

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF RICHARD WAGNER

WAGNER QUARTERLY

DECEMBER 2025

179 ISSUE NO 52



WAGNER
SOCIETY
nsw

Seasons Greetings



COMING SOCIETY EVENTS 2026

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

2025	Some events may be subject to change and further detail in the next newsletter	LOCATION
Wed 4 Feb	12.00pm Dr Thomas Launius talks about the origins of the Grail legends	Zoom
Sun 8 Feb	12.00pm DVD <i>Inbrunst Im Herzen</i> Great arias and scenes from Mozart, Wagner and Strauss 2.00pm Talk by mezzo-soprano Deborah Humble	Goethe Institut
Sun 1 Mar	12.00pm DVD Tony Palmer's TV classic <i>Wagner</i> Parts 1, 2 & 3	Goethe Institut
Sun 29 Mar	12.00pm DVD Tony Palmer's <i>Wagner</i> Part 4 2.00pm Talk by conductor Toby Wong about the Shaumet <i>Das Rheingold</i>	Goethe Institut
Sun 19 April	1.00pm AGM 2.00pm Talk TBA	Goethe Institut
Wed 22 April	12.00pm Talk by F. Peter Phillips , President of the Wagner Society of New York	Zoom
Wed 6 May	12.00pm Talk by Belgian Bass Tijl Faveyts	Zoom
Sun 17 May	2.00pm Birthday concert	St Columba
Sun 21 June	12.00pm DVD Tony Palmer's <i>Wagner</i> Part 5 2.00pm Talk by Chris Sorrell about early Wagner recordings	Goethe Institut
Sun 19 July	12.00pm DVD Tony Palmer's <i>Wagner</i> Part 6 2.00pm Talk by TBA	Goethe Institut
Sun 16 August	12.00pm DVD TBA 2.00pm Talk by conductor Sarah Penicka-Smith	Goethe Institut
Sun 13 Sept	12.00pm DVD TBA 2.00pm Talk by Ass Prof Ross Anderson on his book <i>The Appian Way</i>	Goethe Institut
Sun 11 Oct	12.00pm DVD TBA 2.00pm Talk by Mike Day about Wagner's painter contemporaries	Goethe Institut
Sat 21 Nov	WSNSW Symposium on <i>Götterdämmerung</i>	Goethe Institut
Sun 6 Dec	Christmas concert	St Columba

GOETHE-INSTITUT ADDRESS 90 OCEAN STREET, WOOLLAHRA (CORNER OF JERSEY ROAD)

Advice about changes to the Program will be emailed in our e-news to people who have given their email addresses to the Society's Membership Secretary. The latest updates will also be available on the Society's website: www.wagner.org.au
Admission to each event will be: \$25 per Member | \$35 each non-Member | \$10 (Full-time students)
Seminar/Concert \$40 (m) | \$50 (n-m) | \$20 (fts). For Zoom events members will be requested to register; admission is \$12

FOR YOUR DIARY

1 - 8 March	La Scala <i>Ring</i> with Simone Young AM . Sir David McVicar	Milan
17 Mar – 6 Apr	Royal Opera Barrie Kosky's Siegfried	London
24 April	<i>Das Rheingold</i> Concert presented by Shaumet Music	City Recital Hall, Sydney
8 - 9 May	WASO <i>Der fliegende Holländer</i> with Asher Fisch	Winthrop Hall, Perth
16 – 31 May	Deutsche Oper <i>The Ring</i> with Sir Donald Runnicles	Berlin
24 Jul – 26 Aug	150th anniversary of first Bayreuth Festival	Bayreuth
5 Sept	Singapore Opera <i>Siegfried</i>	Singapore
Sep - Oct	Staatsoper Ring with C Thielemann	Berlin
19, 22 Nov	SSO/ Simone Young AM <i>Götterdämmerung</i>	SOH

COMMITTEE 2025- 2026

President:	Esteban Insausti 0412 282 070
Vice President 1:	Mike Day 0413 807 533
Vice President 2:	Marie Leech 0418 679 626
Treasurer:	Danny May 0414 444 100
Secretary:	Ross Whitelaw ross@karos.com.au 0416 253 161
Membership Secretary:	Lis Bergmann lisbergmann89@gmail.com
Members:	Robert Mitchell robert.mitchell47@gmail.com
	June Donsworth jmdonsworth22@gmail.com
	Melanie Penicka-Smith
Quarterly Editor:	Mike Day michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com
Artists Liaison:	Leona Geeves lg03415@gmail.com
Webmaster:	Lis Bergmann lisbergmann89@gmail.com
Public Officer:	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

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

DEAR FRIENDS,

With *Siegfried* still ringing in our ears, now comes the time to reflect on a very busy 2025 and look forward to 2026. **Simone Young** and her hand-picked cast were magnificent. And what a way to showcase an orchestra that is in prime form. I think I can say on everyone's behalf that Simone Young's continued tenure at the head of the SSO is a blessing. Looking forward to SSO Season 2026 culminating in *Götterdämmerung* next November – I believe fire blankets will be freely distributed; the performances are going to catch fire!

One of the 'wins' around the *Siegfried* performances was that the WSNSW was granted a desk in the southern foyer of the Concert Hall. I believe this is the first time that a Wagner Society has had a desk in the Sydney Opera House. I hope it is not the last. Those of us who did desk duty, or just hung around, were very happy to talk to people about what we do and tried to pitch the benefits of membership. It was very rewarding and a great opportunity to raise the profile of the Society. Hope to do it again next year.

As we will with our symposia shadowing the Simone Young SSO Ring concluding next year. This year's symposium was another varied, interesting, challenging selection of speakers and topics focused on *Siegfried*. We were honoured to have **Daniel Linton-France**, assisting Simone Young here and sponsored by the WSNSW, talk to us about the experience of rehearsing at Bayreuth. And nobody is going to not recognise a Diminished Seventh again after **David Larkin** gave a phenomenal turn to conclude the symposium. We also had a great introductory talk from soprano **Livia Brash**, a challenging thesis from **Carole Cusack** posing Brünnhilde as the true 'hero' of the tetralogy, and an insightful view of Siegfried and Nature from a long-time friend of the Society **Peter Bassett**. A longer review of the symposium will appear in the March Quarterly as time has prevented us from including any coherent thoughts on a longish but engrossing day.

We've had eleven live events this year and five zoom talks. 2026 will see a similar number of events (or more.....) and just as varied a scope of speakers and topics. Of course, in planning a year of events we need to be ready

for things going 'not according to plan'. This is where the WSNSW is very fortunate to have a deep network of friends, speakers and artists that can be, and have been, called upon to step in. One such instance was with the great **Deborah Humble** in October when she was booked to sing at Cadogan Hall in London amongst other things. In that instance I stepped in to reprise my talk on *Meistersinger* given at the symposium in Melbourne in February. Well, I totally rewrote the talk and added a few more interesting images, so it was a new talk in the end. By the way, Deborah Humble will open our 2026 Event season in February – put it in your diary.

The Committee will have its final meeting for the year in which we will debrief as well as plan for 2026. The events calendar is filling up – apologies for a few gaps and 'TBAs' shown inside. But as always Lis will keep everyone informed via our E-News and update information on new and scheduled events. Whilst there is no staged Wagner in our theatres, we are getting a *Der fliegende Holländer* in Perth (May) and an interesting *Das Rheingold* from Shaumet Music (April) as well as a *Siegfried* in Singapore (September) just before *Götterdämmerung* in Sydney. There are other plans afoot that require more discussion before releasing into the wider world so stay tuned. I know that many of you are travelling to see Rings far and wide. Many will be in Milan in March as Simone Young conducts a cycle at La Scala. If you like, please let us know where and when you are going so we can put people in contact as it is always better and more fun to meet up with other familiar Wagnerians.

Finally, I would like to thank the Committee for a great year and you the membership for continuing to engage with the Society. Looking forward to a great year ahead. On behalf of the Committee, I wish you a wonderful end of year and a future full of music. With my best wishes,

ESTEBAN INSAUSTI
President
Wagner Society in NSW Inc

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

 Dear readers, This bumper issue is a Christmas stocking special – overflowing with light hearted and amusing holiday bonbons, many making fun of, or getting up close and personal to, the Meister. As well as the usual information about events, members' travels and our supported artists, you'll find jokes, swan maidens, ballerinas, sill knickers and other (somewhat Queer) delights. I hope readers enjoy the special 'Schwanenquiz' on page ?? Thanks to **Leona Geeves** for proofreading. Best wishes for a happy holiday season and a healthy, prosperous 2026.

MIKE DAY | michaeldayarchitect@gmail.com

WE WARMLY WELCOME NEW MEMBERS WHO JOINED SINCE SEPTEMBER 2025:

1308 Barbara White; 1309 William Barnard [SSO Ring Leader member]; 1310 Simon Eyland MP and Georgina Green [SSO Ring Leader members]; 1311 Kim Knudsen [SSO Ring Leader member]; 1312 Patricia Short [SSO Ring Leader member]; 1313 Colin and Richard Adams; 1314 Toby Wong; Rejoining member: 1031 Bob Carr

ERRATA

Sincere apologies to member **Janet Tomi** for incorrectly labelling her in a photo from the 20 July event.

QUARTERLY HIGHLIGHTS

FUTURE WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS	4
REPORTS ON RECENT WAGNER SOCIETY EVENTS	6
CONGRATULATIONS A BIG WEEK FOR OUR PATRON	9
OUR MEMBERS ABROAD	10
THE HUMOUR OF RICHARD WAGNER	11
WAS WAGNER QUEER?	16
SWANS AND SPELLS	19
MEIN LIEBER SCHWAN! ANSWERS FROM PAGE FOUR SCHWANENQUIZ	23
IN MEMORIUM SIR DONALD MCINTYRE 1934 - 2025	24
REPORTS FROM OUR SUPPORTED ARTISTS	25

FUTURE SOCIETY EVENTS

WEDNESDAY 4 FEBRUARY AT 12.00PM ON ZOOM

DR THOMAS LAUNIUS ON "PARSIFAL: THE MYTHOLOGICAL SOURCES OF THE MASTERPIECE"



Richard Wagner, like the great storytellers of Europe before him, drew on a rich tapestry of legends and spiritual traditions to create *Parsifal*. He sensed that the beliefs of his own time no longer spoke to the deepest needs of the human soul, and so he imagined an alternative world — one woven from Celtic Grail legends, medieval fairy tales, Buddhist insight, and even ideas that anticipate modern depth psychology. This presentation explores *Parsifal* as Wagner's response to a changing world: a drama of healing, compassion, and transformation that reaches beyond religion to the timeless language of myth. Using perspectives from mythological studies, **Dr. Thomas Launius** will open up new ways of hearing and seeing Wagner's final and most profound work.

Thomas Launius was born into a military family and spent his early years living in England, Germany, Japan, and the United States. He came of age in Louisiana and earned a degree in Physics from Louisiana State University, along with a minor in Vocal Performance. Trained

as a tenor, he sang in university and regional opera productions for five years before turning to the academic study of story and symbol. He later earned a doctorate in Mythology and spent over three decades as a professional storyteller and speaker. In 2017, Thomas fulfilled a lifelong dream by relocating to Bavaria, not far from Munich. Since 2019, he has worked as a professional tour guide, specializing in historically rich and mythologically resonant experiences throughout Munich, Salzburg, and especially Neuschwanstein Castle—the fairytale fortress built by **King Ludwig II** as a tribute to Richard Wagner. Drawing on his background in mythology, music, and narrative craft, Thomas creates immersive tours that bring to life the operatic vision behind the castle's creation and illuminate the deep connections between Wagner's works and the cultural landscape of Bavaria.

Ed Note: The March Quarterly will feature the scenic artists who helped in the creation of Neuschwanstein.

SUNDAY 8 FEBRUARY AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

12.00PM DVD INBRUNST IM HERZEN



Fine conductors including **Barenboim, Mehta, Abbado, Dohnányi** and **Runnicles**.

2.00PM TALK BY DEBORAH HUMBLE

WSNSW supported, Newcastle based, mezzo-soprano **Deborah Humble** is one of our most admired performers, and we are delighted that she will be talking to us about her Wagner roles and future plans. Deborah recently received rave reviews for her role debut as Dalila in *Samson et Dalila* in Melbourne and members will recall her thrilling performances over the past few years in Melbourne and Brisbane as Erda, Waltraute, Fricka and Magdalena, plus her Waltraute in *Die Walküre* with **Simone Young** AM and the SSO in 2024. She recently sang with them in Beethoven's 9th Symphony and will be singing Waltraute with them again in *Götterdämmerung* in November. Other performances in 2026 will include the Verdi *Requiem* in Canberra and Herodias in *Salomé* in London.



Previously a Principal Artist at Opera Australia and the State Opera of Hamburg, Deborah Humble has performed more than sixty operatic roles worldwide and has a wide repertoire on the concert platform. WSNSW recently assisted Deborah to undertake preliminary preparation for the role of Kundry.

Mein lieber Schwan! (Blimey!) Schwanenquiz

1. Who conducted the premiere of *Lohengrin*?
2. Whose coat of arms featured a swan?
3. Who is in charge of the Swan Upping on the river Thames?
4. Whose last words were 'Get my swan costume ready...'??
5. What does the swan represent in the Celtic tradition?
6. Who developed The Black Swan Theory?
7. Who or what is Cyggy?
8. What is carmen cygni?
9. What is Matthew Bourne's ballet *Swan Lake* famous for?
10. What is the collective noun for a group of swans

Answers on page 23

SUNDAY 1 MARCH AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

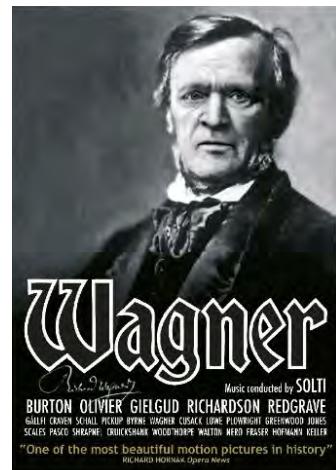
2.00PM DVD TONY PALMER'S WAGNER

This epic film - described by **Richard Hornak** in Opera News as "one of the most beautiful motion pictures in history" originally made in 1982/3 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Wagner's death. Filmed in 200 locations throughout Europe, many where the actual historical events took place, with a team from 19 different countries, the entire production was completed in less than a year. Sadly, it was to be **Richard Burton's** last major role, but the stellar cast assembled partly because of him includes **Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Vanessa Redgrave, Ralph Richardson, Franco Nero, Marthe Keller, Gemma Craven, Gwyneth Jones, Peter Hofmann, Arthur Lowe, Ekkehard Schall** (Brecht's son-in-law), **Joan Greenwood, Sir William Walton, Gabriel Byrne, Andrew Cruickshank** - the list is endless. Multi-Oscar winner **Vittorio Storaro & Nic Knowland**, the cameramen, produced a stream of astonishing images. And none of it would have been possible without the active and continuous support of **Wolfgang Wagner**, the composer's grandson.

We will be showing the work in five parts over the course of 2026 using the 2011 restoration as it was originally edited by **Tony Palmer**. The music, conducted more-or-less as a favour by **Sir Georg Solti**, has never sounded better. Storaro's photography has never looked better. And the script by **Charles Wood** remains a miracle of historical compression and accuracy, given that Wagner himself was an appalling fantasist and the truth often hard to ascertain. This first installment

Part 1 (Episodes 1, 2, 3) Synopsis

Opening in 1849, Richard Wagner is a respected composer living in Dresden, where he works as royal court conductor for the King of Saxony, Friedrich August II, and he is trying to arrange the first performance of his recently composed opera *Lohengrin*. Although his wife, Minna, enjoys their life and status, Wagner is bored with his work for the ageing king and spends most of his time writing revolutionary pamphlets against the establishment and aristocracy. Eventually, the May Uprising breaks out and Wagner becomes an important figure behind it. When Saxon and Prussian troops crush the uprising, Wagner becomes a wanted man and is forced to flee to Zürich. After refusing to join her husband for quite some time, Minna eventually agrees to move to Zürich to be reunited with Wagner. She manages to persuade him to start conducting and composing again and urges him to travel to France. In Bordeaux, Wagner meets a wealthy Scottish emigree, Mrs. Taylor, who agrees to become a patron of his, although he has a brief affair with her married daughter, Jessie Laussot. Upon traveling to Paris, Wagner is ordered to leave the city at once and return to Zürich. In Zürich he meets up with his good friend Franz Liszt, who arranges to perform Wagner's operas in Germany during his exile. While in Switzerland, he begins his first work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and plans an opera about *Wayland the Smith*. He also takes on a pupil, Karl Ritter, the son of another patron, Mrs. Ritter.



Message from our Patron Simone Young AM

"My heartiest congratulations to the NSW Wagner Society on the celebration of 45 years! In this time, the WSNWS has done so much to help young Australian artists in their development in this most challenging of operatic repertoires. Together with their very informative conversation evenings and lectures, the Society continues to work to further develop interest and deepen knowledge of Richard Wagner's monumental works.

There are a great many fine Australian artists now working both here in Australia and overseas, on some of the most prestigious stages, and all have been assisted at some time by the Wagner Society. I myself first visited Bayreuth in 1986 with the help of a small travel grant from the Society - and look where I have ended up! Long may the Society continue in its work to promote potential and to celebrate the love of these extraordinary operas."



REPORTS ON RECENT WAGNER

SUNDAY 22 SEPTEMBER AT ST COLUMBA

WSNSW 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION CONCERT WITH SOPRANO ALEXANDRA FLOOD AND PIANIST THOMAS VICTOR JOHNSON

CONCERT PROGRAM

RICHARD WAGNER (1813 - 1883)

- Processional music from *Tannhäuser*
- *Szene des jungen Hirten* from *Tannhäuser*

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810 - 1856)

- *Frauenlieben und Leben* (selections)

CLARA SCHUMANN (1819 - 1896)

- Op.13, No.6, *Die stille Lotosblume* (Emanuel von Geibel)
- Op.12, No.1, *Er ist gekommen in Sturm und Regen* (Friedrich Rückert)

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 - 1949)

- Op.49, No.1, *Waldseligkeit* (Richard Dehmel)
- Op.48, No.1, *Freundliche Vision* (Otto Julius Bierbaum)
- Op.68, *Brentano Lieder*, No.6, *Amor* (Clemens Brentano)

BETTY BEATH (1932 - present)

- *River songs* (Jena Woodhouse), No. 1. "River - Mother, River - Child"
- No. 5. "Swift Tide"

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 - 1949)

- Op.17, No.2, *Ständchen* (Adolf Friedrich von Schack)
- Op.39, No.4, *Befreit* (Richard Dehmel)
- Op.27, No.2, *Cäcilie* (Heinrich Hart) Op.10, No.1, *Zueignung* (Hermann von Gilm)

This was a very special occasion for the Society. An inspirational concert was followed by several heartfelt speeches. Seven of our Honorary Life Members were present: **Prof. Michael Ewans, Dr Terence Watson, Leona Geeves, Barbara Brady, Lis Bergman, and Margaret Whealy.**

Past President **Roger Cruickshank** and Past Treasurer **Dennis Mather** sent their apologies.

Alexandra Flood's performance was rewarded with very enthusiastic applause from the audience – over 50 members and guests. She delightfully set the scene for her selection of songs; each relating to a significant

aspect of the development as a singer. Her explanation of each song's meaning was very helpful for understanding the works sung in German. Her voice is remarkably bright and flexible with brilliant high notes but also an impressively warm lower register. Alexandra was in Australia to sing a Strauss with MSO as well as other concerts. Her voice isn't yet mature enough to take on the major Wagner roles but Prof **Michael Ewans** expressed the hope that she would consider Sieglinde in the future. Audience members were quick to agree. In the meantime she is loving the Strauss repertoire. **Thomas Victor Johnson** was an exemplary and empathetic partner at the piano. He has a wonderful lightness of touch.



Thomas Victor Johnson, Alexandra Flood



Esteban Insausti



Photos by Sherly Susan and Mike Day

SOCIETY EVENTS



Mairwyn Curtis, Alexandra Flood



Jenny Ferns



Barbara de Rome

After the music, our special guest **Mairwyn Curtis** gave an emotional description of what it was like growing up in a Wagnerian household with her mother, the great Wagnerian soprano **Rita Hunter**, and how difficult it was for her to listen to opera for many years after her mother's passing. She is now devoting her life to continuing her father's legacy project of assembling all the records of Rita's musical achievements.

Founding member **Jenny Ferns** reminisced about the early meetings of the Society at the Concordia Club in Stanmore, organised by founder **Richard King** and with our first Honorary Life Member **Werner Baer MBE**.

Leona Geeves followed with a message from **Clare and Margaret Hennessy**, two founding members who were at the original gathering with Richard in Bayreuth in 1980. Unfortunately 'the twins' were unable to get to our celebration.

Prof. Michael Ewans (member No 0) then shared some early memories of the Society and gave a summary of a paper he had presented to the Society 25 years ago. It touched on the essence of Wagner's story-telling genius, composition techniques and the political interpretations of the *Ring*, in particular **George Bernard Shaw's**, and its relevance to **Chereau's** Centenary Bayreuth production, which Michael has attended.

Our President, **Esteban Insausti** read out a congratulatory message from our Patron **Simone Young AM**.

Past secretary **Barbara de Rome** was given the honour of cutting the beautifully decorated birthday cake, which she had baked – another of a long line of beautifully decorated cakes made by her over the years. Our guest soprano led the singing of *Happy Birthday*. Many thanks to the members who bought along plates of wonderful sandwiches and cakes.



Leona Geeves



Prof Michael Ewans

SUNDAY 12 OCTOBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

12.00PM DVD GLYNDEBOURNE DIE MEISTERSINGER ACT I

Members enjoyed this superbly sung, acted, directed, designed and filmed production

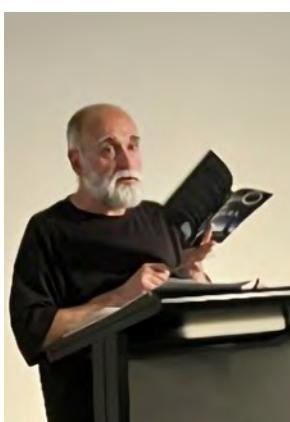
2.00PM TALK BY ESTEBAN INSAUSTI ON TRADITIONAL VS ICONOCLASTIC STAGINGS OF DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG

WSNSW president **Esteban Insausti** delivered a thoroughly researched and stimulating paper looking predominantly at the Bayreuth Festival's stagings of Wagner's great humanist work, from its first performance to its most recent. Esteban introduced *Die Meistersinger* as a "problem work" because of the negative association of Nürnberg and the Nazis, and the relationship between the Wagner family and Hitler. He asked us to consider if it is a world cultural problem or a specific German problem, and referred to the current rise of authoritarianism in America and the return of the far right in Germany. He quoted Elon Musk recently urging Germans to "stop feeling guilty about the past". He explained his ideas under three main headings, illustrated with quotes by **Theodor Adorno**:

Memory. *Only history itself, real history with all its suffering and all its contradictions, constitutes the truth of music.* Esteban explored the genesis of the work and the political context when Wagner was working on it.

Tradition. *One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly.* We were reminded of the original Bayreuth set designs and how little they changed until after WWII and Wieland Wagner's 1956 production which swept away all historical references. "*The Mastersingers without Nuremberg*". This shocked the traditionalists at the time. In later festivals Wieland added some not so subtle Nuremberg references, but eventually his more abstract approach to Wagner's works was adopted world-wide.

Damnatio Memoriae (*Condemnation of Memory*) *Wagner's art is the most sensational self-portrait and self-critique of German nature that it is possible to conceive.* Wagner had many contradictory ideas – he was a Royalist, with his association with King Ludwig, and also a revolutionary socialist, having Bakunin as a friend. Esteban illustrated the conflict within the German



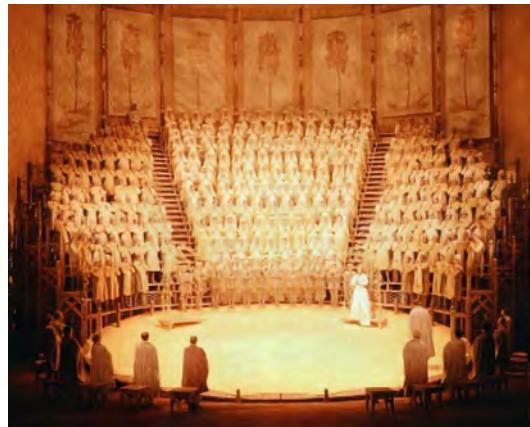
character with a photo of Goethe's oak tree (a great cultural icon), preserved next to the barracks in the Buchenwald death camp. Nürnberg nurtured the genius of Albrecht Dürer but also was the scene of the Nazi mass rallies and later the war criminal trials.

DIE MEISTERSINGER ACT 3 BAYREUTH SET DESIGNERS

Esteban introduced *Die Meistersinger* as a “problem work” because of the negative association of Nürnberg and the Nazis, and the relationship between the Wagner family and Hitler.



1886 Angelo Quaglio/Max Brückner



1956 Wieland Wagner

The talk was followed by some very interesting questions and observations from the audience. One member expressed the feelings of the others by saying what a warm and life affirming work *Die Meistersinger* is and it shouldn't be spoilt by a few “nationalistic” lines at the end. The work is about art – traditional vs new – and not about political ideas.

Editor's note: the December 2024 Quarterly included an article about Wieland Wagner's 1956 production and subsequent revisions.



2024 Andrew D Edwards

SATURDAY 15 NOVEMBER AT THE GOETHE INSTITUT

10.00AM – 4.00PM SIEGFRIED SYMPOSIUM



Carole Cusack

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



David Larkin

Our president **Esteban Insausti** introduced the session, followed by;

Livia Brash: ‘From Barricade to Bayreuth: the Political Evolution of Siegfried’. (On Zoom from Melbourne)

Daniel Linton-France: ‘From the Practice Room to the Performance - observations from working on the Ring in Bayreuth’. (WSNSW sponsored him in the role of Assistant Conductor for the SSO).

Lunch



Peter Bassett, Daniel Linton-France

Professor Carole Cusack: ‘Siegfried the Failed Hero, Brünnhilde the Redeemer of the World’.

Dr Peter Bassett: ‘Siegfried and the Power of Nature’.

Afternoon tea



Helen Meddings, Peter McNeil

Dr David Larkin: ‘The hero's (changing) journey: Wagner's stylistic evolution in *Siegfried*’.

Drinks



Roger Cruickshank, Pauline Holgerson, Geoffrey Seidel

THURSDAY 13 AND SUNDAY 16 NOVEMBER

DIE WALKÜRE WITH THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY **SIMONE YOUNG AM**

The SSO, under the guidance of WSNSW Patron **Simone Young AM**, just gets better and better. These *Siegfried* performances were outstanding music making. The orchestral passages, particularly the Act 3 transition to the mountain top, were sublime. Simone was extraordinarily dynamic and expressive and the musicians responded with great precision and enthusiasm. The soloists were also in top form. Simply wonderful. **Mike Day**

MINNIE BIGGS' RESPONDED TO THE REHEARSAL AND THE PERFORMANCE:

Rehearsals of *Siegfried* November 11, 2025

The moment the orchestra started to play, those many instruments came together, **Simone Young** with her hair up in a bun and almost bare feet, **Simon O'Neill** ready to burst into voice, I was transported. That music, whatever bit it was, wherever it came in the first act, sent me to another world. What world is that? Beyond the simple answer of Wagner's world. The music transcends even him, that man who wrote it. Where do we go when transported? Somewhere like heaven. At the end we listened to the softest strings, achingly beautiful, diminishing to almost silence, and turned to each other and asked, "What was that? Did you ever hear that before?" Goose bumps. Another place.

Siegfried the Performance November 13, 2025

For a concert opera we miss the usual staging, so often nonsense with *Siegfried* in particular, but there was nothing to stop **Warwick Fyfe's** Alberich and **Gerhard Siegel's** Mime from acting

up a storm fully inhabiting their characters for us; no awkward costumes and grumpy bears to distract us. The predictable five stars for all singers, and the orchestra beyond excellent. The surprise delight was seeing Simone having SUCH FUN, enjoying herself so much! Long may we cherish and support her! With more Wagner, please!



Marie Leech and Barbara de Rome



CONGRATULATIONS

A BIG WEEK FOR OUR PATRON

On 17 September our Patron **Simone Young AM** had her SSO contract extended and two days later was awarded an Honorary Doctorate.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra announced that Chief Conductor Simone Young AM will extend her contract for a further three years, remaining with the company until the end of 2029. She took up the role in 2022 and will continue to lead the orchestra in performances at the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall and on tour

nationally and internationally. SSO CEO, **Craig Whitehead**, said the SSO was "thrilled" to retain Young's services: "Her artistry and vision have brought extraordinary vitality to the Orchestra and our audience, and this extension ensures we can continue building on that success together." Her tenure has been marked by ambitious programming and artistic excellence, with recent seasons featuring large-scale symphonic and operatic works, world premieres by Australian composers and collaborations with leading international soloists. 2026 will mark 30 years since Young's first performance with the orchestra. The same year will also conclude the orchestra's multi-year journey through Wagner's complete *Ring Cycle* under her direction. Young said, "It is a joy to lead this remarkable orchestra. The artistry, passion and ambition of the Sydney Symphony musicians inspires me every day, and I am excited to continue our journey together."

On 20 September Simone was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Sydney Conservatorium of Music. The citation was read by the Dean, Professor **Anna Reid**, and the Honorary Doctorate conferred by Emeritus Professor **Alan Pettigrew**. Simone then gave the Occasional Address, speaking warmly about her student days at the Con and conducting local amateur musical group productions. Her talk was followed by an excellent concert

of student and staff compositions played by students and conducted by young up and coming Sydney born **Sam Weller**, who has been helping WSNSW with planning our future *Parsifal* project. This was followed by a drinks reception. WSNSW vice president **Mike Day** and committee member **June Donsworth** were lucky to be able to talk with Simone, who encouraged us to continue the work we are doing supporting local artists.



Mike Day, Simone Young AM, June Donsworth

OUR MEMBERS ABROAD

ROSS WHITELAW AT BAYREUTH 2025



John Mastriogiovanni and Ross Whitelaw

Once again, I was fortunate to obtain tickets to attend Bayreuth, with performances of the *Ring*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal* and the new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Firstly, the *Ring*. This was the last performance directed by **Valentin Schwarz** and it would not be an exaggeration to say that most will not be displeased to see the last of it. Only two cycles were presented. I attended the second cycle as much to try to figure out what was going on as to see what tweaks the production team had made since I saw it last year. Unfortunately the production changes did little to elucidate Schwarz's vision although I suppose familiarity made some things clearer but, on the whole, it was a less than satisfying dramatic experience.

The singing on the other hand was superb, the Bayreuth veteran **Christa Mayer** as Fricka, the Wotan of **Tomasz Konieczny** and, notably, **Anna Kissjudit** as Erda (one of those performances that make the hair on the back of the neck stand up) in *Das Rheingold*, **Michael Spyres** as Siegmund and **Mika Kares** as Hagen. Special mention to the Brunnhilde of **Catherine Foster** and to **Klaus Florian Vogt** as Siegfried, a role he keeps getting better and better at.

Simone Young AM in the pit allowed the singers plenty of space, whilst keeping the pace moving along. She was very warmly received by the audience but I think she still has more to give if given the chance to make further appearances at Bayreuth.

The production of *Tristan und Isolde* featured **Andreas Schager** as Tristan and **Camilla Nylund** as Isolde. I will admit to not being a fan of Herr Schager and found his performance to be unengaging. Ms Nylund on the other hand was another matter, her role being beautifully sung and acted. The production is sparse and the direction of **Thorleifur Orn Arnarsson** uninspiring.

Parsifal had at least four things going for it - **Michael Volle** as Amfortas, **Jordan Shanahan** as Klingsor (although he must have found the sparkling red high heels a bit of a challenge), the superb Kundry of **Elina Garanča** whose performance alone was worth the ticket, and the sympathetic and finely paced conducting of **Pablo Heras-Casado**.

All of the above productions are available either on Blu-ray DVD or on the streaming service of Deutsche Grammophon, Stage +.

The new production of *Die Meistersinger* was a real contrast to the previous production by **Barrie Kosky**. Colourful and full of life, the

comedic aspects of the opera came to the fore as did the hopes and dreams of the various characters. I was especially lucky to have Michael Volle jump into the role of Hans Sachs in place of an indisposed **Georg Zeppenfeld**. It's not that I dislike Herr Zeppenfeld's voice (I do like it and appreciated him a week later as Gurnemanz), however this is one of Volle's best roles and he gave it his all on the night. One of the luxuries afforded to the Bayreuth management must be the presence of singers with the experience and ability to jump into such roles already on the premises so to speak. Not only singers - **Axel Kober** stepped in for **Daniele Gatti** in the pit and did an admirable job.

I attended the Gala Dinner held by the Wagner Society of Southern California after the performance of *Das Rheingold* and was pleased to see that their President, **John Mastriogiovanni** (who has presented talks for us on *Parsifal* via Zoom) was presented with this Golden W for service to the Richard Wagner Verband International. I was seated next to Belgian bass **Tijl Faveys** who sings Hans Schwarz in *Die Meistersinger*. I'll be interviewing him via Zoom in 2026.

I also attended the artist interviews presented by the President of the Wagner Society of New York, **F. Peter Phillips**. **Michael Spyres**, **Ekaterina Cubanova** and **Jordan Shanahan** were featured, talking about their career in general and their involvement with the Bayreuth festival in particular. Interestingly, both Spyres and Cubanova were enthusiasts of singing Bellini as a means of keeping the voice supple and prepared for anything. Handel also got a mention in this regard.

Mr Phillips is the author of a recent book on the late **Stephen Gould** which is well worth a read. He made a brief visit to Sydney shortly after Bayreuth and was entertained by our President, **Esteban Insausti**. I found him to be an interesting and engaging speaker. He is included in our Zoom programme in 2026. Don't miss it.

PS from Ross: "Inspired by the latest Bayreuth production of *Tannhäuser*, I looked into my music collection and saw that I had 16 versions, on record, CD and DVD. I decided to play them all, following on from a similar successful project involving "Norma". My opera buddies, Simon and Ian, get together now for "Tannhäuser Thursdays". I will report in to the next Quarterly with observations, critiques and reviews, but if you are in Newcastle on a Thursday and have 6 hours to spare, look me up."

WAGNER SOCIETY e-news

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

THE HUMOUR OF RICHARD WAGNER

By Siegfried Wagner 1869 - 1930

The underlying trait of my father's character was a lofty artistic earnestness. Along with this, however, there poured forth an illuminating humour and a sunny happiness which, notwithstanding the difficult life situations and the disappointments, rarely resolved into satire or irony.

How highly he prized that gift of God - a wholesome laugh - is revealed in his advice given in a letter to his old friend, **Theodor Uhlig**: "Rely absolutely upon humour. Cultivate thereby, more and more definitely thy excellent gifts. Do not write another serious word but keep on laughing and laughing. That is the only way to get along in life and prove useful to others."

The humour of my father was in common with that of all genius. About **Shakespeare** he writes: "These wonderful witty laughs in Shakespeare. This divine scorn. It is really the highest point a human being can attain." In his remarks about **Beethoven** he says: "We cannot fail to see a basic relationship between Shakespeare and Beethoven. Further, it may be said that in the quickness of grasp, in the peculiarity of the humour, we recognize in the expression of the humour of Shakespeare's characters an inexplicable spontaneity, that in an exactly similar manner gives the types of motives of Beethoven the highest ideality; that is, they are the unavoidable melodic forms demanded by the mood."

Later Wagner remarks: "Never has the art of the world produced any happier or livelier works than Beethoven's symphonies in A major and in F major, and others of the intimate creations of the master written in the time of his complete deafness." In connection with the A Major Symphony, which was loved by my father above everything, may be given the following anecdote of a lighter character: In the year 1873 Wagner attended a rehearsal of the A Major Symphony which was to be given under the baton of **Hermann Zumpe**. When it came near the end of the third movement, Wagner rushed to the conductor's desk, grasped the baton from Zumpe, and besought the orchestra to play the movement over again. Little by little Wagner increased the tempo. The orchestra, gradually led by the master into a dancing and fluctuating whirlpool, gladly obeyed his flying baton. The movement closed with a wild whirlpool — the fastest possible tempo. With the last note of the orchestra, Wagner threw the baton on the floor, whirled around joyfully upon the little conductor's stand and then leaped back at least two yards. Turning around instantly, he rushed back to the dumfounded musicians, exclaiming, "Do it like that. Mach's nach!"

Most of the time when **Liszt** played **Bach** and Beethoven, Wagner listened with prayerful silence. Suddenly he would rise and, going to Liszt, would pet him like a child. This he did quite often; and Liszt used to look at him with a stern glare in his eyes. Once, after Liszt had played, Wagner crept over to him on all fours, saying: "Franz, to thee, one must creep on all fours."

In the presence of his family and friends, and particularly with artists, happiness and joy always affected his mood. Very often upon the arrival of an unexpected but very welcome guest, upon any joyous occasion, or from mere exuberance of good spirits, he would stand upon his head.

Gustav Adolf Kietz, who was working on a bust of Wagner, relates the following which occurred after a pianoforte rehearsal at Bayreuth, in the year 1875, when Wagner was sixty-two years old: "Once when I was working upon Wagner's bust and looked over to him to get the proper expression, I was frightened to see his face turned into a horrible grimace, his mouth open at least an inch, his eyes distorted, the veritable countenance of a Leipzig street rowdy."

Most of the time when Liszt played Bach and Beethoven, Wagner listened with prayerful silence. Suddenly he would rise and, going to Liszt, would pet him like a child.



"Wagner delighted in sitting down with his artists after rehearsals and engaging in jovial chats. At such times his irrepressible humour was evident. Upon one occasion, when a group of his artists were remaining rather late in a restaurant they were amazed to see Wagner appear in the gallery, with a bear skin over his shoulders, a helmet on his head and a spear in his hand, singing the famous lines of the Night Watchman, "Hört ihr Leut und Lasst euch sagen."

At the Bayreuth rehearsals Wagner took the liveliest interest. If all went well, that is if it went as he wanted it, Wagner manifested his thanks in the kindest and most humorous manner. At one of the *Parsifal* rehearsals he addressed himself to the interpreter of Amfortas, who had performed the rôle as he wished it done. "To you I have a ten-mark piece. You can accept it in good grace. When Schnorr sang Tristan in Munich, I gave him only three marks."

After the rehearsals of *Das Rheingold*, Karl Hill, who played Alberich, received a bottle of champagne, and the Rhine Daughters, because of their courage in trying out the somewhat hazardous apparatus employed to make them appear as though swimming, each received a beautiful bouquet.

During the time of the rehearsal of the *Nibelungen Ring* in Bayreuth the dog tax of the municipality was considerably increased. The celebrated violinist, **August Wilhelmj**, at that time was our concert-meister. He heard of this and, being a great lover of animals, feared that many owners would find the tax so high that they would let it slip by and permit their animals to be destroyed. To save the poor animals from this fate, he bought about a dozen of the dogs and confined them in a wooden shack next to the theater. With the first pianissimo of the orchestra the whole bunch began to bark and bay and howl in an unbearable manner. Of course, they had to be liberated at once. At the close of Wilhelmj's *Rheingold* solo, Wagner slowly walked down the stage and said to Wilhelmj in the orchestra, "Very beautiful. Very beautiful. You shall have a new dog."

Wagner delighted in sitting down with his artists after rehearsals and engaging in jovial chats. At such times his irrepressible humour was evident. Upon one occasion, when a group of his artists were remaining rather late in a restaurant they were amazed to see Wagner appear in the gallery, with a bear skin over his shoulders, a helmet on his head and a spear in his hand, singing the famous lines of the Night Watchman, "Hört ihr Leut und Lasst euch sagen." ("Hear me people and let me say to you.") One who was present reported, "The effect was a riot of laughter and amusement."

Felix Mottl and the ballet master, **Richard Fricke**, describe in similar manner a garden fest in honour

of **Amalie Materna**, at Wahnfried. This was followed by a satirical play - really a burlesque at the Hotel "Zur Sonne." It was a veritable vaudeville in which **Lilli Lehmann** danced a two-step (pas de deux) with Fricke, while Mottl played the piano and **Hermann Levi** accompanied him on the bass drum. Wagner remarked at the end, with extravagant explosions of good humour, "We artists are an irrepressible lot. Such an evening as this is incomprehensible to others and is therefore falsely criticised. Therefore it is best to live to ourselves."

Wagner often discussed himself and his works, in a thoroughly humorous fashion. Thus at an after-dinner speech in Dresden, where he had been Kapellmeister in his youth, he fell into one of his humorous moods. He gave a review of his youth in Dresden, when he was an unknown musician, when he had presented himself at the opera house with a very thick manuscript of *Rienzi*. "It was my poor *Rienzi*, which still every now and then is presented here like a plucked chicken." (Wagner here refers to the innumerable cuts made in the usual performance of his very lengthy original manuscript of *Rienzi*.)

When *Lohengrin* was being revived in Vienna Wagner sat upon the conductor's stand making remarks to Elsa and Ortrud about their duet at the end of the second act, permitting the orchestra to continue to play the remainder by themselves. Wagner was amazed at the beautiful warm tone of the Viennese violinists, who of course united to make the ensemble very effective under such conditions. He turned to them and said: "You have played it much more beautifully than I have composed it." When he came to the same passage on the evening of the performance he laid down his baton and let the orchestra continue alone, he laughing heartily to himself over his joke, and at the same time indicating his great confidence in their orchestra, to the Viennese public. This was greeted with such stormy applause that Wagner was forced to rise and acknowledge it with a bow. Turning to one of the musicians nearby, he remarked: "It appears that the public is even better pleased when I do not conduct." Then he laughed heartily and gave the signal to continue the performance.

<https://etudemagazine.com/etude/1924/01/the-humor-of-richard-wagner-->



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.

ANNA RUSSELL'S *THE RING OF THE NIBELUNGS* (AN ANALYSIS)

This is a transcription of the 1953 recording of Anna Russell's immortal sketch summarizing the *Ring*

Now that the opera season is with us again, I feel it would be appropriate for me to give a talk on Wagner's "Ring der Nibelungen." Now I know that analyses of "the Ring" are frequently given over the radio by some great expert for the edification of other great experts, but these are usually so esoteric as to leave the average person as befogged as before...and in fact I think tends to discourage him from going altogether. So I would like to tell you about it as from the point of view of one average opera-goer to another.

Now, the first thing is that every person and event in the Ring cycle has what is grandly called a "leitmotif." Now you don't need to worry about that; it merely means a "signature tune."

The scene opens in the River Rhine. IN it. If it were in New York, it would be like the Hudson. And swimming around there are the three Rhinemaidens...a sort of aquatic Andrews Sisters. Or sometimes they're called "nixies." Mairsie-nix and doesie-nix and little nixie-divie. And they sing their signature tune, which is as follows. [Plays and sings] "Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle, walle zur Wiege! wagala weia! wallala, weiala weia!" I won't translate it, because it doesn't mean anything. The Rhine maidens are looking after a lump of magic gold. And the magic of this gold consists of the fact that anybody who will renounce love and make a ring out of this gold will become Master of the Universe. This is the gimmick.

Now, up from underneath the river, as it might be, let's say, the Holland Tunnel, comes a little dwarf called Alberich. [Piano swoop.] And here he is. [Plays and sings] "Garstig glatter glitsch'riger Glimmer! wie gleit' ich aus! Mit Händen un Füssen nicht fasse noch halt' ich das schlecke Geschlüpfer! Feuchtes Nass füllt mir die Nase..." Well you can see he's excessively unattractive. He makes a pass at the Rhine maidens, who think he's perfectly dreadful, and so they're not very nice to him, they tell him [Plays and sings] "Pfui! du haariger, höckriger Geck! Schwarzes, schweiliges Schwefelgezwerk!" So he thinks "Well, I'm not going to get any love anyhow, I can see that, so I may as well renounce it, and take this lump of gold, make the Ring, and become Master of the Universe. So he takes it back to the Holland Tunnel with him [Piano glissando]. And here he is making the Ring. [Plays] No steel strikes here! Well, that's him.

Well, now, up here, as it might be on top of the Empire State Building, you find Wotan, the head god. And he's a crashing bore, too. Well he and his wife, Mrs Fricka Wotan, have had a castle built for them called Valhalla [Plays piano theme] by a couple of giants called Fasolt and Fafner. Well of course the giants want to be paid for building this castle, and part of the giants builders union scale consists

of this magic ring that Alberich's made. So Wotan goes all the way down from where he is to Alberich [Piano smacks] and takes the Ring away from him. Well of course Alberich is simply furious. So he puts a terrible curse on the Ring. [Plays classic Villain theme.] That's the wrong curse, isn't it! I'm sorry—here—[Plays Alberich's curse music.]

But Wotan takes no notice, he takes the ring up [Piano smacks] and gives it to Fasolt. Well right away Fafner kills Fasolt [Piano SMACK] to get the Ring for himself. So Wotan knows that the curse is working. And this worries him, so he goes down to ground level [Piano black-key glissando] to consult an old fortune-teller friend of his called My Friend Erda; she is a green-faced torso that pops out of the ground—at least we think she's a torso, that's all anyone's ever seen of her. And she says to Wotan, she says [Plays and sings] "Weiche, Wotan, weiche!" Which means "Be careful, Wotan, be careful." She then bears him eight daughters. These daughters are the Valkyries, headed by Brünnhilde...and they are the NOISETEST women! [Plays and sings] "Heiaha! Heiaha! Hojotoho! Hojotoho! Heiaha! Wo—" Well, that is the end of Part 1.

In Part 2 you find Wotan wandering about on the earth, and he has a couple of illegitimate children by a mortal—Siegmund and Sieglinde—whilst disguised under the singularly appropriate name of Wolf. These children become separated at birth, and Sieglinde marries a funny sort of a man called Hunding. He plays the Wagner tuba. [Plays Hunding's leitmotif.] He plays it very well. He also has an ash tree with a sword stuck in it growing through his living room floor.

Well one day who should turn up but Siegmund, and he falls madly in love with Sieglinde, regardless of the fact that she's married to Hunding, which is immoral, and she's his own sister, which is illegal. But that's the beauty of Grand Opera, you can do anything so long as you sing it. And after having given Hunding a Mickey Finn so that they won't wake him up, they certainly do sing it! [Plays and sings] "Du bist der Lenz nach dem ich verlangte in frostigen Winters Frist." Well when they've got that off their chests, Siegmund pulls out the sword that's stuck in the tree that grows in the house that Jack—that HUNDING—built, and they run away together. Well of course when Hunding comes to he's very annoyed, and he chases after them, and there's a tremendous battle that everybody gets mixed up in. [Plays battle music.] There's Hunding dead. [Plays battle music.] There's Siegmund dead. [Plays battle music.] Mr & Mrs Wotan have an argument. [Plays battle music.] And Wotan's furious with Brünnhilde.



Anna Russell
(1911 – 2006)

Was an English-Canadian singer and comedian. She gave many concerts in which she sang and played comic musical sketches on the piano. Russell made her New York City debut in her one-woman show in 1948, which she toured throughout North America, Britain, Australia and the rest of the English-speaking world. Russell became known for her deadpan humour, including her disbelieving emphasis of the absurd in well accepted stories and her mockery of pretension. Her most successful piece was her humorous analysis of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Perhaps the apotheosis of Russell's Wagner *Ring* parody came during the celebrations of the cycle's 100th anniversary in 1976 when **Wolfgang Wagner** held a dinner and musical soiree featuring lighter entertainment based on his grandfather's music, capped by playing Russell's *Ring* send-up for his guests. In her last years she moved to Australia and died in Rosedale, near Batemans Bay.

**And sure enough
there's dirty
work afoot.
Because Hagen
gives Siegfried
a magic potion
that makes him
forget all about
Brünnhilde and
fall in love with
Gutrune Gibich...
who by the way is
the only woman
that Siegfried
has ever come
across who
hasn't been his
aunt. ...I'm not
making this up,
you know!**

He's mad at Brünnhilde because he told her she was NOT to side with Siegmund...and she DID. So as a punishment he puts her on a rock and he surrounds her with impenetrable fire. [Plays fire music.] And that's the end of Part 2. [Plays piano fillip.]

Well Part 3 is devoted to the growing-up of Siegfried, the child of Siegmund and Sieglinde, and he's very young, and he's very handsome, and he's very strong, and he's very brave, and he's very stupid.... He's a regular Little Abner type. There's not too much you need to know about this opera except that Wotan comes down and plays Twenty Questions with him... and Siegfried gets the Ring. ...D'y'remember the Ring? Well he gets the Ring by killing Fafner, the giant...who's turned into a dragon in this opera, don't ask me why. Well then a little bird tells him, and he finds Brünnhilde on the fire-surrounded rock. Well now he's never seen a woman before, so he doesn't know what she is...but he soon finds out...and they go in for some very competitive singing—the type of thing "anything you can sing I can sing louder." And... [Plays and sings] "Sie ist mir ewig ist mir immer Erb' und Eigen, Ein;" "Er ist mir ewig, ist mir immer, Erb' und—" Oh, it's terrific. I think probably she wins.

Well then they fall in love, and he gives her the Ring. She's his aunt, by the way. But nonetheless, they are in love, and everything's very happy and you'd think that would be the end of it wouldn't you. No fear.



Gotterdämmerung. That's Part 4. Well now in the beginning of Part 4 you have the three Norns, or Fates, and they are also daughters of My Friend Erda the Green-Faced Torso, and therefore presumably they are also Siegfried's aunts. But this bunch of aunts are just as droopy as the first lot were noisy. You remember the Valkyrie aunts, they go [Plays and sings] "Heiaha! Heiaha! Hojotoho—" well, that. Well this lot are just the opposite: [Plays and sings] "Dämmert der Tag schon auf? Hinab! Zur Mutter! Hinab!"

Well this dreary lot of aunts, if they don't tell this whole story right over again from the beginning. So actually you can miss out Parts 1, 2, and 3, and come in at the beginning of Götterdämmerung, and you'll be just as far ahead.

Well meanwhile Siegfried's tired of love on the rocks with Brünnhilde. And Brünnhilde's gone completely to pieces. You remember her signature tune used to be [Plays and sings] "Hojotoho! Hojotoho! Heiaha! Heiaha!" Well NOW it's changed to this: [Plays and sings] "La, la-la-la la la la la la...." So love has certainly taken the ginger out of HER.

Well then Siegfried goes off on his travels and he meets three people: Gunther and Gutrune Gibich and their half-brother Hagen...whose mother was a Gibich...but whose father was Alberich the dwarf. D'y'remember Alberich? So Hagen greets Siegfried like this: [Plays and sings] "Heil, Siegfried! Theurer Held!" Now, do you recognize that tune? That's the SAME MUSIC as Alberich's curse! [Plays Alberich's Curse music.]

And sure enough there's dirty work afoot. Because Hagen gives Siegfried a magic potion that makes him forget all about Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune Gibich...who by the way is the only woman that Siegfried has ever come across who hasn't been his aunt. ...I'm not making this up, you know!

Well, so, when Brünnhilde finds out about this, of course naturally she's frightfully annoyed and she plots with Hagen to kill Siegfried. And Hagen kills him. Well of course as soon as he's dead she's sorry...I know you men are going to say "so like a woman," and.... And so she is sorry, and she builds a funeral pyre, and she puts Siegfried on it. And she gets on her horse, and she gallops on the funeral pyre too, and she lights it, and they burn up. [Plays Fire music.] Well that sets Valhalla alight, and IT burns up. [Plays Fire music.] Well then Wotan and all the gods burn up. [Plays Fire music.] And the whole works catches fire, and it ALL burns up. [Plays Fire music.] It's all burnt.

Well then the River Rhine overflows its banks. D'y'remember the Rhine? And the waters come in over the ashes. And who d'you think turns up next? The Rhinemaidens. So they take their lump of gold, I mean the Ring, which is of course their lump of gold, and they put it back where it came from. And after sitting through this whole operation, what do you hear? You hear: [Plays and sings Rheinmaidens' leitmotif]. YOU'RE EXACTLY WHERE YOU STARTED TWENTY HOURS AGO!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m69aPAo1rXE>

MAKING FUN OF WAGNER

By Maureen Buja in *Interlude* (HK), December 29th, 2017

In 1879, the French composer **Emmanuel Chabrier** (1841 – 1894) requested leave from his job at the French Ministry of the Interior so that he could travel to Munich, which was the only place in the world to hear Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. He was so taken with Wagner that he resigned his position in the Ministry the next year to become a full-time composer. He then became the assistant to the conductor **Charles Lamoureux**, helping him put on concert performances of *Tristan* in Paris in 1884 (Act I) and 1885 (Act II).

Chabrier' *Souvenirs de Munich* takes the themes of this serious opera of illicit love and betrayal and makes it into a Quadrille. The quadrille was a simple dance for 4 couples in a square in a set of 5 dances:

1. *Le Pantalon* ("Trousers") uses themes from Act I where the sailors greet King Marke.
2. *L'été* ("Summer") takes its material from Act II using these themes of Ecstasy, Love call, and the Love song.
3. *La Poule* (The Hen") contrasts the shepherd's joyful tune from Act II with the Liebestod of Act II.
4. *La Pastourelle* ("The Shepherd Girl") takes its inspiration from the themes of Kurwenal's song.
5. *Finale - Galop* uses material from both Act I and Act II: Sailor's doleful song (Act I), Kurwenal's aria (Act I), and Longing for Death (Act II).

All of Wagner's melancholy and longing are gone, subsumed under a brilliant piano parody. Chabrier often improvised these kinds of parodies and it is reported that at a dinner party

at Lamoureux' house, Chabrier's parody of the Ring caused **Hans von Bülow**, the conductor of many Wagner's works, to get completely enraged.

Chabrier wasn't the only composer to take on Wagner's pompousness. **Gabriel Fauré** (1845 – 1924) and **André Messager** (1853 – 1929) travelled around Europe to see Wagner's operas. Starting in 1878, they saw *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* at Cologne Opera; the complete Ring cycle in both Munich and London; and *Die Meistersinger* in Munich and then went to Bayreuth, where they saw *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*. Their *Souvenirs de Bayreuth* is subtitled *Fantaisie en forme de quadrille sur les thèmes favoris de l'Anneau de Nibelung* ("Fantasy in the form of a quadrille on favourite themes from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*"). Fauré and Messager's four-hand party piece is also in 5 movements, but without names.

Somehow, the mighty Wagnerian drama of life, love, and death becomes trivialized by the dance rhythms.

These composers all admired Wagner greatly and fully understood how, with his operas, he had changed European music into something greater. At the same time, they could see his tremendous ego operating and could dissect it through their music. The French composer **Francis Poulenc** (1899 – 1963), in his biography of Chabrier, described *Souvenirs de Munich* as "irresistibly funny", putting Wagner's principal themes into "false beards and fake moustaches."

Musical excerpts are available on:
<https://interlude.hk/making-fun-wagner/>

Chabrier wasn't the only composer to take on Wagner's pompousness.
Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924) and André Messager (1853 – 1929) travelled around Europe to see Wagner's operas.
Starting in 1878, they saw Das Rheingold and Die Walküre at Cologne Opera; the complete Ring cycle in both Munich and London; and Die Meistersinger in Munich and then went to Bayreuth, where they saw Die Meistersinger and Parsifal.



Emmanuel Chabrier 1881 by Edouard Manet (1832-1883)



Gabriel Fauré 1896 by John Singer Sargent (1856 – 1925)

These composers all admired Wagner greatly and fully understood how, with his operas, he had changed European music into something greater. At the same time, they could see his tremendous ego operating and could dissect it through their music.

WAS WAGNER QUEER?



Frou Frou Wagner

"This caricature of Richard Wagner, titled "Frou Frou Wagner" ("Frilly Wagner"), was drawn by **Friedrich Grätz** and appeared on the cover of the June 24, 1877, issue of *Der Floh* (The Flea), a Viennese satirical magazine. It portrays Wagner, dressed extravagantly, measuring bolts of silk and satin while **Daniel Spitzer**, a cultural critic for Vienna's *Neue Freie Presse*, looms behind him, poised to stab Wagner on the back with his metaphorical "poisoned pen." The pun in the title, referencing the German word *Frau* (woman), hints at allegations of Wagner's fondness for cross-dressing.

The cartoon capitalized on a scandal surrounding a set of letters Wagner wrote to **Bertha Goldwag**, a prominent seamstress in Vienna. In these letters, Wagner gave elaborate instructions for crafting a wardrobe of luxurious, feminine clothing: pink satin dressing gowns, rose-adorned slippers, silk underwear, and other accessories, all scented with rose perfume. The cost of this indulgent order was outrageous, especially given Wagner's dire financial situation at the time. Somehow, these letters fell into Spitzer's hands, sparking a media frenzy.

The *Neue Freie Presse*, a staunch supporter of **Brahms** in the ongoing "War of the Romantics," seized the opportunity to embarrass Wagner, whose music divided Vienna. **Eduard Hanslick**, the paper's influential music critic, championed Brahms to such an extent that he was often mocked for treating him like a saint. When

Spitzer asked for permission to publish Wagner's letters, the editors eagerly agreed, encouraging him to release them in installments to fuel the scandal and satisfy the city's appetite for gossip. The plan succeeded spectacularly. Rumours about Wagner's "delicate wardrobe" spread quickly across Europe, forcing the composer to consider fleeing to America. Wagner blamed Brahms for orchestrating the affair, though there's no evidence of Brahms' involvement. Ironically, Brahms later obtained the letters and enjoyed reading them aloud to his friends, relishing Wagner's humiliation."

<https://www.talkclassical.com/threads/wagner-the-cross-dresser.91474/>



Sketches by Wagner for his milliner to have made for him

WAGNER'S ABNORMAL MIND PART 5: WAGNER WAS QUEER

Excerpts from US trans blogger R A McDuff's *wagnertripping* blog:

<https://wagnertripping.blogspot.com/2013/09/wagners-abnormal-mind-part-5-wagner-was.html>



Judith Gautier

Wagner was queer. I use queer to mean outside of "heteronormity," in which what is considered to be normal, natural and proper is heterosexuality, with men being masculine and women being feminine.

I am putting this post in the "abnormal mind" series for two reasons. One is that, more than any other thing in his life until the last forty years (in which his anti-Semitism became the focus), the fact of his queerness was the focus for the vast majority of attacks on him and the basis for asserting he suffered pathological issues. His critics believed abnormal equalled pathology. For me, in contrast, "abnormal" merely means a minority-behaviour pattern and has no necessary relationship whatsoever to pathology. Specifically, in Wagner's case, none of what I write below about Wagner's queerness is at all pathological in my book, and there is no evidence that his true psychological problems were related to it except, of course, for the added stress that came from people mocking him.

In this post, I draw greatly from the excellent book *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, by **Laurence Dreyfus**. While I have long believed all that Dreyfus writes about, his research has been very helpful to me in pulling this together quickly. Anyone who wants more details should read his book.

The feminine Wagner

Wagner didn't fit into masculine norms: in the privacy of his own home, he liked to wear, touch, smell and see things—very soft things—that he associated with the feminine, particularly when composing.

Wagner believed that "love was the eternal feminine itself," and his music was always centred on love. Therefore, he wanted to be in touch with the feminine as he wrote, to be both man and woman at the same time. From all evidence—his autobiography, letters, prose and music—he was personally very comfortable with his feminine side, and considered it a crucial part of his sensitivity and of necessity for this work. That said, he was well aware of societal attitudes about it and that his compositional methods would lead to public scorn, so he did his best to hide his penchants. Normally, that meant others—people close to him who understood his needs—were dispatched to buy his silk and satin, his perfumes, his *negligées* and silk panties.

Among his couriers was **Nietzsche**, according to this account from a friend of his: "Nietzsche asked me in the most concerned manner where he might find a good silk shop in Basel. Eventually he admitted he had undertaken to shop for a pair of silk underpants for Wagner, and this important

matter filled him with anxiety; for—added the smiling iconoclast—“once you’ve chosen a God, you’ve got to adorn him.”

During the composition of *Parsifal*, his principal courier—and his muse—was **Judith Gautier**.

He was sending her his orders for perfume, satin, bath oils, silk undergarments, et al., via the post. It was a very flirtatious correspondence, so various biographers have assumed that they had a sexual affair. However, there is only scant evidence to make that case, particularly in that the two were rarely in each other’s presence. And when they were, they were generally under **Cosima’s** watchful eye. Judith denied the affair categorically, for what that is worth. In any case, like **Mathilde Wesendonck** before her, it really doesn’t matter whether they did or they didn’t. Wagner clearly was in love for the final time in his life. Dreyfus writes: “The erotic side of Wagner’s obsession [with all things feminine] emerges most clearly when one reads his letters to Judith Gautier, in which each successive paragraph alternates between the evocation of soft caresses and an uncompromising list of fabrics and scents Gautier was to supply.” Cosima ultimately found out about the letters and put an end to his correspondence, but Wagner quickly found another perfume mule—this time a man, to keep Cosima’s ire down.

The pioneering German sex researcher and very early gay rights activist **Magnus Hirschfeld**, in his 1910 book *Die Transvestiten*, includes a whole chapter on Wagner, entitled “Explanation of Richard Wagner’s Letters to a Milliner.” Unlike most everyone else until modern day, he wasn’t judgmental, but wrote: “Wagner’s particular inclination justifies assuming that there is a feminine characteristic in his psyche.... [But this inclination] in no way deserves mockery and scorn...[but instead] gives evidence of the unusually rich and subtle complexity of [Wagner’s] inner life, the continued study of which would be a difficult as well as rewarding task.

There is no doubt that his music was extraordinarily sensual. As **Thomas Mann** wrote, “who could fail to notice the rustle of satin in Wagner’s work?” **Barry Millington**, in his book *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, after surveying the

evidence of his feminine preoccupation puts it this way:” In the final analysis, then, Wagner’s fetish for silks and satins, his obsessive desire to be surrounded by soft material and sweet fragrances, is not an embarrassment to be swept under one of his deep-piled rugs. On the contrary, these tendencies provide a key to the music, which would not be what it is had the composer been a model of ascetic Calvinist rigor. It is entirely appropriate that such a man would leave this world in a pink satin dressing gown.”

The man-loving Wagner

Wagner was not homosexual; from all evidence, he only had sex with women. However, Wagner was bi-emotional. That is, he fell in love with both men and women and had, essentially, romantic, though sexless, affairs with both men and, sometimes, women.

Even when not “in love,” he was a strikingly emotional guy. For instance, his good friend and supporter, **Franz Liszt**, wrote an account of Wagner’s histrionics at their reunion after a 4-year gap in 1854: “Wagner was waiting for me at the post-house. We nearly choked each other in embraces. Sometimes he has a sort of eaglet’s cry in his voice. He wept and laughed and stormed with joy for at least a quarter of hour at seeing me again.”

Assuming he wasn’t in love with Liszt, can you imagine how he acted around a man—or woman—whom he was in love with?? (Truly, Wagner was very much like an puppy, both in good and bad ways.)

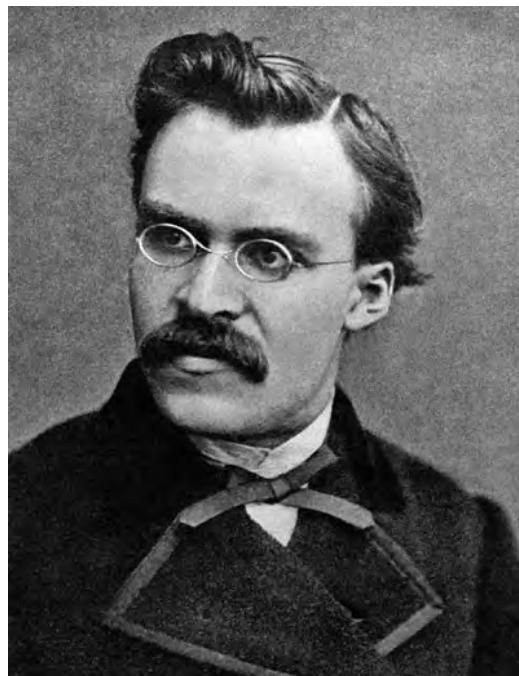
Regarding homosexuality, Wagner was very liberal-minded for his time, though he felt it was an immature form of sexual attraction, with sexual love between man and woman reigning supreme. That said, he had several gay friends over the years. Towards the end of his life, he was very good friends with the Russian painter, *Parsifal* stage designer, and aristocrat **Paul von Joukowsky** and his lover, an Italian of lower-class origins named **Pepino**, who were frequent visitors to the house. Cosima reports Wagner as saying about their relationship: “It is something for which I have understanding, but no inclination.”

“Wagner believed that “love was the eternal feminine itself,” and his music was always centred on love. Therefore, he wanted to be in touch with the feminine as he wrote, to be both man and woman at the same time.”

“Regarding homosexuality, Wagner was very liberal-minded for his time, though he felt it was an immature form of sexual attraction, with sexual love between man and woman reigning supreme. That said, he had several gay friends over the years. Towards the end of his life, he was very good friends with the Russian painter, *Parsifal* stage designer, and aristocrat Paul von Joukowsky and his lover, an Italian of lower-class origins named Pepino, who were frequent visitors to the house.”



A Ludwig II in 1865, the year he met Wagner



B Nietzsche in 1869, the year he met Wagner

"His romantic friendships with men—just as with women—all revolved around him, and they were equally expected to be self-sacrificing to his needs and goals, putting their own pursuits as clearly secondary to his. He was able to attract a number of smart and talented men to make this pledge. In most cases, the younger man was more smitten than Wagner, though there is a good case to be made that in Ludwig and Nietzsche's case, the passion was mutual."

Though he wasn't interested sexually, Wagner was able to conceptualise, and rationalise, his romantic friendships with men via the Greek same-sex love ideal. He wrote in the *Artwork of the Future* a paean to same-sex love: "The higher element of same-sex love excluded the aspect of selfish pleasure [my emphasis].

Nevertheless it not only included a purely spiritual bond of friendship, but [one] which blossomed from and crowned the sensuous friendship. This sprang directly from delight in the ...sensuous bodily beauty of the beloved man; yet this delight was no mere sexual yearning, but a thorough abnegation of self into the unconditional sympathy with the lover's joy in himself involuntarily expressed by the joyous bearing prompted by his beauty." He goes on for some time about this topic but basically he concludes: same-sex love is awesome if you take out the sex. As with the Greek ideal, it is about an older man as teacher and younger man as inspiration. Wagner says of this collaboration, "the most beautiful and noble love would blossom forth."

His romantic friendships with men—just as with women—all revolved around him, and they were equally expected to be self-sacrificing to his needs and goals, putting their own pursuits as clearly secondary to his. He was able to attract a number of smart and talented men to make this pledge. In most cases, the younger man was more smitten than Wagner, though there is a good case to be made that in **Ludwig** and Nietzsche's case, the passion was mutual. In any case, Dreyfus argues in his book, "the biographical evidence shows with some consistency that Wagner encouraged, even groomed, each Romantic Friend to understand and fulfill his assigned role as the adoring, self-sacrificing younger lover." Nietzsche's celebrated break-up with Wagner can best be understood as the philosopher casting off this role of underling to be able to spread his own wings; Wagner was heartbroken. The story of their remarkable friendship has been told in many places, but a good place to start is the 60-page appendix "Wagner and Nietzsche" in Bryan Magee's *Tristan Chord*.

Just to get a flavour of his romantic friendships, I will quote from just one of his many *très romantiques* letters to his benefactor, King Ludwig II:

Dearest, dearest, magnificent Friend!...

*Dear, Dear heavenly Friend! How you brighten my poor harassed existence. I feel so deeply, deeply satisfied and elevated through your love, through my — through our love! No words can express what this wonderful relationship between us means. Might I die—on the evening of my *Tristan*, with a last glance up to your eyes, with a last grasp of your hand!*

Affectioned, blessed, divine Friend!

How deep, how deep is the bottom of our Love!

Suffering, but blissful—

Eternally yours

Richard Wagner

Some have argued that Wagner, needing Ludwig's money, was just trying to string him along. However, Wagner wrote many letters to friends also extolling Ludwig and his love for him. For instance, to his good friend—and confidant—**Eliza Wille**, he wrote many letters of this type. Here is an excerpt from just one: "At last a love relationship which doesn't lead to suffering and torments! This is how it is when I see this magnificent youth before me.... He stays mostly



C Paul von Joukowsky – deathbed sketch of Wagner 1883

in a little castle in my proximity; in 10 minutes the carriage takes me to him. Our conversations are ravishing. I always fly to him as a lover."

Yes, there came a time when the "in love" period faded for both of them and conflicts set in. But, that he had an emotional affair—romantic love—with Ludwig, and several other men, there can be no doubt.

In *The Artwork of the Future*, Wagner had written of same-sex male love that the bond between the men "knit the fellowships of love into battalions of war and military order that prescribed death-defying acts to rescue the threatened lover or to exact vengeance if he fell in battle." In *Tristan*, Wagner put that idea in the opera. Kurwenal exacts vengeance on the traitor Melot, sacrificing himself to be with Tristan. To music of sad love and longing he sings: "Tristan! Beloved! Scold me not, so the faithful one may follow you!" Thus, there are two love-deaths in the opera, Tristan and Isolde's and Tristan and Kurwenal's.

And then there is King Marke, who sings the—to me—extraordinarily touching 13-minute soliloquy to Tristan about his tremendous hurt that his beloved—Tristan—would betray him. Isolde is basically irrelevant in this. That is absolutely not the way it normally works in traditional opera, where the woman's betrayal would be the focus. But Wagner clearly wanted to highlight Romantic Friendships between same-sex people; he did it beautifully and movingly, might I add.

Then there is the betrayer and former friend, Melot. There are a whole lot of clues that he, too, was in love with Tristan. Melot becomes jealous when Tristan becomes enraptured with Isolde. Thus, it is the old "if I can't have you, nobody can." When he dies on Kurwenal's sword, his last words—of course—are to Tristan: "Weh mir, Tristan," (Woe is me, Tristan.)

Six major characters: four in love with someone of the same sex, two dead, two in mourning. All of the four suffered from unrequited love. As for Tristan and Isolde, they never consummate their union but suffer greatly through yearning for the other. Only in death do they actually become one. There you have Wagner's view of the path to true love!

SWANS AND SPELLS

TCHAIKOVSKY AND WAGNER A COLLAGE BY MIKE DAY

What do Tchaikovsky's first ballet *Swan Lake* and Wagner's music-dramas *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin* have in common? All include swans, pure heroes, pagan magicians, women under spells and the fight between the forces of good and evil. All three works remain successful and are performed world-wide nearly 150 years after their composition. They all have passages of transcendent, even sublime, music

***Swan Lake* - the music**

Tchaikovsky was commissioned to compose *Swan Lake* in 1875 by the Moscow Imperial Theatre. The 35 year old composer was growing to appreciate and admire the ballet music of **Leo Delibes** and **Adolphe Adam**, and his enthusiasm resulted in him completing the ballet within just one year, just before he attended the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876. The ballet was first performed on March 4, 1877, at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, with choreography by the Czech ballet master **Julius Wenzel Reisinger (1828 – 1893)**. Critics were universally disparaging, claiming the production was indistinctive and forgettable. They disliked the set and the choreography, thought the orchestra and dancers were subpar, and thought Tchaikovsky's score was too complicated. The dancers who performed in the ballet's premiere also declared the music was too rich to accompany their balletic moves, and simply too difficult to dance to. (Sounds like the same complaints made by dancers of Stravinsky's *le Sacre du Printemps* 36 years later). The ending was considered too tragic; Prince Siegfried and Odette drown themselves in the lake, choosing to die together rather than live their lives apart. In the 1895 revival the couple still drowns, but in this version the double suicide frees the other swan maidens from their curse. Also Siegfried and Odette's souls ascend to heaven where they're united in their love. Despite not being a critical success, all 33 performances of the ballet between 1877-1883 sold out.

Tchaikovsky died in November 1893. He had written far more material than was ever required, and after his death, Riccardo Drigo took on the job of revising the score, with the approval of his brother Modest Tchaikovsky. The revised and edited version – commonly the version of the score used today – is considerably shorter than the original, full-length work. It premiered on 15 January 1895 by the Mariinsky Ballet at the Mariinsky Theatre, with new choreography by **Marius Petipa** and **Lev Ivanov**, to overwhelmingly positive reviews.

The Plot

Prince Siegfried is under pressure from his widowed mother to marry but he resists, as he hasn't met anyone he truly loves. He goes hunting, becomes lost, and a swan he is about to shoot turns into a beautiful maiden, Odette, who, along with her friends, have been cursed by the evil magician Baron von Rothbart to take the form of swans during daylight. At night they revert to human form and live by

a lake formed from the tears of their grieving families. The spell can only be broken if someone who has never loved before promises to love Odette forever. Rothbart appears, Siegfried tries to kill him but Odette stops him because if Rothbart dies before the spell is broken it can never be undone. Siegfried and Odette fall in love. Dawn arrives. She becomes a swan again. A costume ball starts and princesses are brought as candidates to marry Siegfried. Rothbart shows up in disguise with Odile (his daughter, the black swan) who looks like Odette because of a spell. Siegfried is enchanted by Odile whom he thinks is Odette. Odette tries to warn Siegfried but he doesn't see her and he promises to marry Odile. Rothbart then reveals that Odette is heartbroken over his promise to marry Odile and that Siegfried was tricked. She returns to the lake, followed by the Prince looking for the real Odette. She is very torn between the need of her "confused attachment to the dark protection of the family nest and of enduring, white, virginity. Rothbart is the ballet's agent of repression; the freedom offered by Siegfried is one she fears as well as desires." (Alastair Macauley *Swan Lake* Studies) She forgives Siegfried but his betrayal cannot be undone. Siegfried fights and defeats Rothbart by ripping off one of his wings. Odile and Rothbart try to escape but drown in the lake. Rather than stay a swan forever Odette chooses to die and Siegfried dies with her by jumping into the lake so they can be together forever. The remaining swans turn to maidens and Siegfried and Odette are in the heavens together forever. Note that many staged versions choose to not end in tragedy and instead of the suicide they end up alive, happy together. Most ballet companies have their own special version and interpretation, with many varieties of endings between romantic and tragic. In the 1895 production the spell on the maidens was cast by an owl/

It is unsure who wrote the original libretto of *Swan Lake*. It's widely believed that Tchaikovsky had the lion's share of creative input on the story along with his fellow creators of the ballet, but where did their inspiration come from? Several sources claim Tchaikovsky based *Swan Lake* and *Prince Siegfried* on the life of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, also known as the *Swan King*. King Ludwig also died by drowning in a lake, but this tragedy happened almost a decade after *Swan Lake* premiered in Russia, so that theory has been rejected.



Swan Lake Siegfried and Odette



Alexei Bulgakov as von Rothbart
Mariinsky 1895



Anton Fuchs as Klingsor
Bayreuth 1882

witch who lives by the lake and transforms herself into Rothbart in order to go to the ball with his/her daughter Odile. The mutability of the story, with its many ambiguities allows choreographers and designers great freedom.

Uncertain sources

It is unsure who wrote the original libretto of *Swan Lake*. It's widely believed that Tchaikovsky had the lion's share of creative input on the story along with his fellow creators of the ballet, but where did their inspiration come from? Several sources claim Tchaikovsky based *Swan Lake* and Prince Siegfried on the life of **King Ludwig II** of Bavaria, also known as the Swan King. King Ludwig also died by drowning in a lake, but this tragedy happened almost a decade after *Swan Lake* premiered in Russia, so that theory has been rejected. However it's not hard to see the attraction Tchaikovsky must have had for Ludwig – both young, good looking, closeted gays. (Did Tchaikovsky prefer men in tights whereas Wagner admired knights in shining armour? Just asking?) The more popular theory is that *Swan Lake* is derived from two different fairy tales. The first is a German story called *The Stolen Veil* by **Johann Karl August Musäus**. This story is about a young soldier named Friedbert who discovers a flock of enchanted swans. Every night the swans become maidens when they remove their crowns and veils to bathe in the lake. Friedbert steals one of the veils to prevent the youngest maiden from returning to her swan form and turns her into his bride. This story very closely resembles the Swedish fairy tale *The Swan Maiden*, although this one has a happier ending. Another suspected source for the ballet is the Russian fairy tale *The White Duck*. In this tale a scheming witch turns a queen into a white duck and changes her own appearance to take the queen's place by her husband's side. Especially with its Russian origins, *The White Duck* seems to be where the false bride trope of *Swan Lake* came from. Sources: <https://snowwhitewrites.com/swan-lake-fairy-tale-origins/> <https://www.historyhit.com/culture/1877-first-performance-swan-lake/>



Parsifal and Flower-maidens

Tchaikovsky and Reisinger's combination of existing fables has much in common with Wagner's merging of myths and legends but the rapid and seemingly ad hoc putting together and refashioning of *Swan Lake* is in strong contrast to Wagner's lengthy and considered writing of his librettos for *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*. *Lohengrin* was written and composed between 1845 and 1848, although he had started thinking about it in 1841. He hadn't read Schopenhauer or any Buddhist texts at this stage. These were to have a great influence on the thinking behind *Parsifal*. He had read **Wolfram von Eschenbach's** *Parsifal*, which was also a primary source for his *Parsifal* along with the Old French chivalric romance *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* by the 12th Century troubère **Chrétien de Troyes**, which had inspired Wolfram. Wagner conceived of the work in 1857 but didn't complete it until 1882, when it was premiered in Bayreuth, in the theatre specially designed for it.

Wagner's influence

Tchaikovsky and his early choreographers for *Swan Lake* were aware of Wagner's reforms for opera. How applicable were these innovations to ballet? There was Wagner's music with its multitude of harmonic modulations, almost endless melodies and postponed climaxes. There was Wagner's dramatic poetry with its notion of female duality, the male as full of inquiry and yet an innocent, plus some sort of salvation for both and unification involving death and the after-life. In particular, the legend of the enchanted swan figured prominently in Wagner's 1850 *Lohengrin* and in the 1882 *Parsifal*. The latter came after the composition of the initial *Swan Lake* but preceded the ballet's 1895 version. Odette and Odile certainly convey dualities – good and evil, human and "swan-animal", alive and illusion. Prince Siegfried, whose coming of age is being celebrated, isn't very patient with court conventions but has unsatisfied longings and is a seeker. Von Rothbart's magic with its limited power over the swan maidens seems related to that of Klingsor over Kundry and her companions in *Parsifal*. <https://www.danceviewtimes.com/2017/01/consummation.html>

Von Rothbart and Klingsor

There are some interesting parallels between Rothbart (Redbeard) and Klingsor. Klingsor, who castrated himself to no avail in order to prove his purity, uses his power to manipulate young women into becoming seductresses to undermine the purity of the young devout Knights of the Grail and obtain possession of the Grail. Kundry, who is under the influence of Klingsor, is ordered to seduce Parsifal and bring him under Klingsor's power for ever. When Kundry is unsuccessful Klingsor tries to kill Parsifal with the holy spear. Parsifal seizes it and Klingsor's power and domain disappear. Rothbart also has a flock of attractive young maidens under his control. He casts a spell on his daughter Odile to transform her appearance to be like Odette and seduce Siegfried. (With much greater success than Kundry and Parsifal). In *Lohengrin* the magic is performed by the pagan witch Ortrud, who has turned Gottfried, the young Duke, into a swan. The swan-knight Lohengrin reverses the spell and Ortrud dies. Was a future ancestor of Ortrud the witch/Rothbart at the swan lake?

The Settings

Central to the atmosphere of both the ballet and the operas is the forest, which is at the heart of most European, especially German, fairy tales; a place both full of potential terrors and a refuge away from the problems of daily life in the village or Court. The swan lake is deep in the woods where the swan-maidens are undisturbed; safely hidden there by von Rothbart. He provides a sinister element (and gets a very memorable tune), but the audience is entranced by picturesque visual (and musical) beauty. It's hard to imagine *Swan Lake* without dappled moonlight through the tall trees, with flocks of ethereal white tutus reflected in the dark water. Sheer romantic escapist beauty. Very King Ludwig, although he may have preferred Matthew Bourne's all-male (rather butch and aggressive) swans. Ludwig dedicated much of his life to the story of Lohengrin, decorating his palaces with paintings of the legend and 'swanning' around in a swan boat on his lake or in his grotto.. If Ludwig hadn't been entranced by the Swan-Knight and seen Wagner's opera maybe he wouldn't have come to Wagner's rescue and financed the *Ring*? *Lohengrin* is not set in a forest, but rather on the riverbank of the Scheldt and outside the church. The Grail temple is high in the foothills of the mountains, where the knights are isolated from the corrupting world. Amfortas's lake is deep in the woods,

where he can bathe undisturbed. Klingsor's grim fortress sits high above, defending his territory and hiding away his bouquet of spell-bound flower-maidens, who are kept in his enclosed courtyard/magic garden. Compare this to Venus's grotto (magic garden?) in *Tannhäuser*, which is hidden under a mountain, away from the conventional upright Christian town-folks. One of *Parsifal*'s messages is about the sanctity of nature and Wagner is at pains to point out the difference between the beautiful natural setting in Acts I and III and the artificial setting of Act II. In Act III we are in a meadow with a natural spring on the edge of the forest. It's the only time we see the sky. *The Good Friday Spell* summarises the beauty and hope of the coming of spring and the wonderful music gives us a breath of fresh air after the decadent over-perfumed world of Klingsor. Act I of *Die Walküre* has a similar moment when the doors fly open to reveal the Spring dawn and we escape the claustrophobia of Hunding's hut. The old Met production of *Parsifal* referenced the original Bayreuth designs and provided some exquisite stage pictures of trees and flowery meadow which were in great contrast to most modern productions where there is seldom any greenery; often only raw hard degraded spaces, reflecting the moribund state of Amfortas and the Knights. Wagner's most beautiful 'nature music' is, of course *Siegfried's Forest Murmurs*, with the wonderful melodious song of the Woodbird.



Pierina Legnani, Mariinsky 1895



Amalie Materna as Kundry Bayreuth 1882

A FAIRY TALE WITH THE WORST OF HUSBANDS: "THE SWAN MAIDENS"

BY MARI NESS

Stories of swan maidens stretch back to antiquity in Europe. Or, I should say, swan people. The most famous example is more a tale of a swan lord than of a swan maiden: the tale of Zeus seducing Leda in the form of a swan, which either sounds just slightly awkward or a good way for Leda to avoid an even more awkward situation: "Honey, I swear. He looked like a swan the entire time and I mean, yes, swans are beautiful but not god like beautiful I just thought I was petting a swan. A nice innocent swan. Really."

But I digress.

The story of Zeus and Leda inspired several pieces of art, helping to keep the idea of seductive swans into the popular imagination. Though many later folktales did try to clarify the bestiality point: in those stories, the swan maidens were most certainly not in swan form when they embraced their lovers—or in many versions, were forcibly embraced by their lovers. Instead, they removed their swan skins, transforming into human maidens—another fairly common trope in folklore. The Zeus and Leda story also, I think, helped establish the idea that these swan maiden stories would present a more ambiguous take on marriage than what is typically associated with (if not always accurately associated with) fairy tales.

Jacobs' version begins on a violent note, as a skilled hunter heads out to a lake to bring in some ducks. Instead of ducks, however, he finds seven swan maidens, who all remove their swan skins to go swimming in the lake. The hunter, deciding that the youngest is the prettiest, steals her swan dress. Without her feathers, she cannot fly, and can only watch her six sisters fly off without her.

She begs the hunter to return her robe. He gives her his cloak instead, and, in Jacobs' words, "made her promise to marry him."

Also in Jacobs' words:

So they were married and lived happily together....

Really, Jacobs? This swan maiden has just been forcibly separated from her sisters and forced to marry a man who shoots birds. Birds like her. I think it's fairly probable that she knows very little about human housework—I mean, most swans don't take cooking lessons. And to repeat the point, she was forced to marry this husband.

In a German version, the maiden comes willingly to the hunter after he steals her robe—the tale does not mention any forced promise of marriage. In a Romanian version, the maiden leaves her fairy home willingly enough, transforming into a maiden to avoid death. This willingness or at least acceptance is also a strong element of most tales featuring women sent to marry beasts and monsters. True, most are given a choice between that marriage and death, or that marriage and the destruction of their families, but they are usually given some sort of choice. For whatever reason, Jacobs discarded those versions, and stayed with the version where the swan maiden is forced into marriage.

<https://reactormag.com/a-fairy-tale-with-the-worst-of-husbands-the-swan-maidens>



Mari Ness



"The Swan Maidens" by Walter Crane, 1894



Parsifal and the Swan 1912 Willy Pogany 1882 - 1955

PARSIFAL'S SWAN

The drama in Wagner's *Parsifal* is triggered when the 'innocent fool' Parsifal, Lohengrin's father, thoughtlessly kills a swan which is protected and loved by the knights of the Temple of the Holy Grail. The wise knight, Gurnemanz, chastises him, pointing out that all God's creatures are equally important and Parsifal is duly remorseful. At the end of the first act Gurnemanz notices that Parsifal is still standing in the hall. It is obvious that he does not understand what he has seen and heard there and Gurnemanz dismisses him with possibly the only 'joke' in the whole of the opera.

Dort hinaus, deine Wege zu!
Doch rät dir Gurnemanz:
lass du hier künftig die Schwäne
in Ruh'
und suche dir, Gänser, die Gans!

Off with you, be on your way!
Take advice from Gurnemanz:
In future leave our swans
in peace,
go seek — you gander —
for geese!

These words are ironical. Gurnemanz does not realise that he has changed the direction of the young fool's life, or the way that the fool will find, in the end, both the way to wisdom and back to Gurnemanz. In the next act, the young gander will find a (metaphorical) flock of geese. After years of following paths of error and suffering, he comes to see the world and all creatures in it differently and becomes "Durch Mitleid wissend" — enlightened through compassion.

LOHENGRIN'S SWAN

In *Lohengrin*, Princess Elsa's brother, Gottfried, is transformed into the form of a swan by the sorceress Ortrud. Lohengrin, the titular knight, arrives in Brabant in a boat pulled by a swan. At the end of the opera he laments that Elsa's question about his name has forced him to leave her, and he must depart. In his final song, "Mein lieber Schwan", the swan returns to take him back to the Grail. Lohengrin prays, the spell is broken, and the swan transforms back into Gottfried, who is then named the Duke of Brabant.

Mein lieber Schwan!
Ach, diese letzte, traur'ge Fahrt,
wie gern hätt' ich sie dir erspart!
In einem Jahr, wenn deine Zeit
im Dienst zu Ende sollte gehn -
dann, durch des Grales Macht befreit,
wollt' ich dich anders wieder sehn!

Beloved swan!
Ah, how gladly would I have spared you
this last sad journey!
A year hence, when your term
of service would have been at an end,
I would have seen you again,
transformed and freed by the Grail's might!



The arrival of Lohengrin by Carl Schweninger the Younger 1854 - 1912

MEIN LIEBER SCHWAN! SCHWANENQUIZ ANSWERS

1. Franz Listz

conducts the premiere of *Lohengrin*. 28.8.1850
<https://www.wagner-heavymetal.com/blog/between-gloom-and-glory-lohengrin-in-the-factory>



2. King Ludwig II – "The Swan King"

(1845–1886)

Ludwig II of Bavaria saw the Swan Knight, Lohengrin, at that time not yet inspired by **Richard Wagner**, as a child on a mural in the banqueting hall of Hohenschwangau Castle, built in 1832-40 by his father, King **Maximilian II** (1811–1864). The swan is a constantly recurring theme in his father's castle, inspiring Ludwig's art in many respects. It was the historical heraldic animal of the Lords of Schwangau. Maximilian II saw himself as their successor and had adopted the coat of arms. His son followed suit. As a result, the swan also appears heraldically in Schloss Neuschwanstein, built by Ludwig after he became King, but not known by that name until after Ludwig's death.



Pencil drawing by Ludwig, aged 14



Model of King Ludwig's sleigh, drawn by two swans.

This delicately carved miniaturized yet monumental object is a stylized version of King Ludwig's famous gilt-wood sleigh designed by **Franz Seitz** (1817 – 1883). The full-size sleigh had a strong battery-powered light in the crown on top and was widely considered the first electrically illuminated vehicle in Bavaria. Ludwig, who slept during the day and was active at night, astonished the local population with his "miraculous glowing" vehicle. (Ed. note: The march Quarterly will feature the interior designers and artists who decorated Neuschwanstein)

3. King Charles III's swans

The British royal family has owned unmarked mute swans in open waters since the 12th century. It was high treason to kill swans in Britain - the law was only changed in 1998. The monarch is known as the "Seigneur of the Swans" and the tradition of Swan Upping is a yearly count of the swans along the 79 mile length of the River Thames. The King and the Royal Swan Marker last tallied the swans on 15 July 2025. Officials say their numbers have declined over the past two years, primarily due to outbreaks of avian flu across Britain. Swans are a protected species and are no longer eaten.

4. *The Dying Swan*

The famous Russian ballerina **Anna Pavlova** (1881–1931) was most recognised for creating the role *Le Cygne*, (The Swan), a four minute long ballet choreographed specifically for her in 1905 by **Michel Folkine**. It was inspired by a poem by **Tennyson** and set to the sombre cello piece from *The Carnival of the Animals* by **Camille Saint-Saëns**. Pavlova dances as a swan in the fragile final moments of its life. It became known as *The Dying Swan*. Her last words, at half past midnight on Friday 23rd January, 1931, were "Get my 'Swan' costume ready...."



Pavlova in "The Dying Swan". (Monograph by Ira R. Donner, 1931)



Pavlova with Ira R. Donner, (Photograph by Leopoldo, London.)

5. The psychology of the swan symbol

The swan has often been seen as a symbol of wisdom and includes awakening the power of self, balance, grace, inner beauty, innocence, self-esteem, seeing into the future, understanding spiritual evolution, developing intuitive abilities, grace in dealing with others and commitment. In Celtic tradition, the swan represents the soul, our eternal essence

6. The Black Swan Theory

The theory of Black Swan events is a metaphor that describes an event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. The term arose from a Latin expression "rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno" which was based on the presumption that black swans did not exist. The expression was used in the original manner until around 1697 when Dutch mariners saw black swans living in Australia. After this, the term was reinterpreted to mean an unforeseen and consequential event. In his book *The Black Swan* published in 2010, **Nassim Nicholas Taleb** defines the term as an event with two characteristics: first, it is so rare and outside the realm of expectations that it is unpredictable; second, its consequences are extreme—either beneficial or catastrophic—though usually only the catastrophic Black Swan events attract attention.

THE BLACK SWAN



7. An iconic antipodean swan

Cygy is the mascot of the **Sydney Swans** AFL team. Originally called the South Melbourne Football Club, founded in 1874, they were known as the "Swans" due to an influx of West Australian players before relocating to Sydney in 1982.



8. Swan Songs

The swan song (Ancient Greek: κύκνειον ψῆφον; Latin: *carmen cygni*) is a metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance given just before death or retirement. The phrase refers to an ancient belief that swans sing a beautiful song just before their death while they have been silent (or alternatively not so musical) for most of their lifetime. The belief, whose basis has been long debated, had become proverbial in ancient Greece by the 3rd century BCE and was reiterated many times in later Western poetry and art. In reality, swans learn a variety of sounds throughout their lifetime; their sounds are more distinguishable during courting rituals and not correlated with death. Zoologist **D.G. Elliot** reported in 1898 that a tundra swan he had shot and wounded in flight began a long glide down whilst issuing a series of "plaintive and musical" notes that "sounded at times like the soft running of the notes of an octave".

A well-known madrigal by **Orlando Gibbons**, *The Silver Swan*, states the legend thus:

The silver swan, who living had no note,
When death approached unlocked her silent throat.
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
Thus sang her first and last and sang no more.
Farewell all joys, Oh death come close mine eyes,
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.

Schwanengesang (Swan Song) is the title of a posthumously published collection of songs by **Franz Schubert**, written at the end of his life.

10. Swans – fun facts

Swans are some of the largest flying birds, with the biggest swan species growing up to 1.5 meters long and weighing as much as 15 kilograms. There are six living species of swan: whooper swans, trumpeter swans, mute swans, black swans, black-necked swans, and tundra swans. Depending on the species, swans can live as long as twenty-four years.

Swans belong to the biological family Anatidae, which also contains ducks and geese. Baby swans are called swanlings or cygnets, male swans are called cobs,

and females are called pens. Groups of swans can have different names. When swans are in flight, they're called a wedge, when they're in the water, they are often called a bevy. And when they gather on the water's edge, they're called a bank! The technical term for the irrational fear of swans is kiknophobia or cygnophobia.

Swans typically pair up with a partner for life and lay an average of five eggs per clutch and sit on them for as long as forty-five days before they hatch. Male swans stay on guard duty the

9 Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake

Bourne's *Swan Lake* is a groundbreaking 1995 contemporary ballet adaptation of Tchaikovsky's classic, famous for replacing the traditionally female swans with a menacing male ensemble. This bold reimagining, which tells the story of a lonely prince, became a cultural icon and a global success, celebrated for its emotional depth, innovative staging, and ability to make ballet accessible. The production has been revived, filmed, and continues to tour internationally, including a recent 2024/2025 "Next Generation" version.



whole time a female swan sits on her eggs, and even perform victory dances after warding off predators.

The Aboriginal Noongar people of Western Australia believed that black swans were once white but had their white feathers torn out by eagles for being too proud. Meanwhile, Norwegian mythology states that swans are all white because their ancestors drank from a sacred well in Asgard that was so pure it turns all who drink from it white. According to Greek Mythology, Helen of Troy was the lovechild of Leda, Queen of Sparta, and Zeus disguised as a swan.

<https://www.thefactsite.com/15-fun-swan-facts/>

IN MEMORIUM Sir Donald McIntyre 1934 - 2025



The distinguished bass-baritone **Sir Donald McIntyre** passed away in Munich on 13 November, aged 91. Our condolences go to his family and friends.

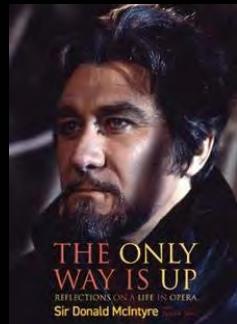
McIntyre was born in Auckland, New Zealand, and moved to London in 1958 to study at the Guildhall School of Music. In 1959 he made his debut with the Welsh National Opera and joined Sadler's Wells as a soloist.

In 1967 he made his Covent Garden debut, followed by his Bayreuth Festival debut. Throughout his career, McIntyre made frequent guest appearances at leading opera houses such as Teatro alla Scala, Covent Garden, and the Metropolitan Opera.

In Sydney, in 1988, he was a memorable Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, conducted by **Sir Charles Mackerras** for the Bi-Centenary. (Sir Charles was then the patron of WSNSW). Sir Donald conducted a masterclass for WSNSW in September 2003, where his students included **Warwick Fyfe** and **Jessica Pratt**. He was Patron of the Wagner Society of New Zealand.

He was honoured with an OBE (1977), CBE (1985), and knighted for services to opera in 1992. He received a Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording for Boulez's Ring. He released a memoir *The Only Way Is Up* in 2019, covering his 50-year career in opera.

The Bayreuth Festival published the following tribute:



"The Bayreuth Festival mourns the loss of Sir Donald McIntyre, one of the most important Wagner baritones of our time, whose voice and stage presence shaped the Green Hill for decades. Since his debut in 1967, he touched audiences and colleagues alike, bringing unmistakable depth and humanity to every role. We remember his legendary Wotan in the Boulez/Chéreau Centenary Ring, the restless and wise Wanderer, the loyal Kurwenal, the passionately searching Amfortas and the fascinatingly dark Klingsor. In each of these characters, he combined vocal power with deep psychological understanding, bringing Wagner to life for us all. Sir Donald McIntyre was more than a singer: he was a mentor, partner and the heart of our festival. His passion, warmth and artistic integrity will continue to resonate in Bayreuth. We bow our heads in gratitude for his life and work".

REPORTS FROM OUR SUPPORTED ARTISTS

UPDATE FROM DIRECTOR MENILA MOINEAUX IN MÜNSTER

Dear Wagner Society of NSW,

It's hard to believe that it's been over a year since I last wrote to you – how the time flies! In my last update, I had just finished my first season as a staff director here in Münster; I'm now entering my third, and last, season in the house, and what a transformative experience this time in the German opera system has been.

The season underway looks to be a long, exciting, and very busy one. As I write, we have just premiered a beautiful new production of *Tristan und Isolde*, which has been an incredible experience. Perhaps it is slightly sacrilegious to write in this context, but I must confess that I'd never really "got" *Tristan und Isolde* before; I had no doubt that it must be a wonderful opera, knowing how significant it is to so many, but it was yet to grab me. And grab me it certainly did throughout an extremely intense but very rewarding six weeks in which we brought the production from conception to opening night. It was truly a joy and an honour to assist **Clara Kalus** again, continuing a very fruitful, enriching collaboration which began when she directed Humperdinck's *Königskinder*, our 2024-25 season opener. Clara's method as a director is very strongly aligned with my own, and it is so inspiring to see her in the room, and to work with her fantastic team, including a living legend and veteran of the German opera system, the brilliant designer **Dieter Richter**. *Tristan und Isolde* in under six weeks of rehearsal was no easy task, resulting in a schedule balanced with the precision of a high-stakes game of Jenga and many nights where leaving the theatre felt like a rather futile exercise, but to be able to do it with such a wonderful director and team was truly a memorable, powerful experience. Having met while touring *Aida* around China seven years ago, it was also so delightful to reconnect with the lovely fellow Aussie **Brad Cooper** making a shining debut as Tristan, and with **Edwin Spark** also working as our souffleur in Münster, it truly was a production made possible in no small part by the Wagner Society of NSW! It's safe to say that I now absolutely "get" *Tristan und Isolde*, and would love to work on this incredible opera again; it's certainly found its way onto my ever-growing list of directorial dreams.

I flew back to Germany a day before *Tristan und Isolde* rehearsals began, having spent the theatre's summer in Sydney winter directing *Nabucco* with The Cooperative, the opera and social justice project I founded (a somewhat unbelievable) six years ago. We were so fortunate to have an incredibly talented team and cast, including fellow Wagner Society of NSW artist, truly beautiful colleague and phenomenal Abigaille, **Livia Brash**, and the wonderful **Toby Wong** on the "podium" (* repurposed drama block), which made this one of those rare, serendipitous productions where all the stars align to create a deeply special, magical experience. All the more essential as we traversed an intense and immense road together - Verdi

and Solera's radical protest opera was our largest undertaking to date, and it's quite a formidable task to bring to life. Formidable not purely due to the work's scale, although that's nothing to sneeze at, but even more so because of the weight of responsibility that telling this story with immediacy and urgency carries.

Horrifyingly and incisively pertinent to Verdi and Solera's society, horrifyingly and incisively pertinent to our world today, there has not been a time since *Nabucco*'s premiere when it has not spoken powerfully to its surrounding world. It was no easy choice to decide to bring this opera to life, in a very contemporary production, but one that felt ever more necessary and urgent. On a personal level, amidst a work which always, overwhelmingly, feels much bigger than any one individual, this felt like a homecoming, a much-needed reminder of why I deal in storytelling – to hold both the mirror up to our world and then gently, or not so gently, tap away at its injustices with the hammer of our art. It can be easy, enveloped in a theatre machine, to lose sight of the ability and necessity of art to speak to and engage with the world around us – but surely that is why this theatre machine needs to exist at all?

Perhaps newly emboldened by the exhilaration of making radical protest opera, I finally made a terrifying but exciting decision which has been a long time coming – to pursue a freelance career and, hopefully, more of my own work as a director, alongside much further reviving and assisting. It's not an easy decision to leave a "fest" job, the closest the arts industry gets to any sort of reliable, full-time employment, but, as much as I love and am grateful for the invaluable opportunities that I've had to learn how this wonderful, wild theatre machine works



Stadttheater Münster

in the German-speaking world, it's time to leap into creating more work of my own (so if anyone finds themselves on the hunt for a director ...). I'm definitely not done with the German opera system yet; on the contrary, I look forward to starting to explore all the possibilities it can offer, both as an assistant and a director, and plan to keep a base in the country for as long as possible (or as long as the bureaucracy stars and planets continue to align!). Münster is such a genuinely lovely house, peopled with warm, supportive colleagues, and I am so grateful for such a formative first

German theatre experience. My remaining time here looks to be very full and exciting: next week we begin rehearsals for a Wildhorn musical, *Der Graf von Monte-Christo*, an adaptation new to me, which, alongside a *Bohème* revival, will take us through to next year. Immediately after the Graf premiere, I am so thrilled to start rehearsals for a production of my own, my first real "director" engagement in the house, a new children's opera based on Shaun Tan's picture book *The Rules of Summer*. My last "fest" season here will round out with Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a work I am so looking forward to exploring and getting to know better, and *La traviata*, assisting the wonderful **Georg Schütky**, an exciting and unique director I'm so glad to be working alongside for a third time, but this won't be the end of my time in the house – they've very kindly invited me to return as a revival director in 2026-27, which definitely softens the blow of leaving such delightful colleagues.

Jumping into freelance life would be incomplete without a tantalising mixture of logistical

challenges, and quite a bit of travel already seems to be on the cards, amongst which I'm so thrilled to be able to spend more time in Australia later next year. The Cooperative has an exciting season ahead, with collaborations, a festival of sorts, and hopefully even a tour beyond Sydney, and some other very exciting projects are starting to crystallise – I promise I'll keep you all updated with more information about these closer to the time!

Only a couple of months ago, I had the absolute pleasure of meeting and reconnecting with several of your wonderful members, and it was such a delightful reminder of the Society's support, warmth, and care, integral for so many young artists. I feel truly honoured to count myself among them, and am so very grateful for all your support.

With gratitude, and the very warmest of wishes, until next time,

Menila November 2025

2025 RECENTLY SUPPORTED ARTISTS

During 2025 WSNSW gave financial support to several artists, including tenor **Brad Cooper** (who sang at our Christmas concert), director **Greg Eldridge** and conductor **Daniel Linton-France**



Greg Eldridge

We have given financial support to Australia-born director **Greg Eldridge** to enable him to join the renowned British director **Charles Edwards** as Associate Director on a new *Ring Cycle* at Grange Park Opera in London that is due to start in April 2026. Greg initially trained in Florence before joining the Young Artist programme at the Royal Opera House. He has worked on over 80 productions across 11 countries, and at leading international houses including the Volksoper Wien, Scottish Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Oper Frankfurt, Opera Australia, and Glyndebourne Festival Opera, winning several directing awards. He has worked with directors including **Sir David McVicar**, **Sir Richard Eyre**, **Christof Loy**, **Kasper Holten** and **Neil Armfield**. Upcoming engagements include the 2026 Milan Ring Cycle with Sir David McVicar and **Simone Young** AM. In 2027 he will again be working with Sir David McVicar on a new Wagner production for OA.



Daniel Linton-France

Sydney-born, **Daniel Linton-France** completed high school at the Sydney Conservatorium and went on to study piano performance and conducting at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, finishing as Magister Artium. He has been engaged at the Staatstheater Braunschweig, Nordharzer Städtebundtheater and the Tyrolean Festival, Erl, and worked as a Kapellmeister at the Opera house in Linz, Upper Austria. Since October 2018 he has held the position of Senior lecturer at the Institute for Vocal Studies and Music Theatre at the University for Music and Performing Art in Vienna and in 2023 he took up the position as Senior Artist for music interpretation there. As a performing artist and assistant he has worked at various festivals including the Bayreuth Festival with conductor **Kirill Petrenko** in 2015 and **Simone Young** AM in 2024. Despite spending most of his time as a conductor and pianist, he has also composed works including chamber music, music for theatre, a chamber opera and sacred music. WSNSW enabled Daniel to return to Sydney in November to assist Simone Young with *Siegfried*.

Coming up in the March Quarterly

The first of two investigations into satirical caricatures of Wagner and his works, published in France and Germany during his lifetime.

Wagner's outsize persona, his striking appearance and egocentric lifestyle, the enormous scope of his artistic ambition, the pathos of his work, and, last but not least, his political statements, provide ample opportunity for caricature and satire. Wagner, who credited himself with the ability to "instantly transform the most serious into nonsense," was a regular reader of satirical publications, revealing a talent for humour and self-irony. Many French artists and caricaturists attacked him with gusto, especially after the fiasco of the *Tannhäuser* premiere. The unusual and disturbing array of orchestral masses, the seemingly dissonant harmonies of his many contemporaries, the alliteration-rhyming operatic figures, and the epic length of the performances are just as much the subject of the caricatures as his "cacophonies," seemingly exhausted by volume and noise, which, with their timpani and trumpets, simultaneously appear as the epitome of his propaganda campaigns for his own cause





Renaissance
Tours



Great Opera Houses of Europe

Vienna, Dresden and Berlin

with Damien Beaumont

02 – 16 May 2026 (15 days)

Enjoy a curated program of superb opera performances at iconic opera houses in Austria and Germany during the colourful European spring season.



The Ring Cycle in Vienna

Vienna

with Phillip Sametz

05 – 15 June 2026 (11 days)

On the 150th anniversary of its premier, delight in Wagner's iconic *Ring* cycle at the Vienna State Opera, in a timeless production by Sven-Eric Bechtolf.



English Country House Opera

Glyndebourne, Garsington and Grange Park

with Phillip Sametz

19 – 29 June 2026 (11 days)

Enjoy a leisurely summertime journey through the beautiful English countryside, famous for its gardens, stately homes and 'country house opera'.



Opera and Music in Spain

Valencia, Barcelona and Madrid

with Christopher Lawrence

08 – 23 May 2026 (16 days)

Journey across Spain to uncover the best of opera and music from leading international orchestras, ensembles, singers and soloists.



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

For detailed information visit renaissancetours.com.au,
call 1300 727 095 or contact your travel agent.

WSNSW 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION AT ST COLUMBA

ON 14 SEPTEMBER 2025 | Photos by Sherly Susan and Mike Day



THE WAGNER SOCIETY IN NEW SOUTH WALES INC ADDRESS

Please note our permanent address
for all correspondence:

The Wagner Society in New South Wales Inc
PO Box 6111
Alexandria NSW 2015

Telephone: 0412 282 070
(Esteban Insausti, President)

Website: www.wagner.org.au

Website enquiries: contact@wagner.org.au

(All website addresses used in this
Newsletter are reproduced in the PDF version
of the Quarterly on the Wagner Society's
website in the relevant article. However, while
all past years' Wagner Quartlies appear
on the Society's website, the current year's
issues are not added until the following year.)

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY FUNCTIONS

(unless otherwise advised in Coming Events)

Goethe Institut
90 Ocean Street, Woollahra (corner of Jersey Road)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/WagnerNSW

Instagram: www.instagram.com/wagnersocietyNSW/

YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/c/wagnersocietyNSW

BRANGAYNE OF ORANGE VINEYARD

Brangayne of Orange has kindly agreed to offer Members
a 10% discount if they purchase any of their wines. Please
call and order by phone (02 6365 3229) and mention your
membership of the Wagner Society

The Wagner Quarterly is designed, produced and
distributed by MKR Productions

Email: michael@mkrproductions.com.au