

## Kiwi Icons in the Wagner World

It's a busy time for two of New Zealand's most famous Wagner singers: **Sir Donald McIntyre** and **Simon O'Neill**, pictured (right) backstage at the Staatsoper, Berlin, where Simon had just finished singing the role of Siegmund in *Die Walküre*.

Sir Don has been patron of the Wagner Society of New Zealand since it began. He will be 85 this year, and is now celebrating the launch of his memoirs entitled *The Only Way is Up*. Simon, a generation younger at 48, is marking the release of his new CD *Distant Beloved*, which includes a rare tenor-voice version of Wagner's *Wesendonck-Lieder*.

Sir Don (b.1934) turned his back on a blossoming career in rugby when he left New Zealand in 1958 taking with him two major qualities: a glorious voice and a dauntless Kiwi determination.

After years of continuous success at UK opera houses such as Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden, Don gravitated more and more towards Wagner roles, and in 1966 was invited to audition for Bayreuth. There, for nearly twenty years, he was a star performer, gaining world-wide fame as Wotan in the Chéreau *Ring* of the 70s and 80s.

Singing on-stage right into his eighties, Sir Don became a highly sought-after opera star, and has only



Wolfgang and Eva Wagner with Donald McIntyre. Bayreuth, 1978. (Photo: Peter Coates)



recently accepted retirement. His memoirs, whose publication the WSNZ has masterminded, cover fifty years in the history of opera and are fascinating, instructive, and entertaining – sometimes very funny.

The WSNZ is now playing a major part in the book's preparation and arrival. It will hold a series of birthday celebrations throughout the country, all of them providing a platform for the release and distribution of *The Only Way is Up*. The book will be available at 30% discount to WSNZ members, and Heath Lees will present a video tribute to Sir Don's fifty years 'in the business'. Simon O'Neill is free to come to the Wellington meeting, which will add lustre and excitement to these events. (His recent double-act there with trombonist David Bremner was a runaway success.) Check the programme listings overleaf to see the times and arrangements for your centre. You won't want to miss this!

### AGM — 19 May 2019

#### FORMAL NOTICE

THE SOCIETY'S AGM IS TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY 19 MAY 2019 IN ST HELIERS COMMUNITY CENTRE, 100 ST HELIERS BAY ROAD, AUCKLAND FROM 6.00-6.30PM.

Committee and Office-Bearer nominations so far 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

To make a nomination, phone Peter Rowe at 021 610 869, or e-mail to: [info@wagnersociety.org.nz](mailto:info@wagnersociety.org.nz), to be sent a form. Nominations can also be made from the floor at the meeting.

### DISTANT BELOVED

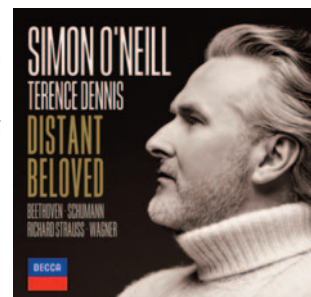
SIMON O'NEILL (TENOR) WITH TERENCE DENNIS (PIANO)

Simon O'Neill's *Distant Beloved* CD (with another WSNZ member, pianist Terence Dennis) has had much praise heaped upon it since its recent high-profile launch at a gala concert on the Dallas Opera stage.

Exchanging the clarion call of the heldentenor for the expressive world of lieder, Simon begins the disc beautifully with Beethoven's song cycle *To the Distant Beloved* and ends it with a gender-neutral *Wesendonck Lieder* (Wagner).

In between are nine rapturous songs by Richard Strauss and two famous ones by Schumann.

Wonderful!



# YEAR'S PROGRAMME DETAILS

## Wellington

Venue: St Andrew's Hall, 30 The Terrace (except 9 June and 14 July)

**Sunday, 19 May at 4.00pm**

*Cities that have Championed Wagner*

Michael Sinclair reviews centres that have provided special events and festivals for Wagner's work.

**Sunday, 9 June at 4.00pm. NOTE: St Andrew's Church**

*The Only Way is Up*

Twenty-fifth birthday celebrations and Sir Donald McIntyre book launch and video retrospective with Heath Lees. Simon O'Neill is also keen to come, if he can, and 'toast' Sir Don.

**Sunday, 14 July at 11.00am**

NOTE Venue: Te Auaha; NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon St.  
*Rienzi the Last of the Tribunes*

Joint meeting with the Opera Society. Full DVD screening.

**Sunday, 21 July, at 4.00pm**

*Lohengrin*

Antony Ernst, artistic director of the Royal Danish Orchestra, presents a two-hour session on Wagner's "Romantic Opera".

**Sunday, 13 October at 4.00pm**

Documentary film screening, details to follow.

**November/December/Date TBA/ End of year party.**

## Dunedin

Venue: Black-Sale House Lecture Room, cnr. St. David and Leith Streets

**Sunday, 26 May at 2.00pm**

*The Only Way is Up*

Twenty-fifth birthday celebrations and Sir Donald McIntyre book launch and video retrospective with Heath Lees.

**Sunday, 20 October at 2.00pm**

*Don Juan in Hell*

*Mozart, Ibsen, Wagner, and George Bernard Shaw*

Chris Ackerley weaves a tapestry that joins this quartet through two semi-serious wagnerian parodies by the great GBS himself.

**Sunday, 24 November at 12 noon**

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

Our Christmas lunch date followed by goodies à la Wagner.



## Is your name on the 2020 list for Bayreuth Tickets?

Later this year we will be informed of the number of tickets we are to be allocated for the 2020 Bayreuth Festival.

If you would like to obtain tickets for this event, you should contact the WSNZ Secretary, (Peter.Rowe@minterellison.co.nz) to request that your name be added to the new list that Peter is now preparing.

Please do this, even if you think your name is already on the existing list. We need to make absolutely sure that there are no omissions and that member details are always up to date.

If your name has already been noted but you now know that you can't go, please contact Peter to have your name removed.

Thanks in advance.

## Wagner Murmurs (whispered softly by Michael Sinclair)

- Christine Goerke will sing *Isolde* in a concert performance of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* in New York in November 2019.
- The Paris Opera will embark on a new *Ring* cycle next year culminating in two complete cycles in November/December 2020. Calixto Bieito directs and leading singers include Iain Paterson (Wotan), Martina Serafin/Ricarda Merbeth (Brünnhilde), Andreas Schager (Siegfried), Jonas Kaufmann (Siegfried) and Eva-Maria Westbroek (Sieglinde).

- Simon O'Neill will sing his first *Tristan* with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in June 2020. Simon is already booked to sing *Parsifal* at the Bavarian State Opera in April 2020.

## New Members

Simon Kane ..... Christchurch  
Bruce and Elizabeth McMillan.....Dunedin

## Christchurch

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

**Friday, 24 May at 7.30pm**

*The Only Way is Up*

Twenty-fifth birthday celebrations and Sir Donald McIntyre book launch and video retrospective with Heath Lees.

**Friday, 19 July at 7.30pm**

*Tristan und Isolde*

Antony Ernst, artistic director of the Royal Danish Orchestra presents a lecture on *Tristan und Isolde*, the opera to be screened on 13 October.

**Friday, 13 September at 7.30pm**

*Magic Fire*

William Dieterle's 1955 film of the life of Wagner. Alan Badel plays the composer and Erich Korngold arranges the music.

**Sunday, 13 October, Afternoon Time and Venue TBA**

*Tristan und Isolde*

DVD screening with a meal between the acts.

**Sunday, 1 December, Evening Time and Venue TBA**

*Christmas BBQ/Pot-Luck*

## Auckland

Venue: St Heliers Community Centre, 100 St. Heliers Bay Road

**Sunday, 14 April at 7.00pm**

*The Tristan Chord*

Heath Lees replaces John Drummond to examine "the most notorious chord in the world" and to introduce the first act of Bernstein's DVD *Tristan und Isolde*.

**Sunday, 19 May at 6.00pm. Please note earlier time**

*The Only Way is Up*

A celebration of the 25th birthday of the WSNZ and a tribute to Sir Donald McIntyre, whose book of memoirs is now being launched. The AGM precedes the launch, with a finger-food buffet and cake at the end.

**Sunday, 14 July at 2.30pm. Please note afternoon time**

*Lohengrin in Perspective*

Antony Ernst flies in from Denmark with a packed, four-hour presentation on *Lohengrin*.

**Sunday, 22 September at 3.00pm**

*Lohengrin*

A full screening of the opera plus optional catered dinner.

**Sunday, 8 December at 7.00pm**

Festive fare of Wagner items, plus our famous cake and wine.

# Looking Back on Twenty-Five Years of Membership

Liz Lees asked five of our long-standing members for a few personal reactions to the following questions:

•Why did you join the Wagner Society of New Zealand? •What have you got out of it? •What will you be looking forward to?

## John Hall (Auckland)

*John and his late wife Pam attended the inaugural meeting of the Wagner Society in Auckland on 22 May 1994. Following the meeting they became foundation members . . .*

“The Halls needed no urging to join the Wagner Society of New Zealand 25 years ago. We had both caught the Wagner bug in our formative years, with early memories of ‘wireless’ recordings. We would listen, totally rapt, to thrilling excerpts from all the principal operas.

Pam (later a committee member) and I always looked forward to WS meetings where we usually watched an act from one of the operas, following an introduction by Heath. Later, as branches of the society were established in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin, we enjoyed presentations by other members.

Two events stand out. The first was a rare opportunity to attend one of the annual *Ring* cycles at the Wagner Mecca in Bayreuth. The second was of an unforgettable visit, with other members, to the New York Met, again for a *Ring* cycle.

The next 25 years? At some point, whilst wishing the Society every success, we will (hopefully) both be at the ‘pearly gates’, enjoying a grandstand view of the Gods entering Valhalla across the Rainbow Bridge”. That’ll be something!”

## Lesley Kendall (Dunedin)

*Lesley joined in Auckland in 1995. Her encyclopaedic knowledge of all things secretarial immediately cast her in the role of Minutes Secretary. She headed south in 2007, and has been brilliantly masterminding the Dunedin centre.*

“Although I was familiar with some of Wagner’s music, the first Wagner opera I saw in London was *The Flying Dutchman*. I was blown away, and went to many more.

Years later a friend said there was a Wagner Society in Auckland. I joined, and much enjoyed the experience before shifting to Dunedin. There, the first U3A course I attended was presented by Terence Dennis and covered Wagner’s first four operas. A couple of years later Terence released his *Liszt and Wagner Piano Works* CD and together with Heath Lees, the Wagner Society in Dunedin was launched, ten years ago.

Thanks to Terence’s knowledge the members and I have learned a great deal more and appreciated other visiting presenters’ views and aspects of Wagner. In terms of the future, I just hope this will all go on so that we can learn still more about Wagner’s musical genius.”

## Jonet Ward (Christchurch)

*Jonet and her late husband Tony were part of the first Wagner Society tour group to the Bayreuth Festival in 1996. They were both very involved members of the Society and Jonet continues to be an eager traveller to Wagner events, often with Gloria Streat (centre co-ordinator in Christchurch).*

“While attending John Pattinson’s University Extension lectures on *The Ring* in 1995, Tony and I learned of the possibility of tickets for New Zealanders to go to Bayreuth in a group. To enter the ballot for tickets we had to join the New Zealand Wagner Society. No problem — more of a bonus! We were lucky with tickets and in 1996 we went with the group to Bayreuth. There we saw not only *The Ring* but also *Die Meistersinger*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*.

Through my membership of the Christchurch branch of the Wagner Society, its programme of talks and DVD recordings, plus several of its Wagner trips to Australia, I have gradually learned a great deal about Wagner’s life, and gained a fuller enjoyment of his music.

I look forward to more of the same in the future.

## John Davidson (Wellington)

*In 1995, John joined the Wagner Society and has been the centre’s co-ordinator for some years now. An inveterate traveller, he has been on nearly all the Wagner Society trips and many of his own besides. His book of Wagner poems (“Visions of Valhalla”) appeared in 2016.*

“I was encouraged to join the Wagner Society by that wonderful Wagner enthusiast John Morrison. But I needed little persuasion because I had fallen under Wagner’s spell while living in London between 1966 and 1969. During that time, I heard my first Wagner performances, conducted by the likes of Georg Solti and Reginald Goodall. Joining a Wagner Society back in New Zealand was an obvious step.

During my membership, I’ve most enjoyed meeting kindred Wagner spirits, not only from New Zealand but also from other countries. It has also been a great pleasure hearing knowledgeable and enthusiastic speakers on a wide range of topics; reading the informative Newsletters (and occasionally being able to contribute my own material), and participating in organised trips to other countries, especially to Bayreuth (I’ve now been four times, and it’s always simply magical).

What will I look forward to in the next 25 years (or less!) with the Wagner Society? Easy. Further presentations by excellent speakers; possibly further trips; further informative newsletters; further participation in Wellington events especially; further Wagner Society-sponsored performances; further welcoming of younger members (hope springs eternal).”

## Margaret Thomas (Auckland)

*In a sense, Margaret has been with the Society since before it was born. A childhood friend of Donald McIntyre and a long-time supporter of everything Wagnerian, Margaret and her husband Ted have been attending Wagner performances all over the world.*

“Since singing in the school choir at age 14 (the Pilgrims’ Chorus from *Tannhäuser*) I have had a lifelong love of Wagner’s music and am still learning.

It hardly seems twenty-five years since the *Beethoven Abend* concert at the Maidment Theatre when Heath Lees announced to a keen audience a proposal to form a New Zealand Wagner Society. Anyone interested could meet in the courtyard after the concert. I think I was the first there! I had no idea what a Wagner Society did, apart from listening to his music — but that itself would have been enough for me.

There followed twenty-five years of the most enjoyable, memorable and sometimes electrifying occasions, both in New Zealand and overseas. They have been simply marvellous due in large part to the knowledge and experience of Heath Lees, and his ever helpful wife, Liz. Above all, I remember all the friendships made through the Society. These have been specially rewarding and enduring.

Thanks to all in the WSNZ — and thank you Richard.”



# That Amazing 1990 *Meistersinger* in Wellington

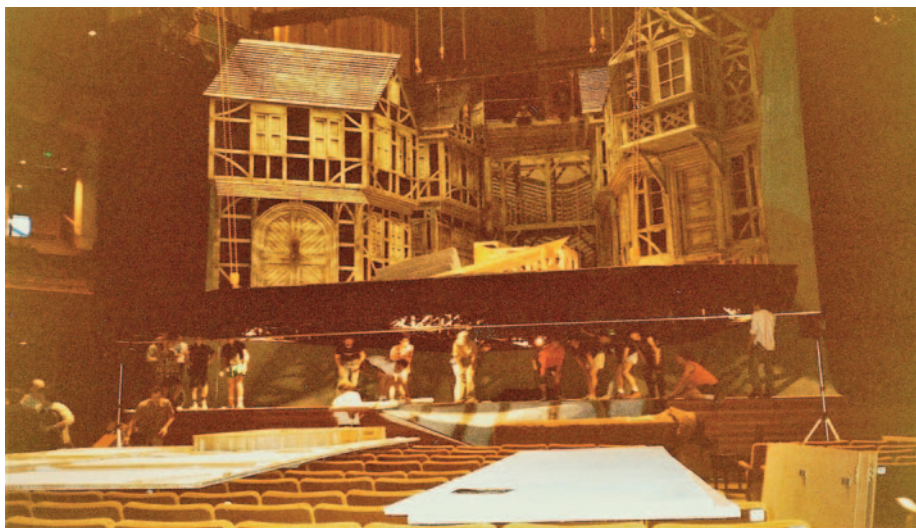
In the second of four instalments, Roger Wilson (Fritz Kothner) re-tells the story

Once Chris Doig and his team had finally cast the projected *Meistersinger*, another huge problem awaited them: where in Wellington could such a massive opera be staged? The State Opera House was too small, the St. James not yet renovated. The Michael Fowler Centre it had to be. But the MFC was never intended to be a theatre; there was no proscenium, no orchestral pit, no suitable loading dock.

Doig and his technicians were undeterred. They planned for huge cranes to be brought in so that the massive sets could be dropped in from the ceiling then raised out of sight. This included an ingenious lighting scheme whereby lights hung under the floor of the second act set so that when it was aloft it lit the third act far below.

It became clear that the roof would need special strengthening. In addition, there were several near-disasters: the second act set, a faithfully reproduced Nuremberg street scene, stuck fast about two metres above the stage for some days as the crew frantically worked to free it. People had to work on while the huge construction hung overhead. In one stage rehearsal, one of the huge towers in the Act 3 Festwiese scene toppled over, requiring frantic repairs. Another night the Tannoy fold-back system failed during the riot scene of Act 2, making it even more riotous than usual.

And yet, for all that, the performances ran with astonishing smoothness and indeed the stage manager assured me that there were



Nibelheim dwarves work frantically to erect the *Meistersinger* Act 2 set in the Michael Fowler Centre

far fewer glitches with the production than there had been in Australia.

Surprising that, when you consider not just the staging obstacles but the musical ones that needed to be overcome. In the absence of a proper pit, the ninety players of the NZ Symphony Orchestra had to be placed on the floor in front of the stage, spread only three deep, taking up an

extraordinarily wide space. How the conductor held it all together so well at such a distance was a miracle. True, there were a few acoustic issues for some sections of the audience, but from the stage it was fun to be able to see the players so clearly; how different from Bayreuth where the orchestra is invisible!



Conductor Heinz Wallberg (1923-2004)

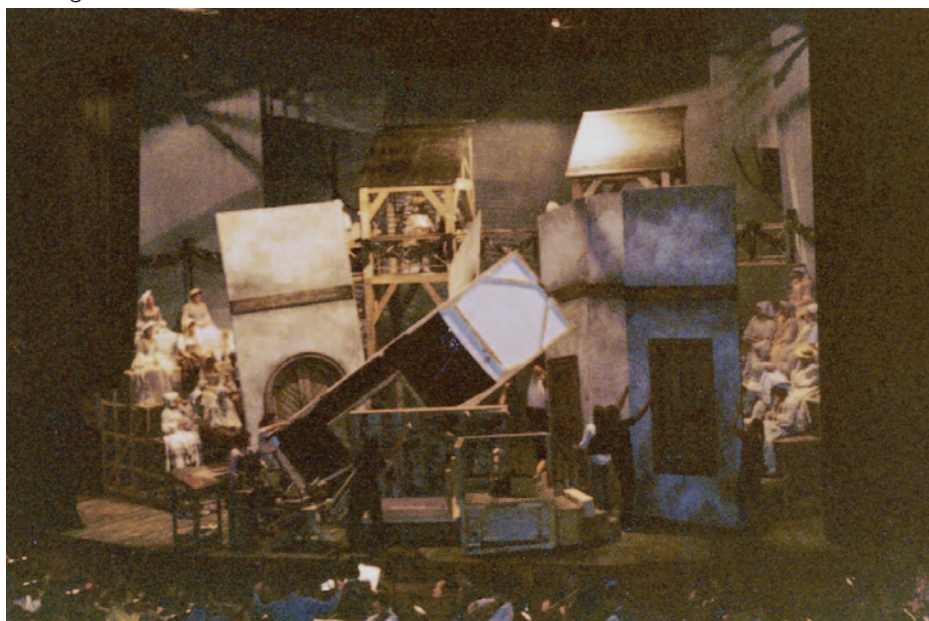
The players were as fascinated by the work as the audience. Concert Master Isador Saslav had memorised his whole score and played over one shoulder so he could keep his eyes fixed on the stage the whole evening.

We had the ideal conductor in the veteran Heinz Wallberg. At least one distinguished New Zealander was very disgruntled at not getting the job, but if he had, we'd never have got past the first act. Wallberg, with his breadth of practical experience, knew exactly how short time was, summed up immediately what could be fixed and what needn't and just got on with what he had.

My clearest memory of him was in my solo in which Kothner reads out the rules of Mastersong. Before the final vocal flourish of cascading triplets Wagner writes a long trill: every night Wallberg looked up, giggling, from the 'pit' and flapped his hands, as if drying nail polish, in case I'd forgotten it. Just once, to my shame, I somehow got a beat out and heard a great rumbling behind me, putting me instantly back on track: Don McIntyre (who had sung my part earlier in his career) had sounded forth and covered it so well that I like to think no one in the audience noticed.

Late summer is usually the time when Wellington's notorious weather is at its most settled, and 1990 saw a glorious Indian summer. What a stroke of luck! Wellington seemed to become just like Bayreuth in August, and it helped to make the whole thing simply unforgettable.

... to be continued



Disaster strikes when one of the giant towers for Act 3 collapses during a late rehearsal