

View from the auditorium of the Santa Fe Opera House (John O Crosby Auditorium) with a vista to the surrounding landscape.
Photo: © The Santa Fe Opera

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**DR SARAH PENICKA-SMITH on
THE FUTURE OF OPERA
AND WHAT WAGNER HAS TO DO WITH IT**
A Wagner Society in NSW Inc event

2.00pm Sunday 16 August 2026
Goethe Institut

90 Ocean Street (corner of Jersey Road), Woollahra

PROGRAMME

12.00 noon
DVD TONY PALMER'S **WAGNER**
PART 4

Richard Burton as Wagner in Tony Palmer's film.



2.00pm
DR SARAH PENICKA-SMITH
on

THE FUTURE OF OPERA - AND WHAT WAGNER HAS TO DO WITH IT

3.00pm (approx) **REFRESHMENTS**

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Margaret Plummer



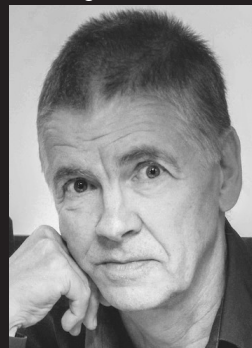
Adrian Tamburini



Olivia Swain



Daniel Sumegi



David Stanhope



Deborah Humble



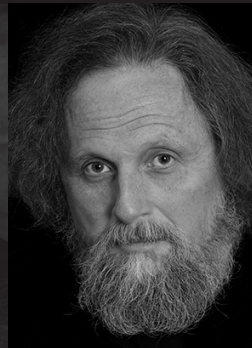
Stuart Skelton



Jennifer Condon



Lisa Gasteen



Warwick Fyfe



Tabatha McFayden



Samuel Sakker

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John O Crosby auditorium from the inside.

WHAT'S COMING UP

Sunday 13 September, Goethe Institut

12.00noon: DVD – **Tony Palmer's Wagner Part 5**

2.00pm: Talk by Associate Professor **ROSS ANDERSON** on his book about visionary designer Adolphe Appia, **The Appian Way**

Sunday 11 October, St Columba Community Centre

2.00pm: Concert with mezzo-soprano **DEBORAH HUMBLE** and **SHAROLYN KIMMORLEY AM** at the piano

Saturday 21 November, Goethe Institut

10.30am – 5.00pm: **SYMPOSIUM** on **GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG**

Sunday 13 December, St Columba Community Centre

2.00pm: **CHRISTMAS CONCERT** and party



Sarah Penicka-Smith. Photo by Keith Saunders.

DR SARAH PENICKA-SMITH

Dr Sarah Penicka-Smith is a conductor and socially-engaged artist who made her international debut via The Dallas Opera's Hart Institute for Women Conductors in 2018. She is currently Associate Conductor of Willoughby Symphony Orchestra.

In 2024, Sarah was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to research socially-engaged orchestral and operatic models internationally, including visits to Santa Fe Opera and the Pueblo Opera Program, Fundación Barenboim-Said, and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. She was an inaugural recipient of a residency for socially-engaged artists with The Cad Factory, later joining projects in regional Australia.

Sarah and her wife Melanie Penicka-Smith produce and direct socially-engaged music projects, including commissioning and co-creating *OCDiva*, Dr Eve Klein's one-woman opera for mezzo- soprano and OCD advocate Yasmin Arkinstall. She has directed several Sydney choirs, most recently as the founding Artistic Director & Principal Conductor of River City Voices. She has conducted operas for several Sydney companies, as well as many Sydney orchestras.

In 2026, Sarah's seven-year collaboration with Italian maestro Carlo Montanaro continues, most recently at the Festival Puccini. She assisted Maestro Nicholas Milton at Göttinger Symphonieorchester for three programs, including two at the Weilburgschlossfestspiele, and in September leads the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra in Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang*.

Building the *Figaro* set at Santa Fe Opera, June 2026.



The Future of Opera - and what Wagner has to do with it

Cast your mind back to your first experience of attending an opera. Did you feel welcome? Did you fall in love from the first note? Was it an 'entry-level' opera, perhaps a comedy, or was it something generally perceived as being only for connoisseurs?

Much effort is spent these days on how to ensure opera does not become a dying artform. Yet perhaps some of our well-intentioned efforts to create entertaining, easily-understood offerings, for young people or the uninitiated, do our cause more harm than good.

This discussion - in which you will be invited to take part - collects many of the findings from my recent Churchill Fellowship travel to Europe and the USA, beginning with the startling experiences of participants in Santa Fe Opera's groundbreaking Pueblo Opera Program, which began in 1973 with a production of *Der fliegende Holländer*. More than fifty years later, the thrill of this experience laid the foundations for three generations of Santa Fe's Native American communities to attend the opera.

Many of the elements common to the experience of participating in Wagner societies and in *Ring* festival events emerge as critical to the success of building opera-loving communities. When he created Bayreuth, Wagner provided a model which opera festivals like Santa Fe have developed into modern success stories, a true *Gesamtkunstwerk* which flows off the stage into the world of human interaction. This talk examines some elements of those successes, with behind-the-scenes glimpses of Santa Fe Opera's Wagnerian productions along the way.

Lightning from the Santa Fe Opera House. Photo by Angelo Accomando.



Scene from *Die Walküre* in the 2025 production directed by Melly Still, designed by Leslie Travers and conducted by James Gaffigan for The Santa Fe Opera.

