

WAGNER NEWS OF VICTORIA



NEWSLETTER OF THE
RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY INC.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Visual Arts: I completed a circuit of the four Australian Wagner Societies in July to talk on Richard Wagner and Visual Art at the Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia.

The WA membership was astonished to learn that the Art Gallery of WA holds an iconic Wagnerian painting, *Ride of the Valkyrs* (1908), by John Charles Dollman. Sadly this painting is often relegated to the vaults, but the conservation department told me it has reframed it since I expressed interest in 2013.

John Meyer, acting President of the WA Society, now plans a Richard Wagner birthday function at the Gallery, seated beneath this Wagnerian painting on special display for the occasion.

Wagner in Italy: Dr Geoffrey Seidel, President of the Richard Wagner Society of South Australia, at a Society meeting in July, revealed his personal transformation from plain Italophile into Wagnerian Italophile, after going to the Adelaide

Rings. He pointed out that Richard Wagner was likewise an Italophile, although less so in regard to contemporary Italian Opera.

Geoffrey began with the early Italian operatic influence inside the Wagner household and within his home town of Dresden, and then explored Wagner's nine major trips to Italy, from his first in 1852 when hiking the Alps, to his last in 1883, upon his death in Venice and his slow gondola journey (coffin draped in black) along the Grand Canal.

Geoffrey conducted us on a heartfelt pilgrimage to all of these Wagnerian Italian sites. This was a grand tour indeed.

Opera Australia Parsifal: Members who visited the Sydney Opera House for *Parsifal* in August experienced an extraordinary performance (see Gavin Cornish's detailed review on Page 4).

Melbourne Opera Lohengrin: Four performances were given in August at the Melbourne Regent,

and one at Robert Blackwood Hall, Monash University. They were impressive: vocally, visually and even orchestrally, despite the reduced orchestral forces and small production budget. The swan graphics were breathtakingly perfect.

This traditionally staged *Lohengrin* was enthusiastically received by audiences, and gained positive press reviews. We are proud to have supported, in the role of Elsa, Melbourne-born Helena Dix, whose singing came close to ideal for this difficult, romantic yet tragic, role.

Helena was guest artist, together with *Lohengrin* conductor Dr David Kram, at a popular Society function in July that attracted 90 members and guests. No doubt attendees hoped for a recital from Helena, but this had not been planned. Instead, David hosted an ad hoc Parkinson-style interview with Helena about her operatic career, to which she sang (beautifully) short snippets to illustrate. ● *Continued on Page 2*

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Thanks again to the many contributors to the newsletter. I was sorry to miss Heath Lees' talk about Wagner and Tolkien, a subject of interest to me. Many authors and musicians attempt to dismiss influences of bygone masters. Tolkien denied many of the inspirations and themes from mythology, in particular, Wagner's ideas. Remember that Wagner mapped out in prose a resume of the whole drama in October 1848 called 'The Nibelung Myth as Sketch for a Drama', which derived from a large number of sources, including Nordic and Germanic myths, Greek drama and fairytales. He condensed all these into a tangible cycle, which became the *Ring* as we know it.

There is no other work that melds all these sources. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* began in 1937, nearly a century later. I find it hard to believe that he took nothing from Wagner, as he claimed. Maybe his distaste for war and Hitler swayed him to dissociate himself from Wagner.

~ Stan O'Loughlin



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Wagner and Tolkien: Professor Heath Lees, of the Wagner Society of New Zealand, spoke at a Society meeting in September on Wagner and Tolkien at Mentone Grammar Creativity Centre. Heath tackled the thorny story that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was totally independent on Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*.

Tolkien apparently dismissed any resemblance to Wagner by saying, "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases." But Heath definitively shows that resemblance does not at all cease there, and that Tolkien's resemblances and dependencies on Wagner are evident everywhere in his work!

Heath took us through a 20-point comparison. Most convincing were (1) the common central motif of a Ring of Power is Wagner's creation, unprecedented in Norse mythology, (2) Tolkien's 'round Ring' dismissal was never intended to refer to Wagner's *Ring* but to the 13th century *Nibelungenlied*. Tolkien's over-eager disciples have to answer for the confusion, and Heath has helped clear it up.

Heath held two sessions: one in the afternoon for 140 secondary school students, and another in the evening, for a general audience of 80, including Society members. The events were organised by Kate Kimpton, as a major contribution to our youth initiative, and hosted by Gavin Cornish, who also happens to be Director of Music and Coordinator for the Performing Arts at Mentone Grammar.

Bayreuth Tickets: The Richard Wagner Verband International—the Inter-

national Association of Wagner Societies, of which we are a member Society—will henceforth allocate Bayreuth Festival tickets to member Societies on the basis of their seating/price requests. Hopefully this will fix the current indeterminate allocation, and will give our Society members greater certainty in getting tickets to the seating areas they desire.

Colin Pyman: Colin Pyman is part way through a year-long trek of the Outback, including attending the Dirk Hartog 400-year celebrations at Inscription Point in Shark Bay, and has accordingly resigned from the Committee. On behalf of the Society, I thank Colin for his enthusiastic services to the Committee over the past four years. Colin was a 'vollie' [volunteer] in both Melbourne *Rings*, a strong advocate for Melbourne Opera, an unstinting champion for Warwick Fyfe, and he added a lively freshness to our meetings. Thank you Colin.

Ruth O'Dea: In accordance with Society Rules, the Committee appointed Ruth O'Dea to fill the casual vacancy following Colin Pyman's departure. Her appointment holds until the next term election at AGM 2018.

Ruth has long been involved in our Society's activities, and she manages our website with her husband Tom, our Treasurer, who dutifully abstained from her appointment. In accepting, Ruth expressed her concern over a husband and wife team working together on the Committee. The Committee responded that its decision was based on her undoubted integrity and suitability to the task.

Tristan and Isolde: Melbourne Opera is staging Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* at the St Kilda Palais in early February 2018. Lee Abrahmsen, who played *Tannhäuser's* Venus last year, is playing Isolde. Tristan is yet to be finalised. The Society is supporting Melbourne Opera in this production.

Meistersinger: Opera Australia is staging the Royal Opera House production of Wagner's *Meistersinger* at the Arts Centre Melbourne State Theatre in November 2018. Walther will be played by Stefan Vinke—the Siegfried of our two Melbourne *Rings*, and the latest Bayreuth *Rings*. Society member Warwick Fyfe will play Beckmesser.

The Society is supporting the role of Eva, played by Natalie Aroyan, and the role of mastersinger Hermann Ortel, played by Michael Honeyman (recently Roger in Szymanowski's *King Roger*).

The Society will be holding *Meistersinger* pre-performance talks with Heath Lees at the piano. This time the talks will not be held at the Melbourne Recital Centre but, appropriately, in the Lutheran Church, St John's Southgate, that is immediately behind Hamer Hall.

Next year will be an exciting time for opera lovers in Melbourne, with major productions by Opera Australia, Victorian Opera and Melbourne Opera.

~ Trevor Clarke
President



Richard Wagner's Birthday Lunch 2017, Rylands of Hawthorn

Richard Wagner's 204th birthday was celebrated on Sunday 21st May, at Rylands of Hawthorn. Fifty-one members attended, with three guests. The venue was given the thumbs-up by most attendees, and the food and service were excellent.

We were fortunate to have Gerry Connolly as guest speaker/artist—a very talented comedian, actor, impressionist and pianist. As he has a background as a satirist, caricaturing public figures such as the Queen, Margaret

Thatcher, Bob Hawke and others, many were expecting he would come in as Richard Wagner himself. But he left his musical talent do the most of the talking, using his piano skill and voice to play a number of renditions of 'Happy Birthday', including: *Sound of Music*, *Phantom of the Opera*, Mozart, Beethoven and a Wagner Happy Birthday. Finally he drank the toast from the drinking horn (see picture below).

~ Stan O'Loughlin



Gerry Connolly at the piano



Gerry proposing the toast with Siegfried's horn



Susan Cumming and Miki Brotzier



A captive audience of members

Parsifal Concert with Jonas Kaufman, Sydney Opera House

(see report next page)



Jonas Kaufman, the star of the show, with committee members Miki Brotzier, Susan Cumming, Trevor Clarke, Tom O'Dea and Gavin Cornish



Secretary Susan Cumming congratulates Jonas Kaufman

Parsifal Concert, Sydney Opera House, 12th August Matinee

For all those interested in the works of Richard Wagner, performances in recent years have provided great excitement, enjoyment and satisfaction. With local and interstate productions of *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, concert performances of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Rienzi* and most importantly two productions of the *Ring*.

Interest in Wagner's works is clearly growing, along with attendance and popularity. Performances are more frequent and the importance of the Wagner's works within the operatic canon has renewed acknowledgement.

Opera Australia's recent concert performance of *Parsifal* in the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall is a welcome addition to the list of recently performed Wagner works. The quality of the performance was of the highest order and the experience was overwhelming and unforgettable.

The Sydney Opera House is a fine venue for concert performances of operatic works. The 2015 *Tristan und Isolde* concert performance, replete with unnecessary AV enhancements and unhelpful stage placement of the cast, was nonetheless a wonderful experience. This time, *Parsifal* was performed in a purely concert style; singers in front of the orchestra, apart from the chorus. The music and the voices were enough to admirably convey the drama, poetry and deep emotions contained within Wagner's last great work.

Without exception the performance of each cast member was dramatically convincing. Apart from the lack of a *mise-en-scène* afforded by a production, little dramatic intent was lost in concert. The cast seemed to move into place on stage and exit with a smooth precision, creating little if any visual distraction.

The surtitles simply summarised the action and Wagner's more complex poetical construct. On this occasion they were mostly conventional; perhaps helpful and important for those less familiar with the work. However, in *Parsifal*, where long musical tableaux and ritual actions prevail, surtitles seem a little unnecessary and a bit distracting as most of the drama is conveyed in the music.



It is hard to point to any specific moment that exemplifies such a wonderful performance. However, the Grail scenes of Act 1 and Act 3 including Titurel's funeral march, the serene and beautiful Good Friday Music, the seduction scene including Kundry's kiss of act 2 and the Finale, where music unites a mystical Heaven and Earth, were all moments of unmatched splendour.

The Prelude must receive a special mention; no less than Friedrich Nietzsche thought it was the greatest piece of music. I could hardly wait to hear the prelude begin. A great benefit of a concert performance is the direct experience of the orchestra. As it began the sounds seemed to rise from nowhere, the main theme surrounded by a shimmering and mystical halo of orchestral colour without musical meter. The deliberate timelessness and mystical qualities of the prelude set the tone for the entire performance.

The sound in the Sydney Opera House Concert was glorious, and with a full house in attendance the orchestra played with passion and beauty under the baton of Pinchas Steinberg. A week earlier I was fortunate to be present at a dress rehearsal focused on Act 2. Pinchas Steinberg confirmed his detailed knowledge of the score and his astute leadership. He encouraged richness and passion when required, but emphasised dynamic range and cohesion at all times. Pinchas is an active participant and meticulous conductor in performance, continuously moulding the musical and dramatic elements as they developed.

Jonas Kaufman's performance as Parsifal was flawless and inspired. Jonas inhabited the mysterious world of Parsifal to perfection with his thrilling, effortless sound and his magnetic stage presence. The Flower Maiden scene

and the seduction scene demonstrated Jonas's fine understanding of the drama. However, on display at all times was his relaxed mastery of the considerable musical difficulties presented by the role.

A casual look at Jonas's biography will uncover a stunning career. Within his Wagnerian repertoire is Walther from *Tannhäuser*, Walther from *Die Meistersinger*, Seigmund from *Die Walküre* and the title role of *Lohengrin*. In 2013 his performances as Parsifal in the Metropolitan Opera's production received glowing reviews and international acclaim. He is also a Kammer-sänger of the Bavarian State Opera.

Michelle DeYoung is a great artist with a tremendous instrument. As Kundry, she gave a blistering performance, her voice ranging in expression from the world-weary Kundry of Act 1 to the magically directed seductress of Act 2. Michelle's transformation was thrilling and exciting and her vocal performance a perfect match for Jonas.

I was struck by the vocal power and quality of all the lead roles and supporting cast. The Flower Maidens all had incredible voices. Warwick Fyfe as Klingsor was well cast, his highly expressive approach and resonant sound a good match for the role of resident evil. Kwangchul Youn as Gurnemanz was stunning with a rich and beautiful sound. Michael Honeyman as Amfortas, now experienced in the role of kings, was much appreciated and David Parkin admirably sang the well known unearthly and disembodied sounds as Titurel.

Further admiration must be afforded the Opera Australia chorus. In full force this large ensemble sat behind the orchestra and made a glorious rich sound, especially during the finale.

Following the final notes the standing applause was long, steady and genuine. We were all deeply moved, somewhat speechless. However, as I left the hall, a person in my row delighted to tell me that the strong audience reaction was not a regular occurrence. I thought, will we see a full production soon?

~ Gavin Cornish

Lohengrin, Melbourne Opera August 2017



Marius Vlad, Act 1



Helena Dix

Melbourne Opera's production was the most recent in a long line of *Lohengrins* dating from the first Australian Wagner performance. The 1877 Lyster production was the first. Then the 1958 season at Her Majesty's, which was my magical introduction to Wagner at age 15. Twenty-seven years later came the stunning August Everding *Lohengrin*, our Society's first involvement in helping with financial assistance.

Considering that Melbourne Opera receives no government funding, the standard of this latest production was remarkably high. With budget restrictions in mind, Christina Logan-Bell produced an excellent amphitheatre style set, with Lucy Birkinshaw's supportive lighting. Yandell Walton's video projections of the swan, in particular, evoked the other-world mystery, and was quite wonderful.

The costumes were traditional and bright and fitted well with the overall setting. Director Suzanne Chaundry acknowledged the conflict between old-world, dark paganism and the brighter Christianity, by placing the world ash tree (Yggdrasil), over the set in Acts 1 and 3, and the image of

the Gothic church as the backdrop of Act 2. I felt this worked well in Act 2, as the pagan Ortrud cast her spell below and in front of the Gothic palace. Less successful was Act 3, scene 2, when the celebration of Christian victory was missing any reference to the Gothic imagery of the second act.

Casting was strong. Helena Dix, who was supported by our Society, gave an accomplished account of Elsa. She maintained her innocence and devotion, but rose to the occasion to ask the forbidden question, because she needed to confirm Lohengrin's belief in her innocence. She knew she was innocent. Ortrud knew she was innocent, and Lohengrin knew she was innocent. Her voice was pure toned and emotional, especially in Act 3.

Romanian tenor, Marius Vlad, began a little tentatively, but rose to the occasion and rendered a lovely and noble 'In Fernem Land'.

I thought that the forces of darkness were extremely well portayed, particularly with appearance and acting. Hrolfur Saemundsson sang with an even and powerful voice

throughout, and Sarah Sweeting sang well and used her considerable theatrical experience to present an Ortrud who was far from sweet. Eddie Muliamaeali'i was a compassionate and even king. Supporting singers were satisfactory.

David Kram, who is a seasoned conductor, moved the 70-strong orchestra through the score with fluency and clarity. The strings in the ethereal prelude and the trumpeting were great.

The 80-strong chorus, prepared by Raymond Lawrence, was impressive, especially considering many members were volunteers, and some came from the Society.

Things have come a long way since 1877. Bringing *Lohengrin* to the stage with purely private funding, the Melbourne Opera has done an impressive job. And there is more to come, with *Tristan and Isolde* scheduled for early 2018.

The whole company and personnel involved are to be congratulated. Special congratulations go to Miki Brotzier, assistant director and also Society and committee member.

~ Stan O'Loughlin

A TASTE OF MELBOURNE OPERA'S LOHENGRIN

On 25th July with excited anticipation, about 90 Society members and friends were introduced to Melbourne Opera's 2017 *Lohengrin* production. The guest speakers were the conductor Dr David Kram and soprano Helena Dix, who the Society is supporting in the role of Elsa. The two outlined director Suzanne Chaundy's interpretation of the production. Maestro Kram elaborated on the important point of the clash of religions between the paganism of Ortrud's old Nordic gods and the purity in Elsa's Christianity. The other important concept is the interplay of faith, hope and doubt; instilling the latter being the precursor to asking the forbidden questions.

They were generous with their musical excerpts. Maestro Kram has the musical and educative abilities to be able to go to and from the piano, whilst presenting succinct and informed background of the musical excerpts. He explained that in *Lohengrin*, Wagner is on the cusp of producing music dramas. To avoid monotony, it is important for the musicians and singers to keep true to the scoring, where inflections and dynamics clarify the text, so that ideas are presented.

We heard for the first time Helena's voluptuous soprano voice when she sang 'Mein Schirm, mein Engel', Elsa's dream

from Act 1. Her exquisite high register pianissimo demonstrated a very beautiful and technically sound voice. In contrast, we were treated to a much stronger dynamic when she sang Act 2's 'Du lästerin, ruchlose Frau'.

The audience experienced a touch of the difficulties in learning new repertoire in Wagner's German. Helena challenged us to say one of the lines she sings, "Wär es so! Und dürft'ich's wissen, dürft ich in meiner Macht es seh'n", phrase by phrase, and then with increasing tempi, which left many of us completely tongue-tied. Helena says she learns the music first, marching around her home to the beat of the music, and then learns the vowels and words and breathing. Finally when all this is in her mind's memory, all she has to do is sing gloriously!

A fitting finale was our Life Member Nance Grant AM MBE presenting a bouquet to Helena. Nance noted that the role of Elsa is a singing role requiring a pure voice. Many years ago she had noted that Helena had solid technique, was a good musician and had something extra in the quality of her voice. All augurs well for Helena's debut as Elsa. We are anticipating a *Lohengrin* feast.

~Susan Cumming



Maestro Kram and Helena Dix performing



Nance Grant presented the Society's bouquet to Helena Dix



Rosemary O'Brien and Jan Halliday
(Rosemary sang in the chorus)



John Middleton, Libby Smith, Shirley Breese, James Alker, Janice Carpenter, Susan Foley and Charles (Chips) Sowerwine at the recent Bayreuth festival

Farewell to the Deutsche Oper's Tunnel Ring

When the curtain fell at the Deutsche Oper on Easter Monday at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, it was the final and fortieth performance of Götz Friedrich's production of the *Ring Cycle*. This enduring production premiered in 1985 and has been performed regularly over the intervening 32 years. The singers, orchestra and conductor, Donald Runnicles, all met with rapturous applause and a standing ovation. It was a nostalgic occasion for Berliners, many of whom have seen this production several times over the years and are sad to see it go, though acknowledging that it is time to move on and make way for change.

While the staging reflects the mid 1980s, the Cold War times of Reagan and Gorbachev dominated by the fear of nuclear war, it is not lacking relevance to the current time with the threats to world peace we experience today. We are placed in a dark and claustrophobic world of the tunnel, which evokes the sense of timelessness that Friedrich intended. He said of his production in 1984, "Our stage should be seen as a 'time tunnel'. Each and every character, every situation is then and now at once. The beginning means the end and the end is the beginning." At the start of *Rheingold* we see the still and shrouded figures of the disguised gods on the stage and they are there again at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, emphasising the continual cycle of destruction and renewal.

The staging of this production is traditional and I enjoyed the lack of added elements with which modern directors appear compelled to burden their productions—dancers, extras filling the stage, or costumes and props which detract from the drama and the music.

The vocal performances in each of the main roles were excellent. Given that the cycle was performed over five nights, there was some doubling up on roles. Indeed, we had three different Wotans. Australian bass-baritone Derek Whetton, now an ensemble member at Deutsche Oper, sang the young Wotan in *Das Rheingold*. He sang well and was dramatically convin-

cing; it will be interesting to watch his career progress in the future. Thomas Mayer had been scheduled for the role of Wotan in *Die Walküre* but cancelled and was replaced by Iain Patterson, who commanded the stage in a manner befitting the arrogant and superior Wotan and sang with great vocal expression, and finally, Samuel Youn, in the role of The Wanderer in *Siegfried*, emphasised the decline and desperation of Wotan.

Evelyn Herlitzius sang Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* and gave the effortless, committed, intense and powerful performance that she is so well known for. Her replacement in *Siegfried*, Ricarda Merbeth, also carried the role beautifully, with her awakening hymn to the sun being particularly memorable. Ricarda also played Gutrune in *Götterdämmerung*.

The Walsung Twins, performed by Stuart Skelton and Eva-Maria Westbroek, both excelled in their roles. Skelton was a last-minute replacement for American tenor Brandon Jovanovich, and gave a five-star performance despite having a cold, though his poor health did show in the timbre of his voice at the end of Act I. Eva-Maria Westbroek is a great singer-actor and gave an excellent interpretation of Sieglinde.

As Siegfried, Stefan Vinke was magnificent and I think reached heights even beyond those we saw in Melbourne last year, both in his acting and in his vocalisation, bringing out the many characteristics of Siegfried—his brashness, his wistfulness, his sadness and his youth. The long and impassioned love-duet in the last act of *Siegfried* was a particularly joyous moment and both Stefan and Evelyn demonstrated their exceptional voices and power as singers. The performance of these two singers felt to me considerably stronger than when I saw them in this same *Ring* at Deutsche Oper in 2010, though it may be that my capacity to appreciate their talent has also grown.



The Valkyries were a vocally fine collection with some strong individuals and they certainly looked interesting in their black leather punk-goth costumes.

There were numerous other performances worthy of mention and I will name just a few. Mezzo Daniela Sindram made an exceptional Fricka with just the right balance of femininity and Machiavellian manipulation. She also played Waltraute in *Götterdämmerung* and sang with emotion and conviction in the encounter with her Valkyrie sister, Brünnhilde. Tobias Kehrer portrayed a dark and dangerous Hunding, his character accentuated by the scene in the forest hut with its reminders of the times of the Stasi. Burkhard Ulrich's subtly calibrated Loge reinforced the production's understanding of the demi-god as the *Ring's* sole intellectual. Ulrich was just as impressive in the very different role of Mime in *Siegfried*.

The Deutsche Oper Orchestra with Donald Runnicles on the podium offered a rich and detailed rendering of the score, allowing the singers to carry the dramatic moments and supporting the singers throughout. Interestingly, the orchestra included only two harps, not the six Wagner wanted and which we enjoyed in Orchestra Victoria last year in Melbourne.

When the applause subsided and the singers and orchestra left the stage at the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* I felt privileged to have attended the last performance of this well-loved Berlin production. So now we wait until 2020 when Deutsche Oper will premiere a new *Ring Cycle*. The 2020 *Ring* will be directed by Norwegian director Stefan Herheim, who studied under Götz Friedrich in Hamburg between 1994 and 1999. His reputation suggests that we can expect an innovative and perhaps challenging new production.

~ Libby Smith

RICHARD WAGNER IN ITALY

Geoffrey Seidel, President, Richard Wagner Society of South Australia

My journey to becoming a Wagnerian began with the well-known Germanic/Northern obsession about all things Italian, including Italian Opera. I retain my Italophile roots and, as I learnt more about Wagner, I made special note of his multiple visits to Italy, and the ways Italian culture and music, whether acknowledged or not, influenced his work.

Early Italian Influence

Richard was exposed to Italian Opera as a boy in Dresden. His older sister Klara made her debut in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, and the Italian castrato Giovanni Sassaroli visited the home, to the young Richard's horror at the "pot-bellied giant" with effeminate voice.

Rossini's *Tancredi* played in Würzburg while Richard was chorus-master, and Bellini's *Capulets and Montagues*, and Rossini's *Otello* (both with soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient) played in Magdeburg while he conducted there.

Cambridge musicologist David Trippett quotes *The Musical Times* of 1886 that Wagner's music dramas owed their hold over the public ear to their melody. As early as 1837, Wagner had expressed a longing for German composers to achieve Bellini's "clear melody, the simple noble and beautiful song", although he held Bellini's operas to be a "threadbare, almost childish art form".

On his first visit to Paris in 1840, Wagner wrote a pure Bellinian aria for a production of *Norma*. On his second visit in 1860 for *Tannhäuser*, he met Rossini, and they discussed Weber, Rossini's visit to Beethoven, the fickleness of the public, the cabals of the press, the future of opera and the current state of Italian opera, and they parted in mutual admiration. (Rossini

vigorously denied the caustic barbs wrongly attributed to him about Wagner's music.)

Wagner's early operas bear the Italian stamp. Charles Osborne describes *Das Liebesverbot* as a "not very successful German imitation of Italian opera buffa", while Wagner's first success *Rienzi* is set in Rome and, of course, *Tannhäuser* pilgrimages to Rome.

gondola ride to Piazza San Marco for lunch, a walk at the Lido or Giardini, an ice at the Cafe del Rotunde, and then more work or conversation with his companion and protégé Karl Ritter.

In his recollections, he gives a glowing account of The Gondoliers Union chorus. He was impressed by the gondoliers' cries, which possibly influenced the wail of the shepherd's

pipe (cor anglais) in *Tristan* Act 3 that Mark Sandy, in *Venice and the Cultural Imagination*, calls a transmuted barcarolle.

Although sources are contradictory, it seems he dined at Albergo San Marco, and frequented the Cafe Quadri, though mainly the Cafe Lavena, in Piazza San Marco. The Cafe Lavena makes a big point out of this association, and you can even buy a *borreria* (butter dish) with Wagner's portrait on it.

Wagner was struck by the contrasting cheer and melancholy—the grandeur and decay—of *La Serenissima* (Venice), whose decline from former glory seems to echo elements of Schopenhauerian annihilation-of-the-self that pervade the drama of *Tristan*.

Two Austrian regimental bands used to play in the Piazza on Sundays, and once they set up on opposing sides, alternately playing overtures, including *Rienzi* and *Tannhäuser*. (I tipped the modern band at Cafe Lavena 50 euros to play the *Tannhäuser* overture.)

Venice's Austrian rulers, under pressure from the Saxon Ambassador, tried to expel the Saxon exile Wagner, but his Swiss passport and a sympathetic Councillor of Police protected him. Eventually, as war threatened between Austria and Savoy/France, he returned to Zurich



Wagner's Trips to Italy

1. In 1852, while hiking in the Swiss Alps, he visited the Borromean Islands on Lake Maggiore, and rejoined his wife Minna at Lugano.
2. In August 1853, he wrote to Liszt, "I am all ablaze to go to Italy", and to Otto Wesendonck, "I expect a great deal from Italy". He stayed in Genoa and visited La Spezia, where he famously dreamt the great E-flat major commencement of the *Ring*.
3. In August 1858, occasioned by the alleged affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, he first visited Venice. After a few nights in Hotel Daniel, he moved to Palazzo Guistiniani on the Grand Canal, where he spent seven productive months completing the full score of *Tristan* Act II. (He originally imagined *Tristan* as an easy-to-perform Italian opera!)

His daily routine in Venice comprised creative work until 2pm, a

(Switzerland), via Milan and Lugano.

4. In November 1861, the Wesendoncks invited him to join them in Venice. He recalls four dreary days that dashed his hopes. He apparently lodged at the Hotel Danieli.

5. In September 1876, after the equivocal success of the first *Ring*, he travelled with second wife Cosima through Verona, Venice, Bologna (which conferred 'honorary burgher of the city' upon him), and then Naples to Sorrento, stopping at the Hotel Victoria.

Friedrich Nietzsche happened to be staying at the Villa Rubinacci. He and Wagner strolled on the beach together. This was to be their last meeting. Richard and Cosima travelled on to Rome, and returned to Bayreuth via Florence.

6. At the end of December 1880, having failed to remount the *Ring* and to mount the planned 1880 premiere of *Parsifal*, Richard fled wintery Bayreuth for Italy. From 4 January 1881, the family occupied Villa Doria-Angri (now a maritime college) at Posilipo near Naples, with panoramic views of Capri, the Sorrento peninsula and Vesuvius.

He was joined by painter Paul Jukowsky, acolytes Rubenstein and Stein (tutor to his son Siegfried), Liszt, Italian composer Sgambati and future *Parsifal* musical director Engelbert Humperdinck. Throughout the Italian winter, Richard persisted with cold sea water bathing.

At the Naples Conservatory he met Francesco Florimo, an old devotee of Bellini, and embraced him crying "Bellini, Bellini".

In May 1880, he and Jukowsky visited Ravello on the Amalfi coast, staying at the Hotel Palumbo. They 'discovered' the Moorish Villa Rufolo that inspired Klingsor's garden in *Parsifal* Act II. Ravello boasts a Hotel Parsifal, Hotel Graal, Viale Richard Wagner, Cafe Klingsor and even Wagner wedding tours!

Ravello hosts a summer music festival, usually with a Wagnerian element. I attended a performance of Grieg's piano concerto, to which we were summoned by fanfare from the *Parsifal* prelude!

With failing health Wagner moved to Siena in Tuscany, where the family occupied the princely Villa Torre Fiorentina, and he enjoyed the luxury of the papal bed built for Pius VI. Cosima records that Richard was moved to tears by the Gothic Siena Cathedral, which Jukowsky sketched for the grail temple in *Parsifal*.

Throughout October, the family settled in Venice at the Palazzo Contarini on the Grand Canal, and returned to Bayreuth.

7. In November 1881, they travelled to Naples via Verona, crossed to the Italian island of Sicily, and settled into the [Grand] Hotel des Palmes, in Palermo, which now displays Wagner's bust in the foyer.

Here he worked on the orchestration of *Parsifal* Act 3. They took walks in the Giardino Inglese and the gardens of the Villa Giulia. They made several visits up to the Arabic-Norman-Byzantine-Romanesque cathedral in Monreale (near Palermo) with its glorious mosaics and cloisters which, in Cosima's words "transported us back into the spirit of that distant time". They also visited the Palermo Duomo, with its mixed Arabic-Norman architecture.

In early February, they moved to the Palazzo Gangi in the Piazza Croce dei Vespri (Palermo), then named the Piazza dei Porazzi. It was here that Wagner toyed with the famous 13-bar fragment called the Porazzi melody.

In March, they travelled to Acireale (east coast) and visited the Greek theatre at Taormina. They returned to Naples by ship from Messina, and then home to Bayreuth.

8. On 6th September 1882, following the successful premiere of *Parsifal*, Wagner left Bayreuth for the last time. The family settled in the Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi (now the Venice Casino) on the Grand Canal. Suffering increasing heart cramps, he was visited by many close associates, and began planning the next year's Bayreuth festival.

The score of his youthful *Symphony in C* had been rediscovered, and was prepared for performance by conductor Anton Seidl. It was given in the Sala Apolloneia in La Fenice, on

Cosima's 45th birthday (Christmas Eve), by an orchestra from the Venice Conservatory, with Wagner conducting the first two movements and Humperdinck the last.

Throughout chilly January he stayed mainly inside the palazzo, reading Shakespeare and Goethe and playing Bach and Beethoven on the piano, but ventured outdoors with the children for the last night of the winter carnival.

On 12th February 1883 he played the Porazzi melody. The following afternoon he died in Cosima's arms. Some days later, a cortege of gondolas transported his body to the railway station to return to Bayreuth.

The Venice Casino apartments, including the room where he died, are preserved as a private museum. You can email the Venetian Wagner Society, and a delightful lady will give a personal guided tour.

From the Grand Canal you can see a marble relief with his profile and the words of the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, "In this palace hear the souls, the last breath of Richard Wagner, in perpetuity, as the tide washes over the marbles" [translation, Peter Jacobsen]. The street side bears the inscription "To Richard Wagner, he died within these walls".

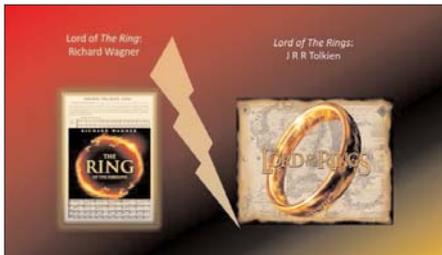
Now, I'm not making a huge point, but Richard Wagner's initial ideas about opera had to have been influenced by Italian opera, in particular by Bellinian melody, and Richard did write wonderful tunes.

He was undoubtedly attracted to the Italian peninsula by more than just the weather, and I believe there is something of Italian sensuality and Venetian melancholy in Acts 2 and 3 of *Tristan*, and the sensual and the spiritual of Ravello, Monreale and Siena in the stage designs for *Parsifal*.

Within months of Richard's death, Angelo Neumann's touring Wagner opera company arrived in Venice at La Fenice to perform the *Ring*.

~ Geoffrey Seidel





The Ring and the Rings: Heath Lees

In conjunction with Mentone Grammar School, the Richard Wagner Society proudly sponsored two talks by Professor Heath Lees at the school's brand-new Creativity Centre, on Friday 8th September. The talks offered new light on Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (including Peter Jackson's *LOTR* blockbuster films).

Tolkien always vehemently denied any dependence upon Wagner. This is quite understandable for, in the years in which he was writing *LOTR* (1937 to 1949), Nazi Germany had blatantly co-opted the power and symbolism of Wagner's music for political purposes.

Nevertheless, Heath amply demonstrated that a comparison between Wagner and Tolkien is impossible to avoid. He presented a persuasive, 20-point list of similarities between the two works—not the least being the Ring of Power, which is solely Wagner's invention and does not appear as such in the original Norse mythology.

Both Wagner and Tolkien centre their stories on Rings of Power, desired by all, but cursed and destructive to all who gain them. In each story, the Ring is won through violence and death; its

owner twists into a dark image of his former self and eventually forfeits the Ring, which is finally returned to its origin through purifying fire.

Heath took the audience through this detailed comparison, step by step, comparing characters, plots and symbolism of both narratives, and we felt he could have gone on endlessly with these aspects alone.

But, in his inimitably entertaining and fact-filled style, Heath presented many more dimensions. He compared the epic scale of both works; their common structure of a trilogy plus a 'prequel'; and the magnitude and complexity of their characters and themes.

In a grand finale, he examined at the piano the musical structures of Wagner's *Ring* and Howard Shore's scores for Peter Jackson's films. He found that, in addition to importing bits from Wagner in his soundtrack (especially the 'Tarnhelm' chords), Howard Shore adopts Wagner's leitmotif technique. Wagner effectively invented the leitmotif as a compositional device to associate a musical theme with different characters, ideas, and situations—the reason why Wagner is often considered to be the original writer of film scores, long before the medium was invented. And why shouldn't Shore use Wagner's extraordinary thematic, layered and emotive musical scheme,

particularly now he is no longer around to claim copyright!

As Heath always does, he dazzled us by jumping from lectern to piano, to build up layer upon layer of musical leitmotifs as they developed to structure the score.

Heath's talk was a joint initiative with the Richard Wagner Society to engage and invite a younger audience into the world of Wagner by drawing upon this comparison with a better-known contemporary story (although, as we were reminded, the Peter Jackson films were actually made some 20 years ago!). To this end, a shorter version of the talk was given in the afternoon to secondary students, and the longer version in the evening was addressed to an open audience.

Feedback has been extremely positive, with requests being made to know more about Wagner—in effect a request for a 'Wagner for Dummies'.

The Society has its work cut out in the future to find ways to initiate new audiences into the Wagnerian world, and Heath's venture was a fantastic foray into beginning that journey.

Wagner's *Ring* shows us the power of imagination on an epic scale, so let us not be daunted by this task but be emboldened to go forth in a similar epic fashion, and bring the power of Wagner to new audiences and generations. ~ Katrina Kimpton



R.I.P. Peter Hall 22.11.1930-11.9.2017

Peter Hall was a distinguished theatre, opera and film director, described by *The Times* as the most important figure in British theatre for half a century.

He established the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1960 in Stratford and set up its London home at the Aldwych theatre. Hall was appointed director of the National Theatre in 1973 and led the organisation for 15 years until 1988. He supervised the move from the Old Vic to the new purpose-built complex on London's South Bank, in the face of widespread scepticism and violent union unrest, turning a potential catastrophe into the great success story it remains today.

Peter Hall was also a celebrated opera director, having

worked at many of the world's leading houses including the Royal Opera House Glyndebourne, Metropolitan Opera in New York, Houston Grand Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Bayreuth Festival, where he, with conductor Georg Solti, directed the *Ring Cycle* in 1983 to honour the centenary of Wagner's death. The production was played until 1986. Apparently the 'British *Ring*' was plagued with problems from the start. Solti and Hall believed that the *Ring* should be done in segments, say, two in one year and two the next. Wolfgang said "No!" So, on with the show. This time a traditional production after the radical Boulez/Chereau *Ring*. Solti only conducted the first year in 1983. He was booed, and left Bayreuth, never to return.

Hall stated in an interview, "We decided to risk it. We made a mistake. You cannot do it. The history of every *Ring* is first year a disaster, second year some acceptance, third year success, fourth year deification and fifth year mythology. That is the way it goes, but I'm very glad I did it."

Professor Kerry Murphy's 'Thomas Quinlan and the All Red Ring'

Professor Kerry Murphy, head of musicology at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne, gave a fascinating talk to members for our spring meeting on 8th October at MLC's Flockart Hall.

Professor Murphy's particular research interests are 19th Century French music criticism and music in colonial Australia. 'Thomas Quinlan and the All Red Ring' was about English entrepreneur Thomas Quinlan's travelling opera companies' two extraordinary tours of 'Greater Britain' in 1912 and 1913, singing "in English to English-speaking peoples all the time, never leaving the red portions of the geographical map". Quinlan aimed to perform nine *Ring Cycles* in six months across the United Kingdom and its dominions in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

She described how Lyster in 1877 put on 19 performances of *Lohengrin* in Australia, sung in Italian, only two years after the opera's London debut. When the Great Exhibition was on in 1888, visiting conductor Frederick Cowen presented many Wagnerian orchestral overtures and excerpts to Melbourne audiences.

In 1913, travelling on the liner the SS Orsova, Thomas Quinlan brought 162 singers, 60 chorus and 55 orchestra as well as stage hands, scenery and costumes to Australia. They

had a repertoire of 55 operas. It was a cohesive team who had toured the English provinces previously and who had four months of rehearsal time. Their breathtaking schedule included 14 difference performances in a fortnight. Compromises had to be made: for example in orchestra parts and also cutting performances short so patrons could get the last tram home.

The herculean logistics of the tour were incredible. The aim was to please the public but as well, in the patronising terms of colonial Britain, to "lure people forward" at the same time. It was recognised that there was a great openness to new ideas in Australia.

Quinlan planned to return to Australia in 1915. This did not eventuate, the war and financial challenges intervening. It was not until the 1950s that Australia finally had a professional opera company, which by then was not prepared to take risks.

Professor Murphy has a vibrant storytelling lecture style. Her anecdotes and cartoons brought to life the opera experiences of Melburnians prior to World War I. It also made us appreciate how spoiled for choice we are in the current era with an international marketplace of Wagnerian operas.

~ Susan Cumming



Professor Kerry Murphy at the podium



Trevor Clarke with Kerry Murphy and Janice Carpenter

Members' R.I.P.



Ila Vanrenen:

A member since March 1995. A very enthusiastic and passionate follower of Wagner's music.

Barbara Niven: A member since 1988.

Rees McCarthy: A member since the 1980s and keen opera-goer. GP from Moonee Ponds.

R.I.P. Sir Jeffrey Tate

28.4.1943-2.6.2017



Jeffrey Tate was a wonderful and inspiring artist in the world of classical music. He overcame considerable disability as a result of spina bifida, which left him with a kypho-scoliosis and partial lower limb paralysis. This did not prevent him achieving a

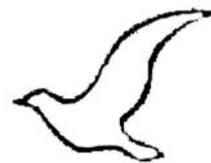
40-plus year career in opera and symphonic music, conducting brilliantly and passionately works by Mozart, Wagner and Richard Strauss.

He originally studied Medicine at Cambridge, qualified as a doctor, and completed his resident years at St Thomas's Hospital in London, where he trained as an eye specialist. He then studied music at the London Opera centre, and went on as a repetiteur at Covent Garden, where he worked closely with George Solti. He later assisted Karajan at Salzburg, and then helped with preparation of singers for the 1976 centennial *Ring* at Bayreuth. He went on to conduct his own *Ring* in Paris in 1994.

He will be well remembered as the brilliant conductor of Adelaide's *Ring* in 1998, the first in modern times in this country. He followed this with a marvellous *Parsifal* in Adelaide in 2001. Before that he had been principal conductor at the Royal Opera House, and more recently took the baton for the 2011 *Flying Dutchman* there. He later spent most of his time in Europe, especially in Germany and Italy.

Despite a somewhat frosty relationship with Britain, he was appointed CBE in 1990, and was knighted earlier this year.

He died of a heart attack in Bergamo, Italy.



Bayreuth news



Barrie Kosky became the first ever Australian and Jewish director of a Bayreuth production when he presented *Die Meistersinger* at the festival this year. The production was a huge success from all reports, and there will be a member review in the next newsletter.

In 2013, the 200th birthday of Richard Wagner, Kosky declared a ban of Wagner's works in his new house. Katherina Wagner asked him to direct *Meistersinger* soon after, and he initially refused. She asked him to reconsider, and after looking further into the work, he accepted the challenge. It was a highlight of this year's festival, receiving rave reviews.

In other Bayreuth news, Plácido Domingo will conduct three performances of *Die Walküre* next year. Domingo has previously performed the role of Siegmund, but this will be the first time he has conducted the work. His Wotan will be Matthias Goerne, making his debut in the part, with Catherine Foster as Brünnhilde, Stephen Gould as Siegmund, and Emily Magee as Sieglinde. This is a departure from the standard, where the *Ring* has always been performed in its entirety.

Next year's festival will open with a new production of *Lohengrin* as staged by the Israeli-American director Yuval Sharon, with sets by the internationally acclaimed German artist Neo Rauch. Roberto Alagna will make his *Lohengrin* debut, marking both his first foray into Wagner and his debut at the

Festival. Alagna will be singing opposite distinguished German soprano Anja Harteros in the role of Elsa. Harteros is replacing Anna Netrebko, who was initially invited but claims that she cannot memorise German. The veteran mezzo soprano Waltraud Meier will be appearing as Ortrud, one of her most celebrated interpretations, with Christian Thielemann at the podium. Thielemann, then, will have set a record, conducting 10 of Wagner's works there.

Wagner Societies are provided tickets to performances towards the end of the Festival around 24 August to 29 August. As mentioned, there will not be a full *Ring* in 2018 but there will be performances of *Die Walküre* from the Frank Castof production of the *Ring Cycle*, conducted by Plácido Domingo.

The new production of *Lohengrin* will not be performed during the time our Society will be allocated tickets. In 2018 there will be an opportunity to see performances of *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Die Walküre*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Parsifal* and *Tristan and Isolde* (conducted by Christian Thielemann).

The Bayreuth cartel is branching out. This year we had the first Australian director, Barrie Kosky, and next year, the first American, Yuval Sharon. What next?

New Ring production

There will not be a full *Ring* production at Bayreuth in either 2018 or 2019. A new production will be staged in 2020, to be directed by Dmitri Tcherniakov, a Russian theatre director.

Rings to come

Dresden: Two *Ring Cycles* in January/February 2018, conducted by Christian Thielemann

Leipzig: Three cycles in January, April and May 2018

Munich: Three cycles with Kirill Petrenko conducting. Nina

Stemme, Wolfgang Koch, Stefan Vinke and Jonas Kaufman as Siegmund in Cycle 3 only.

UK, Covent Garden: Keith Warner's production will be revived for the third time, with three cycles in September, October and into November 2018. Again with Nina Stemme and Stefan Vinke.

USA, San Francisco: Three cycles from 12th June to 1st July. Francesca Zambello directing, with Donald Runnicles conducting. Greer Grimsley, Evelyn Herletzius, and Daniel Brenna in main roles.

~ Stan O'Loughlin

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