

I was truly delighted when my application to be part of the Melbourne Wagner Society group at Bayreuth this year was successful. I had been once before through the Society's auspices and originally thought that this would be sufficient, but with Bayreuth—as with Wagner—once is never enough.

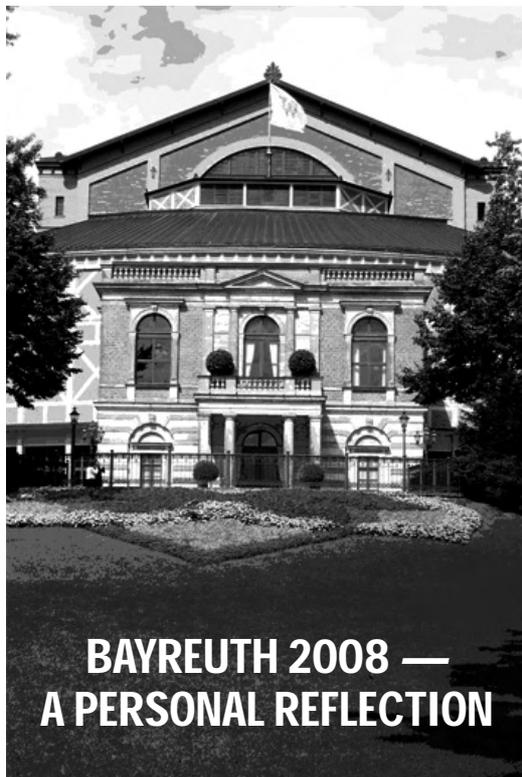
With the dates of the performances in place, I could begin to plan a full itinerary for my trip. Not much else in the way of opera though. The Bayreuth season takes orchestral players from other opera houses, so in summer there is a choice: opera at Bayreuth, or opera elsewhere. I did see a production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* at Covent Garden. I had, perhaps naively, assumed that a 20th century opera like this would be less well-patronised than better known repertoire. But I was fortunate to get one of only two tickets left for a performance just before I left London.

I arrived in Bayreuth three days before my first scheduled opera and, after a month travelling in England and Germany, it was good to be able to empty my suitcase and fill the wardrobe. My clothes for the Festspielhaus wouldn't fit into my suitcase, so I had sent them ahead to the hotel where they awaited my arrival.

For learned comment on the various performances and productions, I will happily defer to greater wisdom: these remarks are a personal reflection and record what, for me, were highlights of my experience.

After the 2004 Adelaide *Ring*, any other production of that tetralogy is always going to be a problem for me. The pyrotechnics of that production—to mention just one aspect—have forever spoilt me for coloured light shining up through the stage to represent fire. But comparisons are always odious and every production emphasises different aspects of the whole. Nuances, borne of the ideas of each director, ensure an enhanced understanding of the whole story.

I was not impressed with the



production of *Tristan and Isolde*. For me, all the contributing elements of story-telling need to work in the same direction for an opera experience to be lifted to a higher plane. In this case, the acting contradicted the words, and the music, particularly in the second act, and thereby detracted from the overall effect. I was assured by those who had seen the production previously that it improved on repeated attendance and I will have to accept their judgement. That was not my experience, however.

This production was of special significance for me because of the singer in the role of Isolde. I met Irene Theorin on my previous visit to Bayreuth. After the performance of *Das Rheingold* on that occasion, those attending from the Melbourne Wagner Society were invited to a dinner hosted by the Southern Californian Wagner Society. Wolfgang and Gudrun Wagner were special guests at that dinner. A singer from that year's productions was seated at each table and I was at Irene's table. She was a Valkyrie that year. It was good to meet her again and she was kind enough to say that she remembered me—from all the questions I asked during the dinner!

*Die Meistersinger*. Even allowing for the need for an aspirant for festival

directorship to make her mark with her first production, this was strange indeed. Mediaeval Nurembergers threw paint at each other, gym shoes rained from above and a naked man emerged from a pile of dirt and proceeded to throw fruit at the chorus at the back of the stage. At times the music seemed incidental to the stage action. But what music! The chorus and orchestra were superb, as expected, but for me the highlight of the production was the singing of Klaus Florian Vogt as Walther. He played the horn in the Hamburg Symphony before embarking on a singing career. This may help to explain his phenomenal breath control, but his fabulous and really beautiful voice cannot be so easily explained.

The DVD of this production is coming out shortly and I will buy it, to see if I can make more sense of the production—but really to hear Vogt again.

*Parsifal* is my favourite Wagner work, and I was really looking forward to this production. It didn't disappoint. A very complex—and presumably expensive—set construction helped in telling a very subtle and intricate story.

I want a pair of the lovely, long feathered wings worn by almost all members of the cast in Act I. I think they could easily become the 21st century answer to the opera cape of the 19th.

The orchestra—surprisingly soft and subtle at times—and the chorus were absolutely wonderful. I came out on a real high, floating and feeling several kilograms lighter, after covering a century of German military history in parallel with the journey of discovery and spiritual enlightenment and eventual fulfilment of a single soul.

Any visit to Bayreuth would be a significant experience by itself. On this occasion, it was enormously enhanced by the friendship and sharing of each of my fellow Melbourne Wagner Society members. I thank each of them for adding greatly to my enjoyment.

And next time ...

—Dr David McCarthy