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NEWSLETTER OF THE RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY OF VICTORIA

July 2006. Vol 3, No 2.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT



With more than half the year gone there are occasions to review and others to take note of for the rest of 2006.

The Society paid its farewell to Birgit Nilsson in March. She, the greatest Wagnerian Soprano on the authority of [Jon Vickers](#), died at the age of 87 in December last year. At the Rado Theatre we heard snippets of Wagner and then a searing DVD of her performing Elektra directed by James Levine. Birgit stood out as expected in a strong cast with Donald McIntyre, who was dressed up like an ancient Greek boy scout, looking incapable of performing the subsequent horrors. Fortunately the latter were performed audibly but behind closed doors.

May is the time of the Birthday celebration. For various reasons the luncheon was held not on the exact day (Wagner's birthday was on May 22nd) but a few days later. By a process that suggests that the Society is favoured by an astonishing circulation network the venue was also changed. This is even acknowledging that we live in the Internet age. The message that the original restaurant had double booked was passed onto our ever-efficient Secretary. David made the changes from where he was temporarily based in Paris no less! The room at the Palace Hotel in South Melbourne was just large enough to accommodate the goodly number of members and guests who attended. The Guest of Honour was Richard Mills whom I have heard described, as Australia's most eminent opera composer. And notably he even has his works staged! We recall Summer of the Seventeenth Doll performed in Melbourne in 1996 and Batavia, to great acclaim, in 2001 and subsequently in Perth. It will reach Sydney latter this year.

However, it was for Richard's undoubted authority as a conductor and especially of Wagner that made him an ideal Guest of Honour. Some of us were privileged to hear him conduct a concert performance of Tristan and Isolde in Brisbane last year. He had Lisa Gasteen and a distinguished cast to direct but it was for Richard's handling of the AYO that made the occasion unforgettable. He is to conduct this work again in Perth in November, this time not with the AYO but with WASO.

At the luncheon Richard spoke of conducting Wagner and noting that however many times he studied the score the next time he would find a previously unnoticed source of beauty emphasising how remarkable the Master's unique gifts are. Richard took the time to move around the various tables paying the Society the complement of being in no hurry to leave despite having a rehearsal to attend that evening.

So what of the Societies future plans? As you will see in the Newsletter we have our popular afternoon at the Soroptimist Hall on Sunday, 6th August. Towards the end of the year we will have an occasion to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Societies foundation. The committee has still to hear who has accepted our invitation to take part but all will be revealed in good time. A new dimension to the AGM is promised.

Ken Muirden

(PRESIDENT)
July 2006

Richard Mills with our President, Ken Muirden at the Wagner Birthday Luncheon on Sun 28th May 2006



Two tables of revellers at the Wagner birthday luncheon, May 28th 2006.



[The Mac is back](#)

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THE MAC IS BACK! NEW ZEALANDS
PRODUCTION OF PARSIFAL



The Mac is back! This was the phrase used to both promote on the radio and celebrate in the press Wellington's production of Parsifal in March. Which about a dozen Victorians were able to attend. The Mac is back---New Zealand's favourite opera knight came out of 12 years retirement to dominate with stage presence and strong voice in the huge part as Gurnemance. At 71 he was every bit as impressive as when I heard him as Wotan in the 1973 Gotz Friedrich Covent Garden production.

The production originated two years previously with a phone call from Donald wishing to collaborate with the N.Z.S.O. to showcase Simon O'Neill (Parsifal) and Paul Whelan (Amfortas) - both of whom he had been helping to nurture. We understand he was helpful in persuading many of the others in this universally strong, all New Zealand cast, to interrupt their European careers for this performance.

This was staged in the modern Michael Fowler Concert Hall, which had fine acoustics, and a wooden ceiling that was colourfully lit with each dramatic change. There was a semicircular stage suspended above the back half of the orchestra, with a central single set of steps leading to an upper level. All this was backlit by three large screens showing changing abstract patterns. This fully costumed and fully acted production directed by Bernard Benthank (who directed the A.O. Tannhauser), worked well. In fact the limited staging let the audience concentrate on the music.

Simon O'Neil, aged 34, the son of a small country town teacher and freezing worker, sang with a powerful clear voice in his debut as Parsifal. He had previously understudied Placido Domingo's Sigmund and Parsifal. He will mature into a great tenor with major roles scheduled in many of the opera houses, including Die Walkure and Lohengrin at the Met. Briefly, Martin Snell (Klingsor) sang with menace and power; Margaret Medlyn (Kundry) had a richer stronger voice than in Adelaide; Paul Whelan (Amfortas) had a lighter voice but sang with authority. Anthony Negus and the N.Z.S.O. gave a straightforward, lithe performance with good separation of sound, emphasizing the beautiful textures of this rich score. He avoided the treacly sentimentality we sometimes hear. He should do well in his new appointment as Director of the troubled Scottish National Opera.

The programme contained a full libretto and an excellent essay both written by Peter Basset. At the end of a triumphant night, we thought we had experienced what he wrote in the final paragraph of his essay. "At the heart of PARSIFAL is the notion that salvation is to be found not in the satisfaction of selfish desires, but in the ability to share the sufferings of others. In our shared sense of compassion we can recognize the fundamental unity of all beings - of all creation. This is the insight that Parsifal, with child-like simplicity, brings to the community of the Grail, and the message that Wagner in his "crowning achievement" left to the world."



Richard Reed

[President's report](#)



[Another point of view](#)

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Another view of the New Zealand Parsifal



Several members of our Society felt able to cross the Tasman to Wellington to attend an all N.Z. performance of Parsifal in March this year. The main stimulus was to celebrate the career of the great Wagnerian bass baritone, Sir Donald McIntyre, unforgettable as the Chereau -Boulez Ring's Wotan. Perhaps some of our members would have concluded that at the age of 72 the occasion might have been left a little late. Someone (from our Society) opined that he had already departed for the other place. Neither of these opinions were anywhere near the mark, I am pleased to say.

The rest of the cast was of an equally high standard. We had all heard Margaret Medlyn sing Wagner in Adelaide. One could not fault Simon O'Neill (Parsifal), Paul Whelan (Amfortas), Martin Snell (Klingsor), and Grant Dickson (Titurel). The N.Z.S.O conducted by Anthony Negus, who had trained with Goodall and Mackerras was more than adequate for the occasion and the chorus was enthusiastic.

One surprise was the effectiveness of what was referred to as "semi staging". This meant that an oval stage area was placed behind the orchestra but in front of the chorus. The cast moved in and out of this area and the lighting was all-important. The stage probably was difficult to see from the front rows of the stalls, but elsewhere all was clear. The spear, Grail goblet and the dead swan were the only props and costumes were very basic. This did allow the remarkable acting skills, the movements, the gestures, the facial expressions and the emotions to come across so clearly from a brilliant McIntyre. This was equally so with Medlyn and a real lesson for young singers to absorb. McIntyre's voice still had the old warmth and power and he seems to be indestructible. It was great privilege for us all to attend, and very moving.

Lesley and I went with a very old N.Z. friend well into his 70's who has a professional musician as a son, but nevertheless had limited experience with Wagner in performance. He was accompanied by his lawyer son aged in his 40's who had even less exposure to Wagner than his father. At the end of an overpowering Act 2 the father's only comment was "Gee, one of the flower maidens was fat, wasn't she?" His son on the other hand said. "I am going to buy a ticket for the other performance in two days time." Lesley and I were sorry that we were not able to take this option also. How indiscriminate the Wagner magic can be.

Ken Muirden (President)

[Mac is back](#)



[The Bangkok Ring](#)

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THE BANGKOK "RING"



David Gale was present at the "Rheingold." in Bangkok on February 6th 2006, and said that he was greatly impressed with the event, and in particular, what could be achieved by a young company, and how the "Ring" could be adapted to a different culture.

David found a review article by Ian Fox in the U.K. "Opera" magazine, which he felt echoed his views, and obtained consent for the article to be reproduced in our newsletter, with thanks.

DAS RHEINGOLD Bangkok Opera
Thai Cultural Centre
February 5th and 6th, 2006

Bangkok Opera was created five years ago by the Thai conductor, composer and novelist, Somtow Sucharitkul. His own opera "Mae Naak" was favourably received by Ken Smith in these pages. Founded in 2001, the company is becoming increasingly adventurous, a remarkable achievement in Bangkok's musically thin calendar, and on February 5th and 6th last staged "Das Rheingold", promising to complete the cycle over the next four years. We attended the first night. Thailand's rich folk literature is full of gods, demons and spirits, and provided Somtow, who studied at Eton and Cambridge, with the opportunity to create an appropriate local Buddhist view, rejecting the world's materialism. The Rhine Maidens became garudas (the half-bird half-women of Thai legend), while Wotan and his court all sported colourful traditional royal garb. A great "Ying- Yang" circle held the gold at the start and then gradually split apart as the story progressed. The rest of the set comprised moveable steps and a simple Thai pavilion. However, as they crossed the Rainbow Bridge, the gods were confronted by the skyline of modern Bangkok rising from below. In all, it was an imaginative approach, which augurs well for the future three operas.

The cast was mainly American-European, with a fine Danish Wotan (Lars Waage), an impressive American Loge (Marc Deaton) and an English Alberich, the splendid Colin Morris. Julia Oesch (Germany) was a sonorous Erda and Barbara Smith Jones (America) a commanding Fricka. There was just one Thai singer, Saran Suebsantiwongse (Donner), a promising young baritone, who appeared in "Susannah" at the Wexford Festival last October. The most remarkable voice, we felt was the sonorous American bass, John Ames (Fafner).

Somtow sustained his classical Thai imagery well, with sets by San Pho-On and costumes by Surat Jongda. Two characters were dressed differently -Loge, presumably because he is only a deceitful semi-god, appeared as a garish tourist, in Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts, a familiar figure on Thai beaches. However, for some inexplicable reason, to us at least, Freia (the excellent Israeli soprano Ronit Widmann-Levy) appeared in trashy mini-skirt, boob tube and stilettos. Apart from this the production had a firm logic.

The Thai Cultural Centre is a concert hall cum theatre of impressive architecture and decor, with good stage machinery. Legible supertitles were provided in Thai and English. The large orchestra with full complement of harps and Wagner tubas, played with real enthusiasm, although pitch was not always true and the brass tended to dominate in places, particularly at the end, when the strings, not always forward enough, appeared weary. Even Somtow's own well judged, if modestly paced conducting seemed to flag a little in the closing scene. Overall, this was an impressive and remarkably imaginative presentation and bodes well for the remainder of the cycle.

Future details from www.bangkokopera.com.

IAN FOX



[Another view of the New Zealand Parsifal](#)



[Editorial comment](#)

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EDITORIAL COMMENT.



There has been quite a deal of comment, both here and overseas, on the ever-diminishing financial assistance given to the arts, opera in particular. Recently, Graeme Murphy of the famed Sydney Dance Company, along with Janet Vernon has announced their retirement at the end of the Company's U.S. tour 2007. The reason is lack of government funding. Remember the Victoria State Opera, and Simone Young's forced exit from Opera Australia. Note also the ever-decreasing number of Opera Australia productions, and particularly the raw deal we get in this state. Political leaders have cynically concluded that there are no votes in the arts. They would rather spend our taxes on sport and war.

This situation has reached crisis proportions in operatic Italy, as reported in "Opera" magazine. The Italian arts budget has been slashed by an almighty one fifth (19.12 percent to be exact). The director of Venice opera has stated that he will stand down in protest to these financial cuts.

Only by public outrage, or demonstration can any of these changes be halted, or better, reversed. And to achieve this, a sympathetic media is necessary. Unfortunately the media is controlled, and in some places, owned by the government. So, we all lie down and accept the inevitable.

It has been said that the best form of coping with change is adaptation. Yes, we can adapt. We can walk away from the expensive and elitist companies that exist, and do what has been done recently in Bangkok, and, last year in the Amazon jungle. Form lower budget opera companies, and put on productions that have been quite uniquely successful, and have ventured into new territories. In my opinion we should all unite in Victoria and support the new State opera company, and attempt to be innovative, and build something worthwhile.

Stan O'Loughlin

IMPORTANT: For this newsletter to continue, correspondence from members is a necessary part. Any agreement or disagreement with anything said by the editor or any contributor is most welcome. The main function of this newsletter is communication.

Please [email](#) to S. O'Loughlin or write to me at 22 Greville Street, PRAHRAN 3181

[The Bangkok Ring](#)



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IMPORTANT NOTICE.



All committee and office bearer posts become vacant at the end of the year. 2006 is an Election Year, and all members are asked to consider nominating for positions on the committee.



Notice of intent is required in writing 4 weeks before the Annual General Meeting, which has yet to be dated.

[Editorial comment](#)



[25th Anniversary](#)

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THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY OF VICTORIA.




2006 marks the 25th birthday of our Society, and in November, or early December this year there will be a Special Event to celebrate this notable occasion. Details will be made public via notices and the web site when arrangements are finalised.



The Richard Wagner Society of Victoria was formed on 26th August 1981, by a trio of Wagner enthusiasts over a lunch. These pioneers were Aubrey Schrader, David Gale and the late Robert Salzer. A meeting one week later seconded Ms Tess Barrett onto the inaugural committee to address the gender balance, and to form a 'Gang of Four'.

The first meeting occurred on 24th November 1981 at Aubrey's home where some fifty or so new members met. Rita Hunter was the guest of honour.

The Society now has approximately 250 members and is ruled by a 'Gang of Nine' with Aubrey and David, two of the original committee still serving with enthusiasm.

[Committee notice](#)  [Coming events](#)

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EVENTS TO COME.



Mid winter 'Get Together" at the Soroptimists Headquarters, at 383 Toorak Road, South Yarra, at 2-30 pm, on Sunday 6th August 2006.

At the meeting on Sunday, Aug. 6th. members of the society will address and discuss recent Wagner Production of interest.

Heinz Kestermann will get the ball rolling by presenting special features of 3 very different but yet remarkable performances he saw. Just a few Bullet Points to raise your interest:

The Ring in Copenhagen:

Sieglinde pulls the sword from the Asch -Tree
Siegfried splits a TV set rather than the anvil...

At the end, Alberich, Loge they are all dead left only a pregnant (!) Brunhilde presenting her Baby in the last act.

The Dutchman in Essen, produced by Barrie Kosky...

The Chorus probably the most obscene Scene I have seen on opera stage....
As Barry told me the Dutchmen is the story of a woman - accordingly Senta brings peace to the Dutchman by slitting his throat....

Tristan, Bastille in Paris by Peter Sellars, W. Meyer and B. Hepner performing

"Parsifal and the Grail"

Lecture by Stan O'Loughlin. In conjunction with the C.G.Jung Society of Victoria.
Lecture will be given at 8-00pm, on Friday 18th August, at St David's Hall, on corner of Mt Albert and Burke Rds, Canterbury.

Admission for Wagner Society Members is \$10-00, and any further enquiries can be directed to Ms Mary Duffy, President of the Jung Society., phone: 9867 4787.

25th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Date and Venue and details forthcoming.

TRISTAN and ISOLDE: November 4th, 8th, and 11th, 2006.

at Her Majesty's Theatre. PERTH. at 5-30pm.
(See previous Newsletter; March 2006, for details.)

WAGNER AROUND THE WORLD

**KIROV RING CYCLE: Metropolitan opera New York.
2 Cycles:**

- 1) July 13th, 14th, 20th and 21st., 2007.
- 2) July 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th, 2007.

Details in March newsletter.

TRISTAN and ISOLDE:

Metropolitan opera New York 2007-2008, (Dates to be released)

Paris: Bastille.

May 19th, 23rd, and 26th, June 2nd, 5th, 8th, and 23rd. 2007.

RING CYCLES:

Berlin: Feb 2007; 2 cycles.

Budapest: Jan 2007; 1 Cycle

London: Covent Garden: Oct/Nov 2007. 1 Cycle?


Vienna: 1 Cycle 2009.

OPERA TOUR

Peter Bassett is leading opera tour around Europe in the spring of 2007. It begins in Paris and includes a 'Lohengrin' at the Bastille with Ben Heppner and Waltraud Meier. Then the tour moves to Lucerne and Munich and then Dresden where a production of 'Der Fliegende Hollander' will be included. Then to Berlin for 'Der Rosenkavalier', and finally Hamburg where Simone Young will conduct 'Tristan and Isolde'. Sounds a marvellous tour!!

[25th Anniversary](#)   [Books](#)

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BOOKS.



'Tristan and Isolde' Newly published by Peter Bassett to co-incide with the Perth production is available at \$34-95.

'The Nibelung's Ring' also by Peter Bassett at \$34-95

The 2 books can be ordered through the Wakefield Press together for \$50-00.

'Winifred Wagner, A Life at the Heart of Hitler's Bayreuth', By German scholar and Historian, Brigitte Hamann.

Aubrey Schrader is currently reading this and strongly recommends it to all. He will write a review on this in a future newsletter.

[Events to come](#)



[Whispering woodbird](#)

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WHISPERING WOODBIRD.



Melba Foundation has recorded the Adelaide 'Ring' cycle 2004, and has announced a release schedule on CD of each part of the Neidhardt 'Ring'. 'Die Walkure' was released on 7th June 2006, 'Das Rheingold' will be released in October; 'Siegfried' in February 2007; and, 'Gotterdammerung' and the complete set in October 2007.

This CD set is unique as it is 'hybrid' in that it can be played on normal stereo systems, and also on multi-channel surround sound systems. This makes it the first surround-sound 'Ring' Cycle in the world.

Placido Domingo has recently pulled out of 3 high profile German productions, according to 'The Guardian'. This suggests that this great artist maybe nearing the end of his career. Hardly a total surprise as Placido is in his mid to late sixties, and each of these major Wagner roles is somewhat of a marathon.

VALE

Professor Andrew McCredie, the co-founder of the South Australian Wagner Society died from complications of cardiac surgery on June 7th 2006.

The Victorian Wagner Society extends sympathy to his family, friends, and the South Australian Wagner Society.

[Book reviews](#)



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