starkly contradicted the sung text. For devoted lovers of *Parsifal*, some of the liberties taken may be difficult to accept.



## WAHNFRIED AT LONGBOROUGH FESTIVAL OPERA MAY – JUNE 2025

It is often said that the intrigues of Richard Wagner and his descendants would themselves provide ample material for an opera. Indeed, such a work premiered in 2017 in Karlsruhe, Germany. The first production in the UK of this opera, *Wahnfried*, took place in May 2025 at the Longborough Festival. Written by **Lutz Hübner** and **Sarah Nemitz**, and composed by Israeli **Avner Dorman**, the piece was brought to life with the support of conductor **Justin Brown**, who also led the Longborough production. The production was directed by **Polly Graham**, who has succeeded her late father, Martin, as Artistic Director of the festival.

As is often the case with modern opera, the music and vocal lines were largely atonal, though there were occasional glimpses of Wagnerian motifs, as well as touches of jazz, waltz, and Klezmer. The opera's title, *Wahnfried*, refers to Wagner's residence in Bayreuth. The name translates loosely as "freedom from delusion" or "peace from madness."

Rather than focusing on Wagner himself, the opera centers on the dysfunctional family



dynamics following his death. The principal character is **Houston Stewart Chamberlain**, whose writings on Aryan supremacy and antisemitism were warmly embraced by the Wahnfried household—and would later resonate more broadly across Germany. Chamberlain, portrayed initially as a timid Englishman enchanted by Wagner's music, becomes a fervent disciple. He inserts himself into the Wahnfried household, abandons his first wife, and marries Wagner's daughter **Eva**.

Set against the backdrop of Weimar Germany—with a chorus clad in black and black fishnet stockings—the opera presents Chamberlain and Cosima Wagner as thoroughly unpleasant figures. **Siegfried Wagner**'s homosexuality is revealed, along with the costly efforts to conceal it. He is sung by a countertenor. His marriage to **Winifred Williams**, who bore four children and was notoriously enamoured with Hitler, is also depicted. Much of the antisemitic animus is directed at **Hermann Levi**, a sympathetic character who was the original conductor of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. Adding a sinister comic thread is the "daemon" of Richard Wagner—a green-clad, agile clown who darts about the stage, mocking the abhorrent behaviour of the characters.

Some prior knowledge of the Wagner family's history, along with English surtitles and explanatory placards held up by cast members, helps the audience navigate the opera's dark and complex narrative. Still, for Wagner enthusiasts, it is an unsettling evening—precisely because everything portrayed is rooted in truth.

It was a bold and commendable move by this small Cotswold company to stage such a large and demanding work, which featured outstanding singing, orchestral performance, and stagecraft throughout.

### Cast

Houston Stewart Chamberlain  
**Mark Le Brocq**

Anna Chamberlain &  
Eva Wagner  
**Meeta Raval**

Cosima Wagner  
**Susan Bullock**

Siegfried Wagner  
**Andrew Watts**

Hermann Levi  
**Edmund Danon**

Wagner Daemon  
**Oskar McCarthy**

**Longborough Festival Orchestra**

Conductor  
**Justin Brown**

Director  
**Polly Graham**

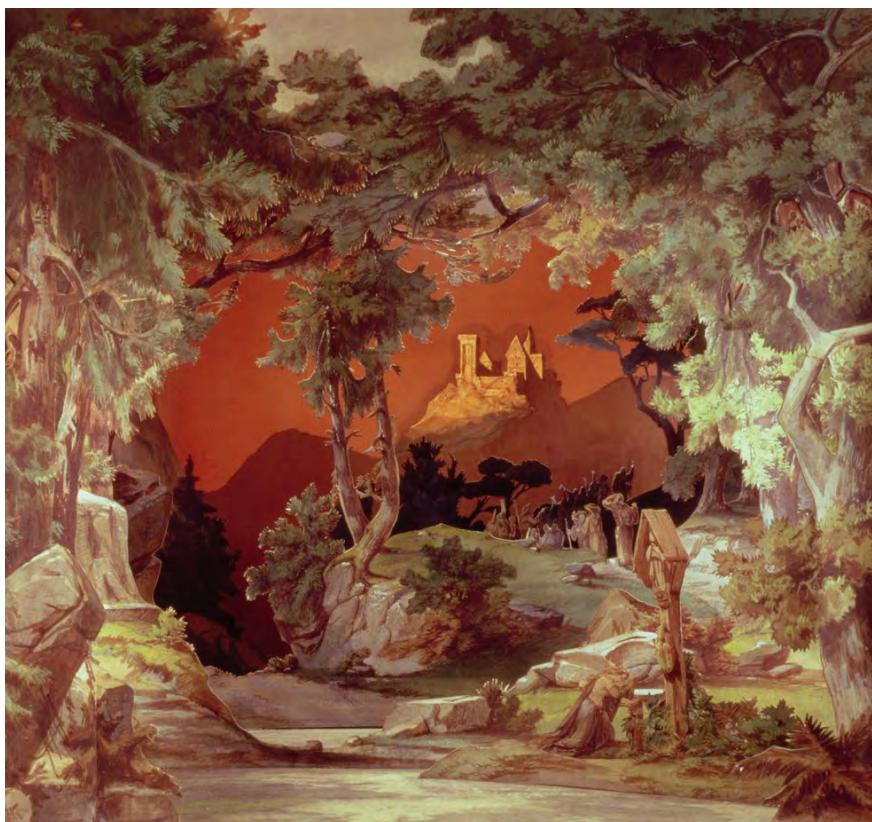


# TANNHÄUSER 180th ANNIVERSARY

**TANNHÄUSER UND DER SÄNGERKRIEG AUF  
WARTBURG PREMIERED ON 19 OCTOBER, 1845  
AT THE KÖNIGLICHES HOFTHEATER IN DRESDEN,  
CONDUCTED BY THE COMPOSER. (ED. NOTE: KING  
LUDWIG II WAS BORN 8 WEEKS EARLIER)**



Set models Act II Angelo Quaglio



Act III Édouard Desplechin

Wagner began composing the music during a vacation in Teplitz in the summer of 1843 and completed the full score on 13 April 1845. It was in this same year that he also began working on *Lohengrin*, along with making an initial draft of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Within four years Wagner had produced his first three great operas; *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* - an amazing accomplishment. (Another notable opera that premiered in 1845 was **Verdi's** *Giovanna d'Arco*).

The composer **Ferdinand Hiller**, at that time a friend of Wagner, assisted in the musical preparations for the first production. The part of Elisabeth was sung by Wagner's niece **Johanna Wagner**. Wagner had intended to premiere the opera on 13 October, Johanna's 19th birthday, but she was ill, so it was postponed by six days.

At the premiere Wagner was called onto the stage after each act, and the musicians of the orchestra, and more than 200 young people, torches in hand, accompanied him home, and serenaded him with pieces from his works and those of **Meyerbeer**. But Wagner considered the opening night a depressing failure. **Joseph Tichatschek**, the tenor who created the title rôle, could not act the part; he was "incapable of all dramatic seriousness, and [his] natural gifts only fitted him for joyous or declamatory accents, and [he] was totally incapable of expressing pain and suffering". (Tichatschek had successfully created the title role of *Rienzi* in 1842). **Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient** was too matronly for the voluptuous Venus, and her portrayal "sketchy and clumsy". The critics "with unconcealed joy, attacked it as ravens attack carrion thrown out to them". Wagner himself was even called a Catholic reactionary - rather surprising, given the Pope is *Tannhäuser*'s antagonist; Venus is more forgiving than the earthly representative of the supposed religion of mercy. A much-curtailed version was performed a week later, to an almost empty but appreciative house; a third performance, to a full house. Nevertheless, *Tannhäuser* became a piece for connoisseurs and intellectuals, rather than for the general opera-going public.

The set designer for the premiere was **Angelo Quaglio the Younger** (1829 – 1890), using sets painted in Paris by the famous scenic designer **Édouard Desplechin** (1802 – 1871). Wagner was happy with the designs but the scenery for the Hall of Song didn't arrive on time, causing him much distress. Quaglio assisted Wagner with other productions, notably the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865. Few records remain of the Dresden *Tannhäuser*, apart from some set models made some years later. Photography was not quite advanced enough at this stage to be useful in recording singers and performances. Newspapers would send artists to performances to make sketches, followed by engravings for reproduction.

*Tannhäuser* was not the success that *Rienzi* had been, and Wagner almost immediately set to modifying the ending, adjusting the score through 1846 and 1847. For the first Dresden revival (1847) he clarified the representation of Venus's temptation of *Tannhäuser* in the final act and added vocal presentation of the pilgrim's

# OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

chorus in this act (where it had previously been represented by orchestra alone). This version of the opera, as revised for publication in 1860, is generally known as the "Dresden" version. 15 year old **Prince Ludwig of Bavaria** saw this version in Munich, shortly after he had seen *Lohengrin*.

**Tannhäuser in Paris** Wagner substantially amended the opera for a special 1861 performance by the Paris Opéra, requested by **Emperor Napoleon III**. This revision forms the basis of what is now known as the "Paris version" of *Tannhäuser*. The venue meant that the composer had to insert a ballet into the score, according to the traditions of the house. Wagner agreed to this condition since he believed that a success at the Opéra represented his most significant opportunity to re-establish himself following his exile from Germany. However, rather than put the ballet in its traditional place in act 2, he chose to place it in act 1, in the form of a bacchanale, where it could make dramatic sense by representing the sensual world of Venus's realm. There were further extensive changes.

*Tannhäuser*'s first performance in Paris was given on 13 March 1861 at the Salle Le Peletier of the Paris Opéra. The composer had been closely involved in its preparation and there had been 164 rehearsals. The costumes were designed by **Alfred Albert**, the sets by **Charles-Antoine Cambon** and **Joseph Thierry** (act 1, scene 1), **Édouard Desplechin** (act 1, scene 2 and act 3), and **François Joseph Nolau** and **Auguste Alfred Rubé** (act 2).

At the first performance the opera was initially well-received, with disturbances including whistling and catcalls beginning to appear in act 2 and becoming prominent by the end of the third act. For the second performance much of the new ballet music was removed. At this performance however the audience disturbances were increased. This was partly due to members of the wealthy and aristocratic Jockey Club, who objected to the ballet coming in act 1, since this meant they would have to be present from the beginning of the performance (disrupting their dining schedule). At the third performance on 24 March (which Wagner did not attend) uproar caused several interruptions of up to fifteen minutes at a time. As a consequence, Wagner withdrew the opera after the third performance. This marked the end to Wagner's hopes of establishing himself in Paris.

A few further changes to *Tannhäuser* were made for an 1875 performance of the opera in Vienna, the last production carried out under Wagner's own supervision. These included the opera being sung in German (rather than in French, as in Paris) and linking the end of the overture to the start of the opera proper. The 1875 Vienna version is that normally used in modern productions of the "Paris" version. Wagner remained dissatisfied with the opera. **Cosima Wagner** noted in her diary on 23 January 1883 (three weeks before he died) "He says he still owes the world *Tannhäuser*."

WAGNER CONSIDERED THE OPENING NIGHT A DEPRESSING FAILURE. JOSEPH TICHTATSCHEK, THE TENOR WHO CREATED THE TITLE RÔLE, COULD NOT ACT THE PART; HE WAS "INCAPABLE OF ALL DRAMATIC SERIOUSNESS, AND [HIS] NATURAL GIFTS ONLY FITTED HIM FOR JOYOUS OR DECLAMATORY ACCENTS, AND [HE] WAS TOTALLY INCAPABLE OF EXPRESSING PAIN AND SUFFERING".



Wagner, inventeur de la grosse caisse à mitraille musicale, se livrant à son exercice favori.

(Croquis inédit de J. Blass.)

Caricature by popular French artist J. Blass (Pierre-Albert Douat 1847 -1892). The accompanying text in French translates to: "Wagner, inventor of the machine-gun bass drum, indulging in his favourite exercise."

# SIEGFRIED

## SIEGFRIED IN CONCERT

A concert performance of *Siegfried* where the orchestra presents itself as the ideal medium to experience Wagner. Because with Wagner, as nothing else in the world of opera, the music is the staging.

**Siegfried is a classic case-history of the regrettable genetic results of inbreeding. Its hero clearly believes that sociopathy starts at home; not content with tormenting the local wildlife, he murders his long-term guardian, beats up his grandfather and has sex with his aunt, while under the impression that she is his mother”**

Robert Thicknesse  
The Times Opera  
Notes 2007

At the end of *Die Walküre*, Wagner lights a fire with orchestral means. A fire that is both earthly and magical. It is a fire in which you see the flames twirl. It is a fire in which you hear a world come to life. Listening to Wagner is like watching with your ears. And this moment - the moment when the magic fire, lit by Loge, invoked by Wotan, with which Brünnhilde is safely shielded from anyone who is not the greatest of all heroes - is the moment in the *Ring* when the ambitions of the orchestra exceed those of the singers. From here you could say that the symphonist Wagner abandons his original goal, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, because he discovers a new force of expression in music that only confirms the primacy of music over everything else.

In *Siegfried*, Wagner gives full rein to his symphonic ambitions. He seems to have less regard for the singers' audibility; the instruments seem at times to deliberately overpower the voices. In *Siegfried*, the opera in which the hero of the cycle makes his entrance, he builds a wall of sound with which he draws the listener into a world that overwhelms and seduces. That listener cannot help but follow the master, into the forest where the hero will slay the dragon, and to the rock where Brünnhilde awaits her valiant knight.

Looking with your ears gets an extra boost in a concert performance (HiFi on steroids!). A performance in which orchestral splendour, together with singers that are acting, with a single prop (Siegfried's horn), and a Waldvogel singing from the balcony are more than enough to bring Wagner's *Ring* world to life in a uniquely evocative way. The mind goes where the ears lead it and the eyes need little

to no inducement to follow the music to a world outside place and time where gods, giants and dwarfs are busy surviving and working themselves up in the food chain.

The ring that falls to Siegfried after he kills the dragon curses anyone who carries it. Yet Siegfried takes it, after the Waldvogel points it out to him. Nature has been corrupted from the beginning, from the moment Wotan cuts off a branch of the world ash to make a spear in which he carves the runes to subjugate the rest of world. The Waldvogel seems to be proof of that corruption. Her moral compass seems broken when she tells Siegfried to pick up the ring.

Unlike in the Nibelungen saga on which he is based, where his character is shaped mainly by his actions, Siegfried's personality in Wagner's opera is for an important part shaped by the young man's search for himself and his origins, his mother. In the forest through which he wanders, he is looking among flora and fauna for something, someone, that can put him in touch with himself and his identity.

Wagner excels in introspection and recapitulation. His music dramas are narratives of the mind. Not to speak short of the physical action (Fafner beating Fasolt to death, Siegmund's death, Siegfried killing the dragon), it plays a relatively minor role in the *Ring*. The real action is in the characters' state of mind. To shape their roles, the singers need little more than expression and gestures. It is perhaps for this reason that a Wagner opera shows itself in an ideal mode of presentation in a concert performance. **Wouter de Moor**  
<https://www.wagner-heavymetal.com/blog/the-glorious-wall-of-sound-of-siegfried>

## QUARTERLY FRONT COVER ILLUSTRATION

*Siegfried and the Magic Bird* c 1930 by **Charles de Sousy Ricketts RA** (1886 – 1931)

**Charles Ricketts** was born in Geneva to a French mother and an English father, the latter of whom harboured serious ambitions of becoming a painter of seascapes and marine subjects. From his parents, then, Ricketts inherited strong visual propensities and a

discerning eye, as well as an affinity with Continental art and ideas that runs through his early work. Much of his youth was spent travelling in France and Italy, where he frequented the Louvre especially and began to formulate the taste and artistic principles that were to guide his life. He began his studies in art at the City and Guilds Technical Art School in Lambeth, in 1882, where he met **Charles Shannon** (1863–1937), painter and lithographer, who would be his lifelong partner in both his artistic and personal life. On the advice of **Pierre Puvis de Chavannes**, they settled in England rather than abroad. They founded *The Dial*, a magazine, which had five issues from 1889 to 1897, and the Vale Press, named after their house, The Vale, in Chelsea, London. Ricketts established himself as an innovator in book design, illustration, publishing, printing and stage design. He earned the admiration of leading figures in the literary and art worlds. In London, the writers **Oscar Wilde**, **Michael Field**, **John Gray**, **Thomas Hardy**, **W. B. Yeats** and **Thomas Sturge Moore** were all eager for Ricketts to decorate their books or design stagings for their plays. In his life as much as his work, he embodied not merely an “aesthetic” devotion to art and beauty but also many of the fin de siècle's finest creative energies.



Set designs for Wagner operas 1928

# SIEGFRIED'S SABBATICAL

EXCERPTS FROM AN ARTICLE BY RICHARD ROTHSCHILD FOR THE CHICAGO LYRIC OPERA 9 APRIL 2020.  
<https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/siegfrieds-sabbatical/>

Of the myriad musical marvels that flow from Richard Wagner's *Ring*, one of the most significant takes place shortly after the midpoint of *Siegfried*. It's not a musical moment. Indeed, it's anything but a moment. Between finishing work on Act Two of *Siegfried* in the summer of 1857 and starting Act Three, Wagner took a bit of a break – a 12-year break. Wagner nearly stopped composing the opera shortly after Siegfried skewers the treacherous Mime and sits exhausted in the noonday sun under a linden tree. In a letter to **Franz Liszt**, Wagner wrote, “[Siegfried] will be better off there than anywhere else.” The composer eventually finished Act Two on August 9, 1857, and then departed the world of the *Ring* until 1869.

Why did Wagner stop work on a project that had dominated his creative life since 1848, the year he wrote the libretto for *Siegfried's Death* (which later became *Götterdämmerung*)?

Certainly crushing financial troubles played a role, stemming from Wagner's inability to stage the two previous *Ring* operas. *Das Rheingold* was not given its world premiere until 1869, *Die Walküre* not until 1870. And the composer, who often had his next operatic project well in view, was starting to fall under the spell of *Tristan und Isolde*. By 1859 the new opera was complete, although *Tristan* would not enjoy its debut

performance until six years later in Munich. And there was more on Wagner's plate: in 1861 he revised his earlier opera *Tannhäuser* for a new production in Paris, described by one opera historian as “one of the greatest operatic flops of all time.” Finally, there was that minor piece of business at decade's end called *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

When Wagner finally returned to *Siegfried*, he was simply a different composer. The groundbreaking harmonic and rhythmic structures of *Tristan* – one of the most influential compositions in the history of music – had carved a permanent place in Wagner's creative imagination. Act Three of *Siegfried* is new, certainly in a musical sense. “When listening to *Siegfried* Act Three we sometimes wonder if we are listening to *Tristan* instead,” wrote the late British musicologist **Derrick Puffett**: It is almost as if we have been listening to two different operas, two different *Siegfrieds* composed before and after *Tristan*. After the pastoral fun and games of Acts One and Two, we are plunged back into the world of myth...the world of *Rheingold* and *Walküre*; and the musical expression of that world is the familiar stock of leitmotifs, incomparably intensified through their contact with Wagner's new harmonic language. From *Tristan* on, much of Wagner's

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

Philippe Aries



Charles Ernest Butler 1864 - 1933 Siegfried 1909

## The sources of the composition of the music for the first act of *Siegfried*

Excerpt from Wagner's *Mein Leben* (My Life) Zurich – September-October 1856

*"It was then that one of the worst calamities of my life arose: a coppersmith had just set up shop opposite our house, and all day long he deafened me with his hammering. Exasperated, I was on the point of giving up all composition when, precisely, my anger at the coppersmith inspired the motif of Siegfried's fit of fury against the blacksmith Mime; I immediately played my sister (Klara) the noisy theme in G minor of the quarrelsome child and sang the words furiously; we could not help bursting out laughing, so that, for this time too, I decided to continue. I had thus managed to write a good part of the first scene when, on October 13, Liszt's arrival was announced to me."*



Original Act 1 set by Josef Hoffmann (1831 – 1904)

music begins to display a plaintive and at times even a haunting quality, one that began with the five *Wesendonck Lieder* composed during late 1857 and early 1858. And listen to the moment when Brünnhilde recognizes her horse Grane in Act Three: for a few measures, with the horns playing so tenderly, the music seems to foreshadow **Richard Strauss**, as if Brünnhilde were channelling her inner Marschallin.

The “pre-Tristan” portion of *Siegfried* contains numerous treasures. The forging scene that closes Act One is music communicating an energy and verve that seldom appear in the *Ring*’s earlier operas. Act Two is one of Wagner’s most creative enterprises, a darkness to light musical odyssey. It begins with sounds of menace and foreboding from the drums and tubas, what the composer called “Fafner’s Repose.” The deep forest is not a place for beginners. Midway through the act, however, the mood shifts as the beautiful “Forest Murmurs” section – seemingly Wagner’s response to **Beethoven’s** *Pastoral Symphony* – is quietly introduced by the higher strings and woodwinds.

After 12 years Wagner did not return to the *Ring* with subtlety or restraint. The start of Act Three finds the composer throwing open the doors and windows to Haus Ring (so to speak) and clearing out the dust and cobwebs with a new sense of mission. Erda’s music, so slow and mysterious in *Das Rheingold*, is urgently dramatic as Wotan seeks advice one final time from the “eternal woman.” Few acts in all Wagner begin with so much pace and power. The late Wagner biographer **Robert Gutman** viewed the Wotan-Erda scene as a turning point, calling it the composer’s “emotional and sad farewell to the complete artwork; music drama now gives way to grand opera, the genre

in which *Götterdämmerung* was originally conceived.”

And following the dramatic confrontation between Siegfried and Wotan and Siegfried’s monologue after he has conquered the magic fire, grand opera is what transpires with the Siegfried-Brünnhilde duet that closes the work. For the first time in the *Ring*, two characters actually sing to one another simultaneously. In the rapturous duet that closes Act One of *Die Walküre*, Siegmund and Sieglinde, Siegfried’s parents, had taken turns pledging their love but their voices never joined. *Tristan und Isolde*, with perhaps the most famous of all love duets, provided Wagner the foundation for combining voices.

Perhaps the best-known music of Act Three is the lulling passage sung by Brünnhilde that forms the central theme of Wagner’s *Siegfried Idyll*. As the onetime Valkyrie contemplates her new life as a mortal woman, the music turns more introspective and intimate, a welcome change of pace from the scene’s romantic tension.

For all his boyish charm and courage, Siegfried never really sees the big picture. He tells Brünnhilde, “My mind fails to grasp far-off things.” Siegfried can come across as limited or even, dare we say, ignorant. *Götterdämmerung*, the *Ring*’s final opera, will show this heroic lad is not the master of all situations (**John Culshaw**, who produced the first complete recording of the *Ring* cycle in 1958-65, said of him, “Wisdom is not, and never will be among his attributes”). Whatever his faults, the confident and joyously happy Siegfried closes his eponymous opera wearing a beautiful, shining new musical mantle. Wagner’s 12 years away from the *Ring* truly paid major dividends.

## QUARTERLY BACK COVER ILLUSTRATION

Elisabeth and Tannhäuser 1911 by **Willy Pogany** (1882 – 1955)

**Willy Pogany**, originally named Vilmos Feichtmann, was born in Szeged, Austria-Hungary and changed his name to William Andrew Pogany in 1903. He was known for his work in pen and ink and his illustrations of myths and fables. His style was influenced by Art Nouveau. He was educated at Budapest Technical University, and art schools in Munich, Paris and London. In London he was greatly influenced by Arthur Rackham, whose illustrations were massively popular. In London, he crafted his quartet of masterpieces: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1910), *Tannhäuser* (1911), *Parsifal* (1912) and *Lohengrin* (1913). Each of these was designed completely by Pogany, from the covers and endpapers to the text written in pen and ink, pencil, wash, colour and tipped-on plates. In *Lohengrin*,

Pogany set his soft colour pencil drawings against the greys. In *Tannhäuser*, Pogany used paper colour for further additional dimension. From soft pastel pencil drawings to watercolour paintings and pen and ink, Pogany utilized a variety of media in his illustrations. He emigrated to the United States in 1914. Besides book illustration, pictures, mural paintings, portraits, etchings, and sculptures, Pogany became interested in theatre and designed stage settings and costumes for different theatres, including at the Metropolitan Opera House, where he achieved great success in 1918 with his décor for Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Le Coq d’or*; given in the opera-ballet staging devised by **Fokine** for London and Paris, with dancers on the stage and singers in the orchestra pit.

He eventually moved to Hollywood to serve as an art director for several film studios during the 1930s and 1940s.



Book bindings 1911-13

# SIEGFRIED: A NEW BEGINNING

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN ANTHONY NEGUS AND SOPHIE RASHBROOK BEFORE A PERFORMANCE OF *SIEGFRIED* AT LONGBOROUGH IN 2022.

"In this opera," says conductor Anthony Negus, "there's always anticipating and looking back – that's the score of *Siegfried* all over. The Prelude simply starts with a very low timpani roll, which seems like a throwback to the world of *Das Rheingold*". Those who know *Das Rheingold* will recall its rumbling beginnings: a low E-flat in the double basses that feels as if it is emanating from the centre of the earth. And the *Rheingold* references don't end there. "Then we hear a strange motif – a kind of reedy groan – in the bassoons, which we've heard before in Scene 3 of *Das Rheingold*. The whole Prelude feels like a recap of the *Rheingold* Nibelung music," says Anthony, referring to the race of dwarves whose actions trigger the events of the entire saga. In its original context, that earthy, moody bassoon theme heralds Mime the dwarf's description of the terrible crimes his brother, Alberich, committed in pursuit of the Ring's power. Now, many years later in *Siegfried*, Mime is still dwelling on the Ring, and his thoughts are turning to the sword he needs to reforge, if he is to claim the stolen jewel. "It's a very strange beginning," says Anthony, "but that 'brooding' motif becomes all-important and all-pervasive in the opera".

A strange beginning, perhaps, but it sets the tone – of a subterranean, malevolent, and indeed, male dominated atmosphere – for much of the opera. If handled in the wrong way, this preponderance of murky musical material can make the opera a difficult listen, which brings us to the subject of *Siegfried*'s dubious status as the least popular of the four *Ring* cycle operas. "This is an understandable thing," says Anthony. "I've always thought the problem with Act I is that we have no female voices, and it can become very wearing if the singer playing Mime just sings it all in an ugly way, or as a caricature. I'm sure that's not what Wagner wanted. It's much more interesting if the singer playing the role is able to inflect their singing according to the character's intention – which is, admittedly, mostly malevolent – but it is vital that we constantly hear a differentiation of mood, dynamic and style. This goes for all the singers – but particularly in the case of Mime".

Another crucial aspect of interpreting *Siegfried* lies in the balance between the serious and the humorous. Comedy is not a quality typically associated with Wagner, but the opera's lighter moments take many forms, from physical comedy (Mime's reaction to Siegfried's superhuman anvil-hammering), character flaws (Mime's joy at riddle-solving, which almost tips into self-sabotage), and the hero's revelation of Brünnhilde at the end of the opera ("That is no man!") which always gets a laugh from British audiences – although not, as Anthony points out, in Germany. But for Negus, there is a more sombre, over-

arching process at work beneath the laughter – and here he cites the writing of **Robert Donington**: "The humour underlies the much more interesting process in the opera of the unconscious becoming conscious, and Donington is fascinating on this. Even Siegfried's reforge of the sword is an important part of him becoming conscious; and becoming a man. But in this opera, all of the characters are on some sort of a journey".

Siegfried's initial lack of consciousness is key to his success: as Mime learns, only a hero who knows no fear can reforge the blade, and thus slay Fafner the dragon, guardian of the gold. But when in Act II – following his successful forging of the blade and killing of the monster – Siegfried drinks the dragon's blood, not only does he become able to understand the song of the Forest Bird, he also experiences a sexual awakening. "The end of that Act is so beautiful and so vital. Until the death of Fafner, there is so much bass in the orchestra – particularly in the contrabass tuba. With the song of the Forest Bird, we hear our first female voice in the opera, and the bass melts away. Suddenly it's all brightness and light, and it's such a relief."

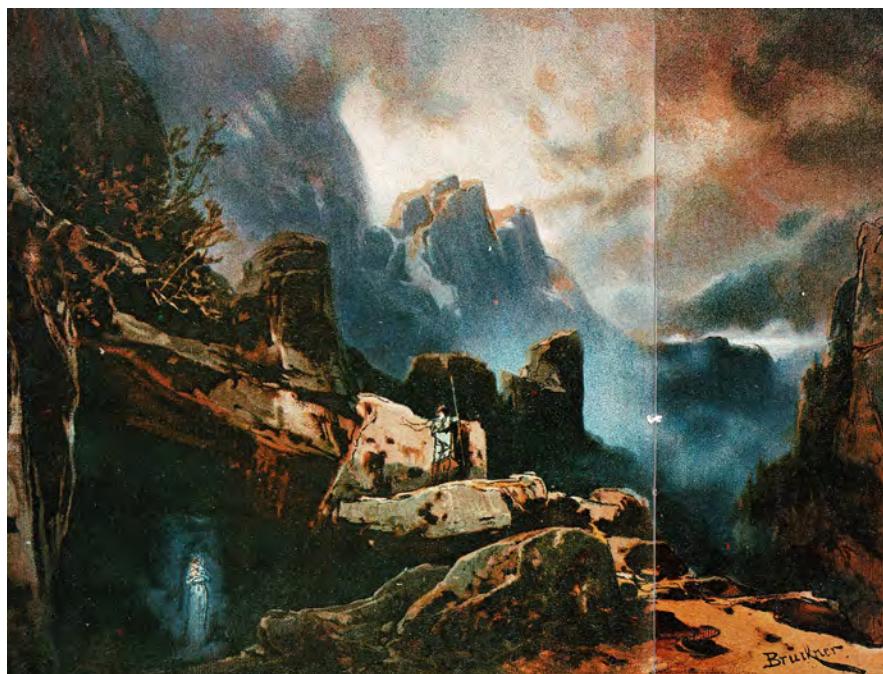
Wotan's evolution in the piece, as the thinly-disguised Wanderer, is equally fascinating. Compared to the impetuous God we encounter in *Die Walküre*, the Wanderer is more restrained, and more mature: "In the second scene, he appears with this wonderfully mysterious, numinous motif which we haven't heard before. It has nobility, and solemnity, and mystery, all in one". Likewise, Brünnhilde's trajectory is far from simple. "The music that Siegfried and Brünnhilde sing together is far more complex than being a conventional 'love

**"I've always thought the problem with Act I is that we have no female voices, and it can become very wearing if the singer playing Mime just sings it all in an ugly way, or as a caricature"**

duet'. When she wakes, she is not ready yet to succumb to the physical assault that Siegfried represents – and she looks back with regret on what she's leaving behind. It's very beautiful and sad".

Ultimately, Brünnhilde is carried away by Siegfried's passion, and the piece ends in a blaze of musical glory.

<https://operavision.eu/performance/siegfried-o>



Bayreuth 1876 Set by Max Bruckner Siegfried Act 3

# THE RING'S WESTERN MYTHS AND EASTERN BELIEFS

Part 2 of the text of Peter Bassett's talk in the Third Brisbane *Ring* Symposium on 16th December 2023



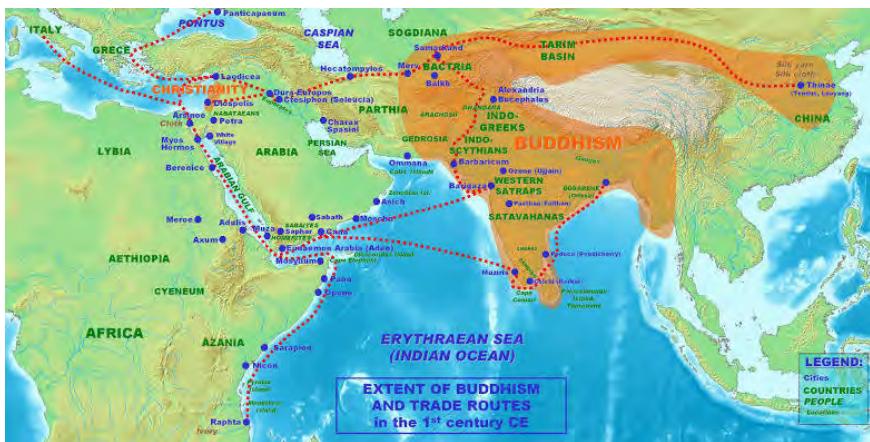
The Buddha and Alexander

Following the arrival of Christianity in Europe during the Early Middle Ages, antisemitism became deeply entrenched, including during the Crusades, the Reformation and even the Enlightenment. It was hardly surprising therefore, that when evidence of links between Christian doctrine and ancient, far-eastern religions emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, this attracted the attention of serious thinkers like Schopenhauer and Wagner. It was a major development in European scholarship, and there is no doubt that Wagner's most important works, from the mid-1850s until the end of his life, made use of it.

The argument went that Buddhist ideas had flowed westwards after the spread of Alexander's empire to the Indus in 327 BC and had influenced Christian doctrine. Certainly, after Alexander, Western artistic values began to influence Indian art, particularly in the Gandhara region of North-West India, which Alexander had conquered. If some ideas were moving Eastwards, undoubtedly others were moving Westwards. In the 3rd Century BC the Buddhist Indian emperor **Ashoka**, who had close links with the Greeks, sent missionaries not only to lands adjacent to India but also to Syria, Egypt, and Greece. Whether or not Buddhism did, in fact, have any influence on Christianity, all that matters for our purposes is that Wagner believed that it did, and this belief shaped his works.

During the First Century AD, Buddhism spread westwards towards Egypt and the Mediterranean, and eastwards to China, where it became the most influential religion for many centuries. Even today, surprisingly, China has the world's largest Buddhist population.

*Tristan und Isolde*, completed in 1859, and *Parsifal*, finished in January 1882, drew inspiration from the Hindu Upanishads in the case of *Tristan*, and Buddhist stories and teachings in the case of *Parsifal*.



East-West influences after Alexander

Schopenhauer was extravagant in his praise of the Upanishads, Hindu treatises written in Sanskrit between 800 and 400 BC and sometimes called the 'Himalayas of the Soul'. He praised them especially for their recognition that our senses are only able to grasp a representation of the world, and that this representation (let's think of it as the illusory world of 'day') stands like a veil between the subject and the hidden world of timeless reality, which Tristan and Isolde would call the world of 'night'.

When Tristan and Isolde sing: "Then I myself am the world", they are drawing on one of Schopenhauer's favourite passages in the Upanishads: "I am all these creatures, and besides me there is no other being", illustrating how someone contemplating nature necessarily draws nature into himself, transcending individuality and joining with the sublime. This image also finds an echo in the Good Friday scene in *Parsifal* when Gurnemanz draws even the humblest things in nature - the grasses and flowers of the meadow - into a greater reality. In both instances the music achieves an overwhelmingly beautiful 'untroubled, pure harmony', to use Wagner's phrase.

In *Parsifal* we find a veritable cornucopia of Buddhist images. The innocent fool's journey towards enlightenment follows that of the Buddha who, in his younger life as the prince Siddhartha, had left the sheltered environment of his father's palace and encountered the sufferings of the world in the form of sickness, old age and death. Parsifal too, having left his mother's protection, encounters these truths in the form of the wounded Amfortas, the immensely old Titurel, and Kundry's shocking revelation that his mother Herzeleide had died pining for him.

A collection of Buddhist legends dating from the first century AD contains the story of a wounded swan, whose moral lesson, as in *Parsifal*, was the need for compassion, and its role in easing the suffering of all beings. The swan, used in both *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*, has other significance too - as a symbol of the transmigration of souls which Wagner said, "almost certainly expresses the truth". The swan in *Parsifal* is given the same distinctive music as the transformed swan in *Lohengrin*, which implies that it too may be a reincarnation of a human soul. "The orchestra must be like an invisible soul", said Wagner, referring to this scene at the time of the *Parsifal* rehearsals in 1882.

In the Buddhist legends we also find the story of Mara, the tempter figure who, with the help of his seductive daughters, had tried to prevent the sage Siddhartha from achieving enlightenment. The imagery in Act Two of *Parsifal*, including that of Klingsor and the flower maidens, owes much to

the Mara legend. Parsifal overcomes the knights, resists the maidens, and recovers the holy spear when Klingsor hurls it at him. Miraculously, the spear remains poised above Parsifal's head. In the Buddhist legend, it was not a spear but a discus (some say thunderbolt) that was thrown by Mara at the meditating Buddha. This missile was transformed into a canopy of flowers that remained suspended over the Buddha's head. Klingsor, like Mara, is defeated and, according to the stage directions, the castle sinks 'as if by an earthquake' and the garden withers to a desert; or as the Mara legend puts it 'rocks, logs and trees are scattered everywhere'.

The Buddhist texts contain graphic descriptions of paradise, a place where beings go as a reward for especially worthy past lives, before returning to the world and the inevitable cycle of suffering. One account describes the giant flowers that grow in that celestial place, and we read of the nymphs' "soft words, tremulous calls, wanton swaying, sweet laughter, butterfly kisses and seductive glances", descriptions that could easily apply to Klingsor's magic garden and its inhabitants in Act Two of Wagner's *Parsifal*.

Kundry is a tormented creature, longing for sleep and death but condemned to endless rebirths. In the First Act, Gurnemanz wonders aloud whether she carries a burden of sin resulting from actions in a previous life, which is a curious remark for a Christian knight to make. In time we learn that in a former life she had laughed at the Saviour on the cross, which is the very antithesis of compassion. His own compassionate gaze fell on her, she says, and now she seeks him again 'from world to world' – which is to say, from life to life. Even the innocent fool Parsifal declares in the final act: "Ah! What transgression, what burden of guilt must my foolish head have borne from eternity." In the First Act, he reveals that he has had many names but has forgotten them all; and in the Third Act he speaks of all that lives and will live again. Reincarnation is definitely woven into the Parsifal story.

The parable of Kundry, Amfortas and Parsifal is an illustration of fundamental truths recognised by the Buddha, that worldly existence is suffering, and that the cause of this suffering is desire and attachment to worldly things. But the Buddha also taught that release from suffering is possible through the 'blowing out' of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. Klingsor had revealed the means by which Kundry could achieve this release when he told her: "He that rejects you will set you free." By rejecting every stratagem and enticement that Kundry could devise, Parsifal not only frees himself from the wounding affliction of desire but also 'blows out' the fires of Kundry's suffering. He is therefore, truly the instrument of her redemption. And so, Western myths and Eastern beliefs come together in Parsifal in a unique way.

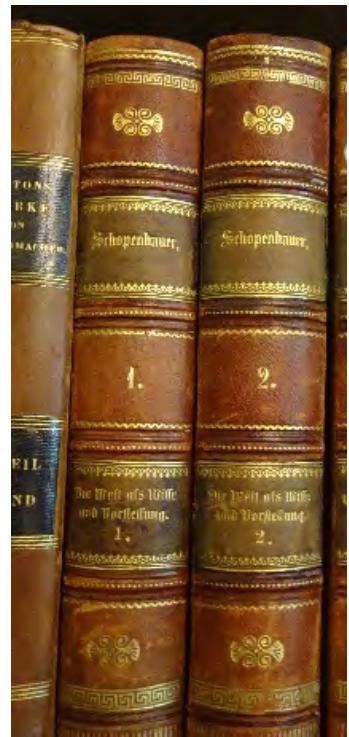
In May 1868, in the diary he called 'The Brown Book', Wagner jotted down some

correlations between Hindu/Buddhist concepts, dramatic imagery and modes of musical expression. He identified truth and reality with night, and selfishness and illusion with day - both central to *Tristan und Isolde*. Interestingly too, Wagner equated Nirvana with 'untroubled, pure harmony', the most perfect example of which comes in the final bars of Isolde's Verklärung or 'transfiguration', the so-called Liebestod, when she is joined at last with her Tristan in mystical union.

Wagner first read Schopenhauer's 'The World as Will and Representation' in September 1854 and found in it a coherent explanation of his treatment of Wotan. His intention – which he had arrived at instinctively – had been to show nothing less than the breaking of the god's proud spirit, not by an external and greater force but by 'willing his own destruction', something that Schopenhauer would call the annihilation of the will – the negation of compulsive wanting, striving, and yearning that leads inevitably to disappointment and pain. The Buddha would have called it the renunciation of craving and desire, which lies at the root of suffering.

The first European scholar to provide a comprehensive and informed account of Buddhism was the Frenchman **Eugène Burnouf**, who in 1844 published his Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism. It was this book that Wagner devoured during a period of convalescence in Zürich in the winter of 1855, before sketching out his unfinished Buddhist opera *Die Sieger* inspired by Burnouf's material. "What a shameful place our entire learning takes" Wagner told **Mathilde Wesendonck**, "confronted with these purest revelations of most noble humanity in the old orient".

Interestingly, one of the first things that his son, Siegfried, did on reaching adulthood was to travel to the Far East in 1892, visiting Canton, Macao, Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, and the Philippines. Siegfried's



Schopenhauer in Wagner's library



Mara and his daughters

watercolour paintings have survived, depicting Buddhist temples in China, amongst other things.

Wagner's interest in Buddhism was no passing fad, and as late as October 1882, just four months before his death, he told Cosima that Buddhism was a flowering of the human spirit, against which everything that followed was decadence. For Wagner, who lived in exile for much of his creative life and had become seriously disenchanted with politics, Buddhism was a way of answering his three most fundamental questions: What does it mean to be German? What does it mean to be Christian? What is art? In his view, Buddhism was not remote from German thought but intrinsic to it.

This connection can be demonstrated by one piece of music composed for *Die Sieger* that ended up in the *Ring*. According to Cosima Wagner's diary entry for 20 July 1878, it had been composed for the Buddha himself. These days, it is misleadingly labelled 'the motive of the world's inheritance', but it was described by Wagner's assistant **Heinrich Porges** as the 'redemption theme'. The phrase in question is first heard in its grandest form in the Wanderer's final scene with Erda. What he once resolved in despair he will now do gladly. And at that point, we hear in the orchestra the majestic theme once intended for the Buddha. During the first rehearsals, Wagner said that this passage

"must sound like the proclamation of a new religion". Indeed, it does.

Wagner was especially attracted to *Die Sieger*'s secondary theme of reincarnation as a vehicle for his compositional technique of emotional reminiscence or leitmotifs. "Only music" he said, "can convey the mysteries of reincarnation." *Die Sieger* was never developed beyond a sketch, but some of its ideas and characters were used again in *Parsifal*.

The clearest and perhaps most important Buddhist connection with the *Ring* came with a change to the text for the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung* in 1856, written contemporaneously with the sketch for *Die Sieger*, and within months of the first sketch for *Parsifal*. By 1856, Wagner's preoccupation was no longer with redemption through love but with redemption through renunciation. And, of course, the vehicle for this change was Brünnhilde.

Consider how Brünnhilde was depicted in the medieval German *Nibelungenlied* of 1200 AD, and how great the difference is between that depiction and the way she came to be presented in Wagner's *Ring*. In the *Nibelungenlied*, she is Queen Brunhild of Iceland, renowned not only for her beauty but also for her great strength, as well as for her skill at throwing the javelin, hurling a weight, and leaping a great distance. Any man who sought to marry her was required to better her in these three contests. The prize for victory would be Brunhild herself, but the penalty for defeat was the loss of one's head. Many would-be suitors had challenged the fair Brunhild but no one had defeated her, and all had lost their heads. This might remind you of the *Turandot* story! King Gunther wanted to woo Brunhild, but Siegfried advised against this and, out of loyalty to his expected brother-in-law (for he wanted to marry Gunther's sister, Kriemhild) he offered to assist Gunther. With the aid of a cloak of invisibility and the strength of twelve men, Siegfried did win Brunhild for Gunther, although he came to regret this. The remainder of the *Nibelungenlied* features details that also appear in *Götterdämmerung*, but, again, the biggest change is to be found

in the closing pages of Wagner's opera shaped by his encounters with eastern beliefs and, in particular, with the teachings of Buddhism.

In Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the nature of Brünnhilde's insight which had transformed her from an insanely angry woman at the end of Act II to the redeeming figure at the conclusion of Act III, is explained in a remark by Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck in 1858 about his difficulties in depicting the Buddha in *Die Sieger*.

"I have now solved the problem" he wrote, "by having him reach one last remaining stage in his development whereby he is seen to acquire a new insight, which – like every insight – is conveyed not by abstract associations of ideas but by intuitive emotional experience; in other words, by a process of shock and agitation suffered by his inner self; as a result, this insight reveals him in his final progress towards a state of supreme enlightenment".

In a prose draft for the ending of *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner wrote as follows:

"Brünnhilde, having set fire to the pile of wood, turns to those left behind: she wishes him who has fallen [that is, Siegfried] no rebirth; in contrast, she prophesies for Hagen a long series of re-births, before he attains the salvation to which she is now going; for she knows that she will not be re-born".

In the metrical version intended for singing (though in fact never set to music), Brünnhilde refers to herself as the 'enlightened one', and she anticipates her own release from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. The text that Wagner wrote for her reads:

"I depart from the home of desire, I flee forever from the home of delusion; the open gates of eternal becoming I close behind me: to the holiest chosen land, [she means nirvana], free from desire and delusion, the goal of world-wandering, redeemed from rebirth, the enlightened one now goes."

World-wandering and redemption from rebirth also feature in *Parsifal*.

And how did Brünnhilde achieve this enlightenment? "The blessed end of all things eternal" she says, "do you know how I attained it? Grieving love's deepest suffering opened my eyes: I saw the world end."

"I saw the world end" doesn't mean that *Götterdämmerung* is about the apocalypse or nuclear war or any other geo-political encounter, although some productions do show Valhalla disappearing in an atomic mushroom cloud! Rather, it describes Brünnhilde's pain - the 'shock and agitation' (as Wagner calls it) of Siegfried's death, or, as Brünnhilde herself puts it: "Grieving love's deepest suffering". This is what has brought her to a state of enlightenment.

Brünnhilde's insight was born of her overwhelming, grieving love for Siegfried. And that, to my mind, is what the end of the *Ring* is all about. So Brünnhilde exemplifies Wagner's application of the eastern religions to his greatest works for the stage, and the final orchestral ending of *Götterdämmerung* expresses the composer's most profound thoughts and his hopes for all humanity.

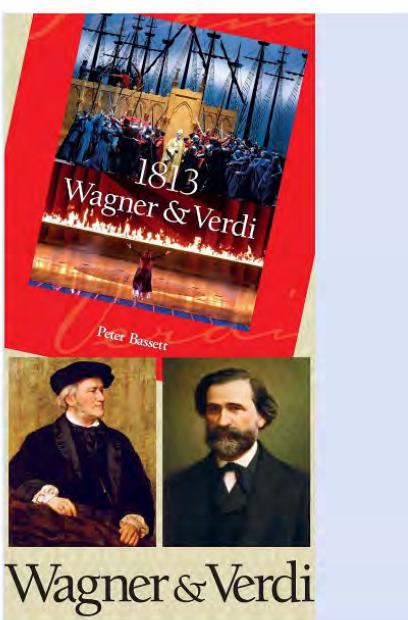
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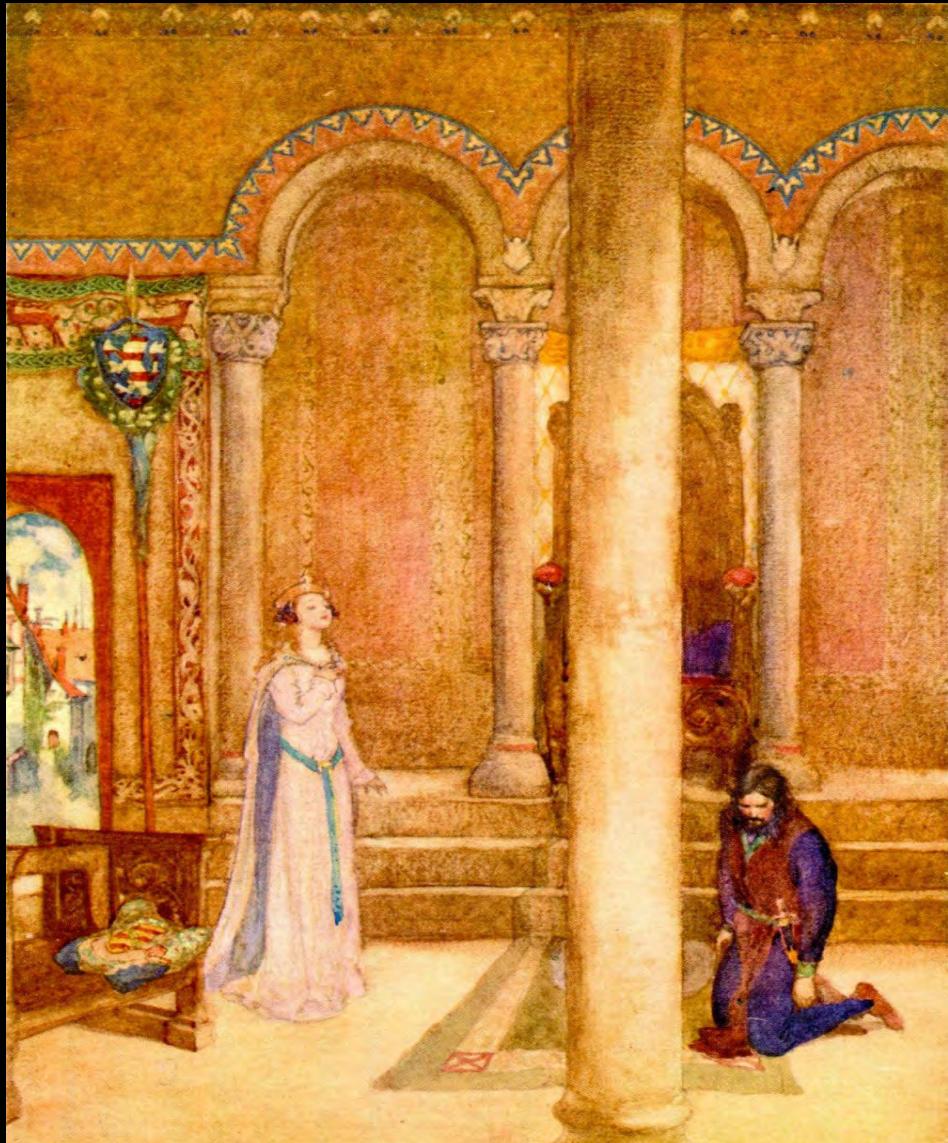
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