



HALFWAY TO THE STARS . . .

San Francisco Hosts *The Ring* in June



The War Memorial Opera House, Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco (Photo: Joel Pulatti)

It's looking good for those who signed up on the WSNZ trip to the San Francisco Ring. Those from Christchurch and Dunedin will escape the cold, Aucklanders will get away from their eternal winter rain and Wellingtonians will no doubt fly off in a brisk southerly. But what do we know about our destination city of San Francisco — and what do we know about its illustrious opera company? Liz Lees has done the research and tells all:

The story of the San Francisco Opera Company (SFO) is one of progress and success from the moment of its foundation in the early 1920s. It was still a fledgling company by the time the great depression knocked most US cities for six, but luckily, San Francisco survived the crisis pretty well. Much of its major infrastructure was put into place during the pre-WW1 period and so solid was its financial base that not a single San Francisco bank failed during the depression. In fact, the famous Golden Gate and Oakland Bay Bridges were constructed at this time, as well as the full-scale conversion of a military barracks into the infamous Alcatraz prison.

There were difficulties at the opera — there always are with opera companies — but thanks to the

boundless energy of its first General Director, Gaetano Merola, the company which he founded in 1923 grew steadily. Born in Naples, Merola was a conductor who managed to convince wealthy residents to contribute generously to the new company, and a few short years after its foundation, the SFO was on its way to establishing its home in the War Memorial Opera House where it still resides today.

Early opera performances were mostly Italian, but by 1927 the company had already staged local premieres of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*. After moving in to the new War Memorial Hall, Merola produced the first *Ring Cycle* with Kirsten Flagstad no less, in 1935. (She was back again with Lauritz Melchior for *Tristan und Isolde* in 1937.)

In 1953, Merola died as he had lived, conducting an orchestra, but he had already provided for a smooth transition to his deputy, Kurt Adler, who had arrived in 1943 as a conductor and choral director. Like Merola, he would be at the helm for nearly 30 years and these two long tenures ensured that SFO achieved its

important place in the international operatic scene.

One of Adler's strengths was his interest in new singers, especially young Americans. His reputation carries on through the Merola Opera Programme which provides training for singers, coaches and directors. He also developed strong associations with directors such as Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in order to strengthen dramatic and theatrical aspects of the works staged. (Ponnelle will be remembered for his sublimely beautiful production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Bayreuth in 1981.)

Though Adler's tenure was reputed to be rigorous it was also full of exciting tales of 'rescue' replacements like Placido Domingo who, in the 1970s, was rushed in at three hours' notice for the first night of *Otello*. An interesting Kiwi connection began in 1972 with the arrival of New Zealander Sarah Billingham first as a volunteer but finishing 22 years later as Artistic Administrator, at which point she was head-hunted by the Met Opera in New York. Some members may remember her as Director Joseph Volpe's deputy when the WSNZ took a group to the Met's *Ring Cycle* in 2000.

This was also an interesting time for the whole San Francisco region as it underwent a transformation from an industrial centre into the more touristy place that we know today. It lost about 10% of its population due to a lack of jobs, and demographically changed from being predominantly European to being about half European, with a third of its population being Asian and the other 20% Afro-American and Hispanic. Other dramatic changes took

Membership Renewals

2018-19 membership renewal forms are being sent out at the same time as this newsletter. The Society is *all of us* — the more the better — so please do complete the form ASAP. We have another great year lined up and we want you to be part of it.

Also, please also consider a donation to the charitable arm of the Society, the Wagner Foundation.

place with the spectacular rise of the internet and the dot.com boom. Companies like Apple and Google arrived in Silicon Valley and the world was never the same again . . .

Director Kurt Adler was succeeded by Terence McEwen, who quickly put a Wagnerian stamp on the house with a *Ring* cycle in 1983. He had a reputation for seeking out the finest singers and improving facilities for their work and training. He set up the San Francisco Opera Centre and introduced the first super-titles.

After McEwen came Iranian-born 'Lotfi' Mansouri. From the beginning of his reign in 1988, he leaned towards modern American operas such as *The Death of Klinghoffer* by John Adams and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by André Previn.



Alas, it was during Mansouri's time that San Francisco suffered the 6.9 Doma Prieta earthquake in 1989 which left the opera house badly damaged. A magnificent, classic-revival style building which had staged hundreds of operas over the years, it had also been the historic site for the San Francisco Conference of 1945, a world meeting that eventually saw the birth of the United Nations. With the weight of history on his shoulders, Mansouri set about the huge task of overseeing the reconstruction and renovation of the opera house. It took nearly two years and \$90m but the result was a seismically strengthened, technically perfect building.

Many other parts of San Francisco were badly damaged in the earthquake but the iconic cable cars hardly missed a run. Built in the 1880s, they are the world's last manually operated cable car system. Members going to SF will be able to take advantage of the route that runs along California Street, just a few blocks from the opera house.

At last, a woman. Following Lotfi Mansouri, Pamela Rosenberg appeared as the new director in 2001. Bravely she tried to follow Mansouri's lead, but her *avant-garde* operas drove away both opera-goers and donors. Her time was short-lived and she was replaced in 2006 by David Gockley who came from Houston Grand Opera. Big names and big operas returned to the repertoire, and needless to say, Wagner opera played its part. The individual

operas of Francesca Zambello's *Ring* cycle began in 2008 and in 2011 the whole cycle was performed. Her emphasis is on an 'American' context, and she tries to highlight humanity's degradation of the natural world — a theme that also ran through Neil Armfield's Melbourne *Ring* Cycle.

Gockley stayed as director till 2016 when the current director, Matthew Shilvoek, took over. An Englishman, Shilvoek is passionate about opera with Wagner and Strauss high on his list of favourite composers. He holds an all-embracing view of opera as a 400-year-old art form that must be continued and renewed.

The Zambello *Ring* does just that.

Ring Cycle Forum Presentations in San Francisco

Three *Opera Forum* sessions will be held in the Wilsey Centre for Opera, Veterans Building, 4th Floor, 401 Van Ness Ave (next door to the Opera House).

Saturday, 16 June – 10.30am to 3.30pm

Peter Bassett.....Wagner's Theatres
Desirée Mays.....*Das Ende*: The Endings of the *Ring*
Simon Williams.....The 'Deep State' of the *Ring*

Saturday, 23 June – 10.30am to 3.30pm

Heath Lees.....Getting to Grips with the *Ring* (Sessions 1, 2 & 3)

Saturday, 30 June – 10.30am to 3.30pm

Speight Jenkins.....Creating a *Ring*
John Mastrogiovanni.....Brünnhilde: The Liberator Liberated
Jonathan Khuner.....Wagner's Mistakes:

Ticket price (including boxed lunch): WS members US\$55, others US\$65.

Buy tickets at <https://sfopera.com/ringfestival>.

The WSNC is also organising a *Ring* Cruise on San Francisco Bay on Monday, 25 June – 11.45am to 2pm. Tickets are at: <https://www.wagnersf.org/content/special-events> (NB. When you get to the check-out page, scroll to the bottom to make your menu selection – salmon/steak/vegetarian.)



ALEX ROSS COMES TO NEW ZEALAND

Alex Ross, the brightest star of today's writers on music, will be visiting this country from 17 to 30 May. One of the main attractions at the Auckland Writers Festival, Ross is also teaming up with mezzo-soprano Bianca Andrew and Chamber Music New Zealand to present a nationwide series of concerts of chamber music from the 20th and 21st centuries.

As much at home with the heaviest metal as he is with the tiniest minimalism, Ross shook the musical world in 2007 with his now-famous book *The Rest is Noise*, an epic overview of every sort of 'contemporary' music. He then followed this up in 2011 with an equally eye-opening — sorry, ear-opening — book entitled *Listen to This*.

Not only is Ross a (guarded) Wagnerian, he is currently engaged in defining what that might mean through his forthcoming book *Wagnerism*. Not surprisingly, the subject of his lecture in Auckland is simply entitled "On Wagner". No doubt it will be as fascinating as everything else he touches (his feisty *New Yorker* articles frequently steer into Wagnerian seas, and he is fast becoming an accepted authority on the composer).

As you might expect, his book on the mighty subject of *Wagnerism* is taking a bit of time. In fact, the organisers of the website *The-Wagnerian* recently contacted him, saying cheekily that they couldn't stand the suspense any longer and when might it appear? Ross politely sent them a photo of his cat Minnie (below) standing guard over thirteen completed chapters, with a hint that the final two chapters won't be long now.



Those who can't wait might catch Ross here in NZ. His Auckland talks are 17-20 May, and his presented concerts around the country can be found in the current *Chamber Music NZ* brochure.

AGM — 20 May 2018

FORMAL NOTICE

THE WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND AGM IS TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY 20 MAY 2018 IN ST HELIERS COMMUNITY CENTRE, 100 ST HELIERS BAY ROAD, AUCKLAND, AT 7.00PM.

So far, the following Committee and Office-Bearer nominations have been received:

President Chris Brodrick
Vice-President Ken Tomkins
Secretary..... Peter Rowe
Treasurer Jeanette Miller
PR/Liaison..... Gloria Streat

Committee:

John Davidson
Lesley Kendall
Juliet Rowe

If you wish to make a nomination, phone Peter Rowe at 021 610 869, or e-mail to: info@wagnersociety.org.nz, to be sent a form.

Nominations can also be made from the floor at the meeting.

New Members

A *fortissimo* Wagnerian fanfare for the following new arrivals:

Kay Shacklock..... Auckland
Grant & Lynda Walter..... Auckland

Wagner Murmurs

Michael Sinclair has heard that: Anna Netrebko says that she will not sing any Wagner roles other than Elsa (in *Lohengrin*).

The Metropolitan Opera will revive three cycles of its Robert Lepage *Ring* in April and May, 2019.

WSNZ Website

Worth Checking Out!

Don't forget to visit the website for the Society at wagnersociety.org.nz.

The updated site contains a lot of general information about the Society and details of upcoming meetings for each of our four centres.

There are also links to all our newsletters going back over ten years, plus links to useful Wagner sites around the internet, including links to other worldwide Wagner Society sites.

In addition to being a great tool for members it is also an excellent starting point for potential new members so be sure to pass the link to friends who might be interested in the Society.

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2018 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 15 April at 7.00pm

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre*

Terence Dennis: Weber and Wagner, Dresden Kapellmeister

Wagner called Carl Maria von Weber his 'spiritual father'. Terence will introduce music Wagner wrote for the Dresden interment of Weber's remains, plus excerpts from his masterpieces *Der Freischütz*, *Euryanthe* and *Oberon* — all within the context of Wagner's early works

Sunday, 20 May at 7.00pm

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre*

AGM & The Golden Ring

The Wagner Society's 'official round-up' for last year, plus the 1964 BBC film on the first-ever complete recording of *The Ring* (the 'Solti Ring')

Sunday, 12 August at 7.00pm

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre*

Peter Bassett: Die Meistersinger — Models, Motivations and Misconceptions

A look ahead to Melbourne's *Meistersinger* in November. What was Wagner's motivation, and what were his models for characters, text and music?

Sunday, 30 September at 3.00pm

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre*

Heath Lees introduces a complete opera - TBA

Sunday, 9 December at 7.00pm

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre*

Christmas Potpourri

Dunedin

Sunday, 22 April at 2.00pm

Venue: *Black-Sale House Lecture Room*

Terence Dennis: Deep In The Forest — Wagner's Siegfried

Terence Dennis discusses Wagner's musical and dramatic response to the doomed hero of the Nibelungen Saga. The presentation includes excerpts from noted productions on film, along with scenes from *Die Nibelungen*, Fritz Lang's 1924 silent film.

Sunday, 24 June at 10.30am

Venue: *Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room, 192 Castle Street*

Terence Dennis: A Memorable Parsifal

An illustrated concentration on Wolfgang Wagner's beautiful staging of Wagner's final masterwork in a 1990s Bayreuth production

Sunday, 9 September at 2.00pm

Venue: *Black-Sale House Lecture Room*

Heath Lees: Rosenkavalier: A Match-Maker between Mozart and Wagner

A full afternoon's tour of *Rosenkavalier* showing how Strauss blended Mozartian elegance with Wagnerian effects

Sunday, 25 November at 12.00pm

Venue: *Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row (Turn Right off Pitt Street)*

Christmas Luncheon followed by Wagnerian Goodies including Kirsten Flagstad on film and Herbert von Karajan rehearsing a number of sections from *Die Walküre*...



Christchurch

PLEASE REMEMBER NEW VENUE

Friday, 18 May at 7.30pm

Venue: *The Music Centre, St. Mary's Pro Cathedral, Manchester Street*

Roger Wilson: The 1990 NZ production of Die Meistersinger

An illustrated presentation on the 1990 NZ Festival production of *Die Meistersinger* in which Roger sang the role of Fritz Kothner

Friday, 17 August at 7.30pm

Venue: *The Music Centre, St. Mary's Pro Cathedral, Manchester Street*

Peter Bassett: Die Meistersinger — Models, Motivations and Misconceptions (See Auckland 12 August)

Friday, 7 September at 7.30pm

Venue: *The Music Centre, St. Mary's Pro Cathedral, Manchester Street*

Heath Lees: Rosenkavalier: A Match-Maker between Mozart and Wagner

A full evening's tour of *Rosenkavalier* showing how Strauss blended Mozartian elegance with Wagnerian effects

Sunday 14 October - Venue & time TBA

Complete DVD of *Die Meistersinger* with a meal between acts

Sunday 2 December - Venue & time TBA
Christmas BBQ/Pot-Luck

Wellington

Sunday, 29 April at 4.00pm

Venue: *St Andrews Church*

Heath Lees: Rosenkavalier: A Match-Maker between Mozart and Wagner

(See Christchurch, 7 September)

Sunday, 17 June at 4.00pm

Venue: *St Andrews Hall*

Terence Dennis: Weber and Wagner, Dresden Kapellmeister

(See Auckland's 15 April programme)

Sunday, 8 July 2018, 11.00am

Venue: *Boutique Cinema, 2nd Floor, Te Auhaha-New Zealand Institute of Applied Creativity, Dixon St (corner of Dixon & Cuba St.). Enter from Dixon St.*

Götterdämmerung: Joint Opera Society/Wagner Society screening

Sunday, 19 August at 4.00pm

Venue: *St Andrews Hall*

Peter Bassett: Die Meistersinger — Models, Motivations and Misconceptions

(See Auckland 12 August)

Sunday, 28 October at 4.00pm

Venue: *St Andrews Hall*

John Drummond: The Most Notorious Chord in the World — the 'Tristan Chord'

What this unique chord is all about, how Wagner came up with it, and why it is so appropriate to the story of the opera.

Ernest Newman — A Critical Biography

A new book by Paul Watt is reviewed by Heath Lees

As soon as I started to read Paul Watt's new book I realised my mistake. I had assumed that any biography of Ernest Newman (1868-1959) would devote much of its space to Wagner. After all, Newman produced four mighty volumes of the best Wagner biography ever to appear in English. It consumed twenty years of his life and left him feeling like an empty shell, but it was, in Desmond Shawe-Taylor's words, "a masterpiece [that] ranks among the dozen or so finest biographies in the language".

Newman didn't stop there. In addition to his *Life of Wagner*, he wrote other books on the composer, and repeatedly spotlighted him during a forty-year stretch as music critic for *The Sunday Times*. In fact, Newman often became identified with Wagner no matter what he was addressing. For the critic's obituary, Deryck Cooke relayed a nudge-nudge verse that had been doing the rounds as an arty little clerihew:

*Next week, said Ernest Newman,
I shall write about Schumann;
But when next week came,
It was Wagner, just the same.*

Watt thinks he'll get a clearer assessment of Newman's intellect if he simply detaches Wagner from the equation. The book, he says firmly (p.2), "is not a book about Newman the great Wagnerian" (my italics). So, for a good part of the way, Wagner's presence is deliberately ignored, like the proverbial elephant in the room. Only in the last ten per cent of the text is he finally released, to regain his place in the centre of Newman's viewfinder.

But having achieved the Herculean task of pushing Wagner out of the way, Watt now widens his gaze to reveal things about Newman that we never knew. So we learn of his gradual emergence out of 19th-century Freethought circles, thanks to his mentor the rationalist John M. Robertson. We are told of his passion for developing 'scientific' music-criticism to replace the loose opinion-pieces of the day. We discover that he completed other biographies — Gluck of course, but also Elgar, Richard Strauss and Hugo Wolf, plus an embarrassingly ill-judged life of Liszt. We read about his on-again off-again crusade on behalf of British music, his lukewarm treatment of most French composers, and his views on music education and the contemporary music festival movement.

All of this covers more than seven decades, from the 1890s to the threshold of the 1960s, and it makes for absorbing reading. But one has to ask: how important is it at the end of the day in the cultural scheme of things? The fact is that, divorced from Wagner,



Ernest Newman, aged 32

Newman's so-called 'European' profile becomes very indistinct, and his judgment of other European composers (Liszt for one, Schoenberg for another) goes frequently off the rails.

Certainly, Newman did possess important European links but Watt is forced to gloss over them, since they will inevitably rouse Wagner from his induced sleep. One such link is glimpsed through the critic's long friendship with EMI's celebrated record-producer Walter Legge, a connection that also brought Newman in touch with Legge's wife Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and the Wagner family itself. Watt features an intriguing photo of a lunchtime company at Bayreuth that includes Walter Legge, Ernest Newman, and Wieland Wagner. The year is 1951, the



Ernest Newman, Iris Wagner, Gertrud Wagner, Walter Legge and Wieland Wagner

actual year of Wieland Wagner's re-opening of the Festival in the wake of the Nazi hijack. What part did Newman play in this crucial Wagner revival? We don't find the answer from Watt's book, but we do know that when Newman retired from *The Times*, Wieland Wagner

offered an eye-opening acknowledgment of his backstage contribution at the time:

I owe to Ernest Newman what one may perhaps describe as the 'scientific' basis of the new Bayreuth. Newman's deep understanding of the personality and work of Richard Wagner has, in its relentless objectivity, guided the intellectual and artistic course of the Bayreuth Festival since 1951."

How the reader aches for more information! How much more light could have been thrown on Bayreuth, and Newman's many other German connections! But all of them bring direct links to Wagner, so this book determinedly looks away.

The chief casualty of Watt's Wagner-avoidance is the movement we know as English Wagnerism, a movement in which Newman played a long and considerable part — beginning at a time when Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley roamed the land, and those who came out in support of Wagner were treated as though they were in league with the Devil. Over two generations, Newman provided solid and approachable facts about Wagner, he unashamedly rubbished the Master's more outlandish ideas, but he always evangelised on behalf of the beauty of his epic sounds and the uniqueness of his fusion of words and music.

The trouble with Watt's otherwise excellent book is that it tries to detach Newman from both Wagner and English Wagnerism in order to gain a clearer

view of the critic's own intellectual growth. Alas, it becomes a case of baby and bathwater, since both character and identity tend to disappear in the process. For Newman, who thought of himself as 'a new man in earnest', this situation seems disappointingly bloodless.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2017/18

For the Wagner Society of New Zealand, the year 2017/18 was 'relatively' quiet. While the number of meetings was consistent with previous years, twenty-two between the four centres, there was a lull in the extra activity such as overseas trips and domestic performances of Richard Wagner's works. To an extent, this was understandable as the celebrations in 2013 that surrounded the bi-centenary of Wagner's birth were inevitably going to die down and allow us to catch our breath. But do not get too relaxed as 2018 has plenty in store: a San Francisco *Ring*, *Die Meistersinger* in Melbourne and, in exactly a year, the WSNZ twenty-fifth anniversary for which we already have plans! The generally low-key 2017/18 year was marked by a significant increase in the number of tickets to Bayreuth that we were allocated by the Wagner Verband (The International Association of Wagner Societies). The nine sets of tickets we were able to offer members was a huge increase in the two sets we had received in previous years and resulted in a strong WSNZ presence at the 2017 Festival. While the increased allocation of tickets is to be welcomed, as more of you now have the chance to attend the Festival, it does not come without a problem, namely, how many tickets does the Society purchase for members? As this decision has to be made before we receive any commitment from those members who wish to attend the Festival there is a certain amount of risk involved. On the one hand we do not want to have to ask the Verband to take, the already paid, tickets back and on the other, the Society cannot afford to be left with unsold tickets. Consequently, the WSNZ will apply for an allocation based on the number of members who have shown an interest in obtaining tickets offset against the knowledge that not all of those members will be able to attend in that particular year. It would be helpful, therefore, if you could let Peter Rowe know, that you would like Bayreuth tickets at some point in the future, as early as possible. Remember a declaration of interest does not bind you to purchase tickets for any specific year but it is vital information for the Society to have when deciding on the number of tickets for which we should apply.

The administrative task of ticket allocation and the person assigned to keeping the wheels of the Society running, falls into the very capable hands of WSNZ Secretary, Peter Rowe. While that job alone deserves our heartfelt thanks,

Peter's commitment to the WSNZ goes deeper. He chairs the Wagner New Zealand Foundation with members Sir Michael Hardie Boys, Heather Simpson and Terence Dennis, holds the position of WSNZ honorary solicitor and, through Minter Ellison Rudd Watts provides the conference call facilities that enable the national committee to hold its meetings four times a year. Overseeing our finances are Treasurer Jeanette Miller and auditor John Hambling while the remainder of the national committee includes Ken Tomkins (Vice President), Juliet Rowe (Minute Secretary), John Davidson (Wellington), Gloria Streat (Christchurch), Lesley Kendall (Dunedin) and myself. But while the national committee oversees the running of the Society and provides the legal framework, it is in the four branches where the real activity takes place. Acknowledgment for this work must go to Ken Tomkins, John Davidson, Gloria Streat and Lesley Kendall who, with their supporters, Juliet & Peter Rowe, Jeanette Miller, Richard Green, David Colemore-Williams, Helen Kirkman, Liz Lees, Tibby and Adrian Simcock, Anne Mallison, Michael Ashdown, John Pattinson, Jenny Lee, Elizabeth Cooch, Terence Dennis and Louise Kilby, ensure the smooth running of the society. Indeed, in order for those meetings to take place, there must be a reason to convene. The very fact that after 24 years the WSNZ remains strong is a reflection on the quality of our meetings and the dedication of the presenters to find interesting topics about Richard Wagner.

After 14 years, and approximately 80 issues, I decided, late last year, to step down from my role producing the newsletter, prompted by my move to become a full-time student. I am grateful to Heath Lees who has volunteered to be my replacement and I urge every member, particularly those who travel to overseas productions, to share your thoughts through the newsletter by submitting material to Heath. The mix of voices, rather than the solo, results in a far more invigorating read. Acknowledgement must also be made to Michael Sinclair who not only regularly contributes to the newsletter but also looks after the website and can usually be found at the organising centre of our forays overseas.

On behalf of all WSNZ members, I wish to sincerely thank all those mentioned above for the contributions they have made in making our 24th another stimulating year.

Christopher Brodrick