



WE'VE GOT A FRIEND

Thanks to the persuasive powers of Margaret Medlyn, Wellington members of the WSNZ will have the opportunity to get to know the well-known Wagnerian conductor Lionel Friend (*above right*) at a meeting on 2nd May. Lionel, who is here to conduct the NBR New Zealand Opera seasons of *The Marriage of Figaro* has agreed to talk about his work in conversation with Margaret.

Lionel Friend was educated at the Royal College of Music in London, where he won all the major conducting prizes. Following private study with Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt and Sir Colin Davis, he made his *début* in 1969 conducting *La Traviata* with Welsh National Opera and until 1972 was also conductor and chorus-master for Glyndebourne Festival Opera and Glyndebourne Touring Opera, specialising in Mozart. For the next three years he was Kapellmeister at the Staatstheater in Kassel, Germany.

On returning to the UK, Lionel Friend held the position of Staff Conductor to English National Opera from 1976 to 1989, conducting more than thirty different productions and working with such producers as Jonathan Miller, Joachim Herz, Götz Friedrich, Harry Kupfer, Richard Jones, Keith Warner and

Graham Vick. At ENO he also assisted conductors such as Charles Mackerras and Reginald Goodall (*above left*), a highly influential musician with whom Friend collaborated on all his Wagner productions in London.

For two years Lionel Friend was part of Daniel Barenboim's team for *The Ring* at the Bayreuth Festival and in 1992 also acted as his assistant with the Chicago Symphony in a major Mozart project.

He was Assistant Conductor for South Australia's *Ring* cycles and *Parsifal*, conducted *Götterdämmerung* in 2003 at the Perth International Arts Festival, and in 2006 a production of *Tristan und Isolde* with Susan Bullock for West Australian Opera. In 2008 he made his *début* with Opera Australia conducting *Arabella*.

Margaret Medlyn reports that 'Lionel has already sent me a curiosity to learn for this interview – the cut verse of the Immolation scene!! He says it's a real rarity, and he's pretty confident that no one in NZ will have heard it before!!'

This presentation will be another opportunity to hear about the world of Wagner from the inside.

(*This replaces the meeting of 25 April*)

Sunday 2 May 4.00pm

St Andrew's on the Terrace, Wellington

THE VIEW FROM THE STAGE PART 2

What do the Prince & Princess of Wales, Albert Schweitzer, Anton Bruckner, Isadora Duncan & Mark Twain have in common? The answer is Bayreuth. They were all visitors to the Festival between 1882 and 1914. In part 2 of his talk, *The View from the Stage*, Chris Brodrick will look at the diverse collection of people who made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear Wagner's operas performed in his own theatre. Find out how a piece of cake ended up in a drawer full of the Master's silk shirts, why Puccini failed to get an introduction to Cosima and how an eccentric English aristocrat cajoled her friends into singing Mendelssohn, (yes! Mendelssohn!), part-songs during evenings when there was no performance.

Friday 16 April 7.30pm

Theatre A6, Uni. of Canterbury



Bayreuth visitors Sergei Rachmaniniov & Henry Wood at a concert in London in 1938.

ELRIC HOOPER IN DUNEDIN

Elric Hooper will present his talk on *The Evolution of Wagner Production* in Dunedin on 11 April at 2.00pm. He has already given this talk to great acclaim in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. Elric is a regular contributor to Concert FM where he demonstrates a prodigious knowledge of the Arts and, in particular, the history of theatre. Do get to hear this talk!

Sunday, 11 April 2.00pm

Sale-Black House, Uni. of Otago



WAGNER GALA CONCERT

WELLINGTON 5 MARCH 2010

Wellington was at its best! The sun shone down, the air was still and Wagner was being performed at the Michael Fowler Centre. What more could you ask for on a late Summer evening? Wagnerians from all over the country had assembled to hear New Zealand's next great singer, Simon O'Neill, perform excerpts from *Lohengrin*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung* & *Parsifal*. The concert, which doubled as the launch of Simon's debut CD, *Father & Son*, was always going to be a 'taster' and there were times when one felt as though one was left hanging as the music stopped in mid flight. On the other hand the 'pot pourri' had unexpected delights. To hear the sublime music from *Parsifal* after the *Ride of the Valkyries*, albeit with an interval in between, was like moving between two different worlds. A very strange sensation! It was also interesting to hear *the Ride* in concert, with an orchestra 'in the open', and to really hear the complexity of the piece!

The concert was ultimately to showcase Simon's talent and what an abundance he has. From the moment he took the stage he came across as relaxed and in full control. One was immediately aware of the clarity of his diction and the ease of his delivery, with no hint of strain. Couple this with his instinctive musicianship and you can see why all the great conductors and opera houses are queuing up to engage him. New Zealand now has another great Wagnerian and it was fitting that our first singer in the genre, Sir Donald McIntyre was in the audience to hear his protégé. While Simon has prodigious talent he also possesses humility. During the concert he took time to thank his family, teachers and particularly Sir Donald for all the help they have given "to the career I seem to be having".

With a contract to sing *Parsifal* at Bayreuth in 2011, Simon's career is well on the way and we, the members of the WSNZ, are in for a great ride!

Chris Brodrick

MY CAREER SO FAR

Les Holborow reports on Simon O'Neill's Wellington presentation.

Wellington Members were delighted when Simon O'Neill agreed to talk to us about his career so far on the Sunday between his appearance in the Mahler Eighth Symphony and his Wagner concert with the NZSO the following week. He had offered to accompany himself on the piano but Terence Dennis came in with an offer to do this and to play the Busoni transcription of the Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung* to add to the sense of occasion. Then Simon and Terence agreed that things would go even more smoothly if Terence interviewed Simon on an agreed range of topics.

But things do not always go smoothly, in the world of singers especially. One of Simon's young twins had greeted him at a recent airport reunion with a healthy sneeze to such effect that when Simon arrived in Wellington for the Sunday event he had to report that his voice was in a precarious condition. A quick consultation confirmed that plans to include singing in the presentation should be scrapped and be replaced by more interviewing, and by Simon illustrating points on the piano. As a result, we received an extended account of Simon's career, full of anecdotes and of acknowledgements to those many people, both here and overseas, who have assisted him to achieve the eminent position which he has now reached.

Foremost among these was Sir Donald McIntyre, who was able to attend the NZSO concert and obviously enjoyed meeting those representatives of several branches of the WSNZ who were able to attend the post-concert function. Several distinguished singers at the Sunday

event to whom Simon referred included Margaret Medlyn, Keith Lewis, Richard Greager and Emily Mair (Simon's teacher at Victoria University).

Terence Dennis played marvellously as we had expected and also showed a deep knowledge of Wagner and of Simon's key performances, a surprising number of which he had been able to attend. One of the best stories concerned an audition at Bayreuth where Simon was asked to sing a section from *Lohengrin* for which he had not been given notice. When Simon prudently, but still somewhat courageously, said that he could do it if they gave him a score the Wagner family representative laughed and responded that he could sing from the autograph copy if he wanted to!

Overall the event painted a picture of a young singer of immense talent who is generous, grateful to those who have assisted him (including WSNZ), keen to retain his New Zealand connection and conscious that, if he is to achieve further success over the longer career that we must all hope for, he must plan carefully and take on roles as he becomes ready for them, not necessarily as soon as he is asked. He promised to reward us for not having heard him sing on Sunday at the concert the following Friday, and he certainly delivered on that promise.

For those wishing an even more detailed report on this meeting, Lindis Taylor has posted one on his web site www.middle-c.org.

2013 WAGNER BICENTENARY COMPETITION FOR COMPOSERS

The Wagner Society in Queensland invites composers who are permanent residents of Australia or New Zealand to create an instrumental chamber work to celebrate the 2013 bicentenary of the birth of Richard Wagner (1813-1883). The Society is offering a prize of \$10,000 plus a public performance and a recording of the selected work.

The competition is for a chamber work of approximately 10 minutes duration for either a single instrument or a combination of instruments, quoting or otherwise making use of one or more themes from the stage works of Richard Wagner. The deadline for submissions is 30 June 2012 and the winning composition will be announced in December 2012.

More information including detailed terms of the competition and an application form are available at www.wagnersociety.com

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:
Alastair & Susan Stokes..... *Christchurch*
Marion McCree..... *Wellington*
Susan & Alfons des Tombe *Wellington*

BAYREUTH TICKETS

If any members of the WSNZ are interested in obtaining tickets for the Bayreuth Festival they should contact the Secretary of the WSNZ, Michael Sinclair, who will put your name on the list. Each year tickets are allocated by the Society, firstly in the order that members applied and then on the basis of seniority of membership. A request for tickets doesn't commit you as, if you are unable to attend in the year you are offered tickets, you may pass and let someone below you on the list take up the offer. Your name will remain on the list for the next year.

Contact details:-

Mail: WSNZ, PO Box 99826,
Newmarket, Auckland 1149

Phone: (09) 528 0776

Email: msinclair@xtra.co.nz



Wagner's Erard Piano, now at rest in the Tribschen Wagner Museum, Lucerne.

WAGNER THROUGH THE PIANO

On 18 April, Heath Lees will be presenting *Wagner through the Piano* at the Auckland meeting. Heath says the subject is fascinating and often surprising, given Wagner's hot-and-cold attitude to the instrument. When he was being rude, he called it a musical laboratory rather than a musical instrument and claimed that, by comparison with the human voice or even the orchestra, it was a failure.

Yet Wagner wrote a number of pieces for the piano, and much of the music for his operas was clearly written in 'sketch' form at the piano – you can tell by the way the notes lie so easily under the fingers. He travelled everywhere with a sturdy Erard grand piano that he had almost tricked Erard's widow into donating and, in later life, he was often pictured seated at the piano (though his piano-playing was only rudimentary).

The second part of Heath's talk might be called "Wagnerism through the Piano" since it explores how Wagner's music was introduced to others through the piano, which was used to teach, to demonstrate, and to win 'converts' in private gatherings and in amateur circles. Heath will also look at the kinds of transcriptions that people have produced, from Wagner's day until now, and he will describe the rise of the all-important wagneriste "showman-pianist" in Europe.

Some hilarious send-ups of Wagner by pianists young and old will be included, and Heath promises lots of examples and illustrations, with some (sometimes rare) video and audio excerpts, not to mention the occasional, spontaneous burst of live piano-playing.

Sunday, 18 April 7.30pm

School of Music, Uni. of Auckland

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2010 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 18 April 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St

Wagner through the piano -

Heath Lees traces the rise of the 'Wagner-pianist' from Wagner himself until today

Sunday, 23 May 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St

Annual General Meeting - Wagner's Birthday celebrations

Sunday, 11 July 4.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St

Tristan & Isolde – Robert Gambill and Nina Stemme in Nikolaus Lehnhoff's Glyndebourne production

Sunday, 5 September 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St

The Operas Wagner almost wrote -

Peter Bassett gives a behind the scenes look at Wagner's creative mind

NB: A \$10 fee will apply

Sunday, 5 December 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St

Wagner Pot Pourri

A Christmas celebration: An evening of requests, roundups, selections and surprises

Wellington

Sunday 2 May 4.00pm

(NB. change of date & programme)

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace

Lionel Friend talks with Margaret Medlyn

Sunday 11 July 10.30am

Venue: Paramount Theatre

Tannhäuser - 1978 Bayreuth Festival production. (In association with NZ Opera Society)

Monday 6 September 7.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace

The Operas Wagner almost wrote -

Peter Bassett gives a behind the scenes look at Wagner's creative mind

2010/11 Membership

Included with this newsletter is an application form for 2010/11 membership. We sincerely hope that you will want to rejoin the Society and enjoy the programmes and trips that we offer.

Why not invite someone you know to join up as well!

Christchurch

Friday 16 April 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

View from the Stage Part 2 -

Chris Brodrick continues his look at the Bayreuth Festival audiences. Part 2 is from 1882 -1914

Friday 21 May 7.30pm

The home of Cynthia Hawes & Andy Buchanan, 74 Hackthorne Rd, Cashmere
Pot Luck Dinner for RW's birthday.

Friday 3 September 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

The Operas Wagner almost wrote -

Peter Bassett gives a behind the scenes look at Wagner's creative mind

Friday 8 October 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

The Life of Max Lorenz -

John Pattinson will introduce a DVD on the life of a Wagnerian tenor of 1930-40s, Max Lorenz

Sunday 28 November 6.00pm

Venue: To be confirmed

Christmas BBQ

Dunedin

Sunday, 11 April 2.00pm

Venue: Sale-Black House, Department of Music, The University of Otago

The Evolution of Wagner stage

production - Elric Hooper speaks about the evolution of stage production of Wagner's operas

Sunday, 23 May 12.00 noon

Venue: The Savoy, 50 Princes Street

Wagner: Transition and Railway Trains

- Professor John Drummond looks at the coincidence of Wagner's development of a new awareness of musical time and space at a time when he made important railway journeys.

With lunch to honour Wagner's birthday

Sunday, 12 September 2.00pm

Venue: Marama Hall, University of Otago

Wagner And German Tradition -

Baritone Roger Wilson, with pianist Terence Dennis, brings the historical context to vivid life in a lecture/recital

Sunday, 7 November 1.00pm

Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum

Die Meistersinger At The Met: Acts 1 & 2

Otto Schenk's production of Wagner's comic opera from The Met, New York, conducted by James Levine

Sunday, 5 December 1.00pm

Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum

Die Meistersinger At The Met: Act 3

And our end-of-year Christmas celebration with *Meistersinger* Act 3

HILDEGARD BEHRENS

1937 – 2009

Lack of space in previous newsletters precluded a look at the life of the great German soprano Hildegard Behrens who died of an aortic aneurysm aged 72 in Tokyo, Japan in the middle of last year.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest Wagnerians of her generation, Behrens was born on February 9 1937 in Varel, Germany, graduating from the University of Freiburg as a junior barrister before becoming serious about her talents as a singer.

After studying at the Freiburg Academy of Music she began her musical career singing small roles at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf, where she stayed for six years during which time she graduated into bigger roles. Then in the 1975-76 season, while rehearsing *Wozzeck*, she was 'discovered' by Herbert von Karajan, who was then looking for his new Salome. She was summoned to Berlin to audition for the role. Karajan liked what he heard and invited her to sing the role at the 1977 Salzburg Festival where she achieved international stardom, earning fame as one of the few singers to win an argument with the autocratic maestro.

With Leonard Bernstein, she made an unforgettable recording of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in three sessions between 1980 and 1981, giving birth to her daughter just six weeks before the third act was committed to disc.

In the 1983 Bayreuth *Ring* she stole the show as Brünnhilde, dressed in shiny black leather and sequined studs, looking to one writer "like a Saint Joan calling her amazon army to battle".

Despite her captivating stage presence she was not without her detractors who would unkindly compare her with Brünnhildes of old; indeed, she was destined to sing forever in the shadow of Birgit Nilsson, who herself had suffered from not being Kirsten Flagstad.

In a tribute in the Guardian, Germaine Greer goes straight to the heart with such an honest assessment of this great singer that it is worth quoting in full.

'Hildegard Behrens is dead – only two years older than I am, and felled by an aneurysm in Japan, far from her Vienna woods. She is the reason I gave up going to performances of the Ring. I don't want anyone else's Brünnhilde to blur my memory of her doing it with the Vienna State Opera in April 1996. In her obituaries over the last fortnight, there has been a great deal said about her intelligence, her insight, her occasionally dodgy vocal quality – all of it true, but somehow missing the mark. She was sublime. What that means is that she was occasionally ridiculous. Her Tosca was ridiculous – on video, that is. You



Photo: Met Opera Archives

Hildegard Behrens as Brünnhilde in the Ring can't – sorry, couldn't – get what Behrens was doing if you weren't seeing her live in an opera house, and sometimes not even then. It was partly a matter of the scale of her performance, which you're not going to get if you're poking a video camera down her throat. You're not going to get it at the Met either, because the Met is just too vast. I don't know what premonition sent me to Vienna that spring, but I am so glad I scraped together enough money for a good hotel and the occasional sachertorte mit schlag. Hildegard Behrens changed forever my understanding of the art of singing opera.

I had always been a stickler for perfect intonation, floating tone slicing its way through the orchestral texture by force of sheer purity, even in the most dramatic of operas. I thought Joan Sutherland had it pretty right, as she shaped ineffable ornaments like a craftsman cutting diamonds, each grace note perfectly in tune. You mightn't have been able to distinguish Sutherland's words in any language, but you never misunderstood the emotional colour of what she sang. She could add plangency that was heartbreaking, without straying from the middle of the note. Behrens was the opposite, a kamikaze pilot of a singer. Hers was an unadorned scream of a voice. As it rocketed through the winding and unwinding, leaping and bounding orchestral motifs, it was electrifying. Sometimes it burned up on re-entry; sometimes it crashed in a succession of hoarse gasps. At times like those, Behrens was ridiculed and even humiliated in the music press. By the time I went to see her perform in Vienna, she was losing her nerve. What was worse, because of the way she used her voice, it had begun to shred.

*I found myself in the middle of the third row for all four operas. Donald Runnicles was conducting *The Ring* at the Vienna State Opera for the first time. When Behrens came on stage as Brünnhilde, I was momentarily aware that she was small and physically unimpressive, and rather too vain about the honey-blond curls – her own – that bounced over*

her shoulders. What I wasn't prepared for was the white-hot intensity of her concentration. She struck a pose at the beginning of each musical phrase, and then, keeping her body utterly motionless, launched her voice. There was no fiddling with her spear. No butch posturing. She was so far inside the music that, if her costume had fallen off, she would not have reacted.

The opera house surrounded her singing as a frame surrounds a picture; as each motif was completed, it hung in the mind as if it had been drawn in light. Then she changed her position, and the process began again. As phrase built on phrase, I felt as if I had never heard that familiar music before. I learned then that pretty is enjoyable – but sublime exists on another level, beyond comfort, somewhere at the edge of the world.

*Behrens had sung Brünnhilde to James Morris's Wotan many times before, notably when she made her debut in the role at the Met in 1990. Runnicles's unsentimental insistence on strict tempo suited her much better than had James Levine's traditional schmalz and schwärmerei. On Runnicles's firm orchestral armature, she erected a performance so shattering that, in act three of *Die Walküre*, even Morris was moved to a point where his voice turned gruff. From my seat in the third row, I could see him struggling with the lump in his throat.*

*After the performance, the word went out that Behrens was exhausted and terrified of singing in *Götterdämmerung*. The friends I was with went back to London, but I hung on, hoping against hope that she would put herself through it again. After a Siegfried in which Brünnhilde was sung by a soprano who is now singing all over the place, but whose fussy performance served to demonstrate how unutterably superior Behrens was, I ran up and down the opera house asking the attendants if they thought Behrens would sing in *Götterdämmerung*. They said: "This is her opera house. We will take care of her. She will sing." And she did.*

There is no chance that I will see a Brünnhilde so utterly destroyed, so uncompromisingly tragic ever again. I would have thought it impossible to show such a depth of devastation and helplessness in music, but Behrens did it. How she did it – whether by her utter absorption, her rapt earnestness or her lack of self-consciousness – I shall never know. Never to have seen her do it would be never to have understood how a preposterous musical drama, with absurdly affected DIY verse for a libretto, could be transmuted into the highest of high art.'

*Behrens can be seen on DVD as Brünnhilde in Otto Schenk's Met *Ring*, conducted by James Levine.*