



BAYREUTH: OPERA AND DRAMA

Not many years go by without a Bayreuth controversy and 2016 has been no exception.

At the end of June, writing in the *Boston Globe*, Rebecca Ostriker reported: "Conductor Andris Nelsons (above left) has abruptly withdrawn from this summer's production of *Parsifal* at the Bayreuth Festival."

A statement issued on behalf of Nelsons stated "Owing to a differing approach in various matters, the atmosphere at this year's Bayreuth Festival did not develop in a mutually comfortable way for all parties."

Writing in *Die Welt*, the German critic Manuel Brug speculated the walk-off may have been due to artistic meddling from Bayreuth music director Christian Thielemann. And according to a separate report in the German media, tensions had been rising at the festival, which had increased security measures to guard against potential terrorist attacks.

Replacement conductor Hartmut Haenchen stepped in but his approach,

being different from Nelsons', caused another issue. With three weeks before opening night the singers and orchestral musicians had to make a major readjustment. Haenchen uses the 'original' *Parsifal* score and parts, rather than the 'traditional' Bayreuth orchestral parts which include handwritten notes from years of previous performances. Some of the instrumentalists who know the pieces so well that they can play them by memory now had to look at their parts again. While inconvenient there have been benefits. By all accounts the production has benefited from Hartmut Haenchen's rigorous approach.

Meanwhile American soprano Jennifer Ann Wilson (above centre) was asked to step down from the role of Sieglinde, in *Die Walküre*, over concerns that conductor Marek Janowski had with the lack of vocal contrast between Wilson's Sieglinde and this year's *Ring* Brünnhilde, Catherine Foster.

Bayreuth wouldn't be Bayreuth without some controversy, would it?

ALBERTO REMEDIOS 1935–2016

In June we received the sad news that Alberto Remedios, Siegfried in Reginald Goodall's *Ring* at English National Opera, London, had died at the age of 81. He was a former Liverpool dock worker who went on to study at the Royal College of Music before joining the Sadlers Wells company in the late 1950s. He had been living in retirement in Australia since 1999. We hope to have a special tribute to Remedios in a future newsletter.



PAM HALL

It was with much sadness that we heard of Pam Hall's death on 29 May.

Pam was a foundation member of the WSNZ and served as a committee member/librarian for 3 years.

She and her husband John attended the Bayreuth Festival in 1998 and the New York *Ring Cycle* in 2000. They were inveterate travellers on their own too, setting off on musical voyages of discovery that many of us only dream about.

Among her abundant gifts, Pam had musical talents that she tended to keep quietly hidden. Yet, in her last year at secondary school, her piano-playing had become so impressive that she was chosen as the soloist in a performance of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.21* — the slow movement of which was played during her "funeral and celebration of life".

She was quite simply one of those people that you remember always; in the company of her fellow society members, her enthusiasm for Wagner's music was always accompanied by a wide smile and a ready hug.

Leb wohl Pam, we will miss you.

2016 AGM

At the WSNZ AGM, held in Christchurch on 6 May, the following were elected to the committee:

President Chris Brodrick
Vice President Ken Tomkins
Secretary Peter Rowe
Treasurer Jeanette Miller
PR/Liaison Gloria Streat
Committee John Davidson
Lesley Kendall, Bob O'Hara, Juliet Rowe

HEATH LEES RING DAY LECTURES

DUNEDIN WAGNER SOCIETY, 3 APRIL 2016

Recent new member George Mullenger reports on his trip to Dunedin to hear Heath Lees' Ring lectures.

The day was a wonderful experience. My wife and I came to the lectures as complete beginners and were entranced.

In the first place we enjoyed the consummate ease of a very gifted speaker who was fully in control of his material. The voice, the lightness of touch, the infectious enthusiasm, the sense of leading the audience on a journey that progresses in a fascinating logic leaving the listener so well satisfied because the development is understandable, the motives are clear and the outcomes explained. You can always tell when a performance is hitting the mark by the degree of silence in the audience - and they were wholeheartedly engaged, but also from time to time happily released by humorous asides.

The avowed intention of the speaker was to expose the musical structure and show the music telling the story. In this regard the piano accompaniment was the icing. I have no formal musical education and was therefore particularly grateful to hear and understand musical associations with ideas and events; and subtle distortions to the music where there was a subsequent intention to subvert an idea or event. Also to hear a train of key changes, so quick and skilful, to bring the music to another vista: again effected with consummate ease. Which brings me to my personal favourite moment: when the speaker remarked that music by its very nature permits the imagination freedom to roam. That so obviously puts music on the same level as the written word, which I had not previously thought much about. The fascination of being able to imagine scenes or emotions freely while listening or reading is apparent. But then, for musical drama or staged plays, you now have the basis for judging the visual performance: does it live up to the expectations of your imagination?

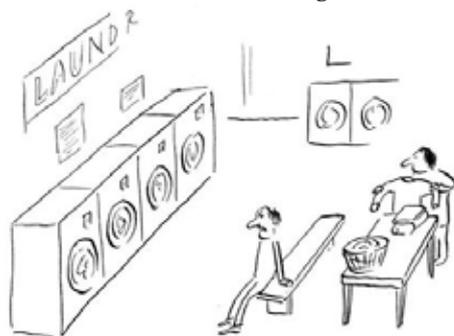
Towards this question the speaker judiciously interspersed his talks with visual material. Video conversations with experienced Wagner conductor Asher Fisch revealed interesting insights. Short excerpts of sung performance brought a dimension which the piano alone could not provide. And still photos taken from various productions raised the important decisions directors face when creating a staged performance. These made us aware that a complex story is being presented, offering a rich field for interpretation. The scope of the



whole enterprise is breathtaking and one must admire the bravery of a director deciding how a staging is to be nuanced to emphasize particular aspects: and tailoring a complete production to that end. Controversy would seem to be unavoidable.

Coming from Christchurch we have to thank and applaud the Dunedin branch of the Wagner Society for mounting this very interesting meeting. Clearly Lesley and her team gave great attention to the details: the very nicely appropriate room, the excellent lunch arrangements and the welcoming congenial atmosphere to name a few. And we must express our appreciation to Professor Lees for giving us such a fine exposition with absolutely no lack of freshness on a topic that he has traversed before.

For ourselves: we came, we listened, we liked it so much that we bought the DVD!



"This is taking forever — I shouldn't have put the load on the Ring cycle."

NEW NOSE FOR RICHARD WAGNER

Berlin-based member Matthias Seidenstücker was recently passing the Richard Wagner Memorial Statue (left) on the edge of the Tiergarten in Berlin when he saw that the base was full of contractors' equipment. He later sent a news clip dated 26 April which gives the information that Wagner himself on his lofty perch, and Wolfram von Eschenbach (from *Tannhäuser*) below who is pointing up to his creator, were to acquire new noses, not to mention some toes, fingers, bits of beard, and buttocks. The statue is being thoroughly renovated, with the work to be completed in May. The new marble comes from the same quarry in Athens from which the original was sculpted. It was unveiled in 1903 and was the work of Gustav Eberlein. The artist Anton von Werner in 1908 produced a painting of the unveiling ceremony which hangs today in the Berlinische Galerie. The weather had naturally caused damage to the statue over time, and some years ago it had been given a protective dome of acrylic glass. This dome will remain and the statue will be given a thorough cleaning.



THE RINSE CYCLE

English based Unexpected Opera took inspiration from a cartoon by artist Pablo Helguera (below left) of a man sitting in a laundrette saying "This is taking forever — I shouldn't have put the load on the *Ring Cycle*" for their new cabaret opera, *The Rinse Cycle*. Described as Wagner's *Ring* conditioned with comedy and shrunk to one evening, it was recently premiered at the Charing Cross Theatre in London to great critical acclaim. *The Stage's* verdict was "Witty, entertaining undertaking which puts Wagner in a spin". Marian Kennedy on the website London Theatre.com wrote "It's a hugely enjoyable evening of fun leavened by the 'best bits' of Wagner...The show ends with the *Ride of the Valkyries* performed in a way that is familiar to us all...sending everyone in the audience of the Charing Cross Theatre home energised and with a smile on their face."

Watch out for it at a Festival near you!

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2016 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 31 July at 7.30pm

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

Singers of the Cosima Era:

Terence Dennis will present this travel back in time and bring to life the great, pre-war Wagner singers who were caught in sound recording

Sunday, 25 September at 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
A Ring Refresher: Heath Lees presents the *Ring* in 2 hours

Sunday 11 December at 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
Christmas Function: Featuring a Pot-pourri of Wagneriana plus our famous cake and wine

Wellington

Sunday, 18 September at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

Wagner and Trains:

Otago University's Professor John Drummond discusses the coincidence of Wagner's development at a time when he made important railway journeys
Christmas Party details to come

Christchurch

NB: Due to earthquake repairs at the University of Canterbury, our usual venue is unavailable in 2016

Friday, 12 August at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Suite, Room P2, Rangī Ruru School, Merivale

Singers of the Cosima Era:

Terence Dennis will present this travel back in time and bring to life the great, pre-war Wagner singers who were caught in sound recording

Friday, 16 September at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Suite, Room P2, Rangī Ruru School, Merivale

Tuba or not Tuba? That is the Question.

Mysterious, misunderstood, and a misnomer, the Wagner Tuba is an essential part of the *Ring* orchestra, and deserves to be better known. Presented by John Pattinson

Friday, 28 October at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Suite, Room P2, Rangī Ruru School, Merivale

Tristan & Isolde....The Classical and Medieval Background.

Presented by John Davidson

Sunday, 27 November

Venue: TBA

Christmas Social Function

Dunedin

Sunday, 11 September at 2.00pm

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

Historical Perspective:

The Mastersingers of Nuremberg

Roger Wilson will present a talk on the 1990 NZ Festival of the Arts production of *Die Meistersinger* which a quarter of a century later is still seen as a watershed in our cultural history

Sunday, 2 October at 2.00pm

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

The Most Notorious Chord in The World

The opening bars of *Tristan und Isolde* introduced the world to the so-called Tristan-chord. In this talk Professor John Drummond explains what the chord is all about, how Wagner came up with it, and why it is so appropriate to the story of the opera

Sunday, 27 November at 12.00pm

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

Wagner: The Dresden Years

A special concert given in the Semperoper, in celebration of the Wagner 200th Anniversary Year, 2013. Jonas Kaufmann sings from *Rienzi*, *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*. Also on the programme is Wagner's early *Faust Overture*, and the overtures to *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*

WAGNER MURMURS

- The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden will mount a new production of *Die Meistersinger* in March 2017, in a co-production with Opera Australia.
- Finnish National Opera will stage a new *Ring Cycle* between 2019 and 2021, to be conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen.
- Simon O'Neill will sing in a concert performance of Act I of *Die Walküre* in December 2016 with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Simon Rattle.
- Katharina Wagner will direct a new production of *Lohengrin* at the National Theatre Prague in June 2017.
- Stuart Skelton was a last-minute replacement for an indisposed Jonas Kaufmann in a concert performance of *Die Walküre* in July in Baden-Baden.

- Michael Sinclair

NEW MEMBERS

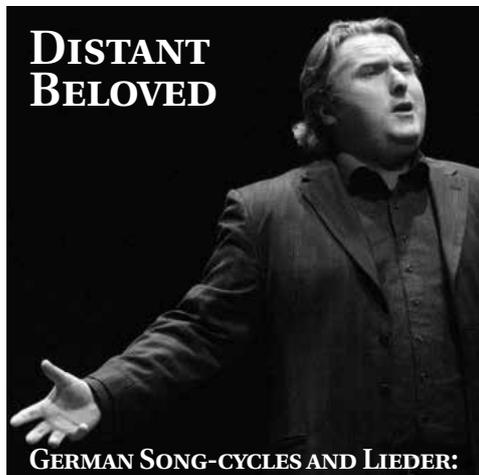
A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Andreas Heuser & Georgia Jamieson

Emms..... Wellington

Susan Court..... Auckland

Roger Noonan Dunedin



Soon to be released on the NZ label, Rattle Records, a recording by two of our recently appointed life members, Simon O'Neill (left) and Terence Dennis (right).

The CD takes its title from Beethoven's Song-cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (*To the distant beloved*), op.98 and includes Lieder of Richard Strauss and Schumann along with Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*.

Although Wagner initially wrote the songs for female voice some male singers have also performed some or all of the songs. Lauritz Melchior recorded *Schmerzen* and *Träume* in 1923, *Der Engel* has been recorded by tenors Franco Corelli (in French), Plácido Domingo, Andrea Bocelli, and the bass Paata Burchuladze.



Simon O'Neill joins Jonas Kaufmann in recording the complete set.

The CD release date is expected very soon.

WSNZ TO RE-JOIN VERBAND

The WSNZ committee recently decided to reapply for membership of the Richard Wagner Verband International, the body that connects all the world-wide Wagner Societies. Over the last few years the Verband has undergone significant reform and is now more inclusive and democratic.

The WSNZ joins a number of our fellow associations, including New York and most of the Australian societies, in returning to the fold.



Original Rhinemaidens



Updated Rhinemaidens



Upstaged Rhinemaidens

UPSTAGING WAGNER – Heath Lees

“Why was Waltraute’s name written on the back of her coat?” We were car-pooling, and a friend was driving us back from the Auckland meeting of the WSNZ, where we had just watched the Valencia *Götterdämmerung* punctuated by convivial meal breaks at the Copthorne Hotel.

His question was a good one. But as someone from the back of the car pointed out, *all* the cast in this production had their names stuck somewhere about them. Gutrune’s name was on her lapel, next to a huge dollar sign that screamed membership of the wheeler-dealer, sharebroking class. Hagen, half-family, half-outsider, had his name firmly pinned to a plastic security pass. Even the dead Siegfried — lying in state as the world awaited cremation — had his name. It dangled on a brown label from the big toe of his right foot; just another anonymous cadaver in a mortuary.

But the question concealed a more searching question, not to mention an exasperated annoyance that the driver was far too polite to express. What he was really asking was “What on earth has all this got to do with Wagner and *The Ring*?”

It’s a question you hear regularly, as theatre directors become increasingly outrageous and Wagnerians become increasingly scandalised. Look at the Rhinemaidens’ pictures above. First there’s Wagner’s original 1876 production with three supported female singers pretending to be swimming in the Rhine. The middle picture is from the Valencia production with water-filled fish-tanks hung by sleek metal cables and abseiling clips. On the right is Neil Armfield’s current Melbourne production with a trio of Vegas-type showgirls who clearly wouldn’t know a Rhine if they fell over one. All three photos seem utterly different, and only Wagner’s seems to have any real bearing upon *The Ring* as we know it.

Anger over theatre-directors’ liberties has become normal nowadays. Much of it is voiced by the world’s Wagner Societies, who often feel that they guard the sacred flame of the Master’s intention against the barbarous ‘creatives’ in the theatre. But there are other villains too, many of them lurking in press reviews, where attention strays from the ideas or the music and becomes just a rant over Schlingensiefel’s

dead rabbits in *Parsifal* or Castorf’s *Ring* aberrations of East Berlin squalor, humping crocodiles, and Valkyrie binge-drinking. But it’s provocative, so it makes stirringly good copy.

Taking indiscriminate pot-shots at Wagner performances happens even in the best circles. A few months ago, in the New York Review, Martin Filler wrote up the Morgan Library & Museum’s 1876 *Ring* exhibition, but used it mostly as a stick for beating today’s stage directors. “It’s hard,” he said, “not to see the Morgan show ... as a rebuke to the antics that have lately turned this landmark of musical theater into an international freak show.”

But maybe it’s all just a matter of degree. Look at it from the director’s point of view. After all, what is the point of just repeating what Wagner did in 1876? To provide an ‘entry-level’ show for those who know nothing about story or background? Is there anyone like that left? In our age, with its horizon of books, internet, CDs, TV docos, Peter Jackson ... even the self-confessed Wagner virgins know plenty about *The Ring* before they get anywhere near an opera theatre.

True, the best theatres can often boast a musical event of the highest quality, but nowadays you can also get that in a concert performance. In the theatre, there needs to be something else; something gripping that adds its own special layers to the story, makes the work come alive, and forces the audience away from passive consumption into active reflection.

This last point has been occupying much theatre-director attention over the last twenty-five years, at least since Susan Bennett led the charge in her pathbreaking study *Theatre Audiences* (1990). In that book, she ‘stole’ the literary scholars’ so-called reception theory that said that a text doesn’t actually have a fixed meaning. The ‘real meaning’ is found in the interpretation that each person draws. When Bennett applied this to the theatre, she concluded that a director’s job is not to re-present a work before a passive, all-consuming audience. Instead, a director must use the work’s performance as a way of creating dialogue between the author, the work, and the audience. Audience-members therefore need to be shaken out of their normal ‘consumers’ role and encouraged

to create their own ideas, drawing on their own background and imagination. So the director needs to build distance in order that this process of dialogue can take place. In theatre terms, it’s what the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht famously called ‘alienation’.

So we’re back where we started. In the Valencia production, Waltraute (and the others) had her name on her back to remind us that she’s just an actor playing a part. It’s a way of detaching her from the unthinking acceptance of a ‘hypnotised’ audience. So is the ploy of having acrobats in tiers, swaying above to represent the tower of Valhalla. So is the endless conveyor-belt production lines that were stretched to infinity by the computer graphics. . . and so on.

For myself, I have few problems with all this nowadays. Sure, I had some reservations, but overall I love the video of the *Valencia Ring*. The real problems arise only when directors get caught up in theatre effects alone, and ignore the fact that *The Ring* is primarily a work of music. As a stage-play, *The Ring* can take any amount of distance, or alienation — or even, as sometimes happens, aggressive self-mockery.

But when you add the music, you are simply unable to distance the audience any more. Music doesn’t distance people, it embraces them — especially Wagner’s music, which goes all out to draw audiences into its emotional course. Thanks to Wagner’s fusion of text and music, his stunning orchestral textures and psychologically loaded themes, the emotional effect will always overcome any amount of ‘alienation’ the director wants to set up.

Today’s Wagnerian anger comes not just from theatre directors being outrageous, but from the needlessly harsh contradiction that occurs between a hostile and objectionable stage production on the one hand, and Wagner’s rich, all-embracing music on the other. Until directors find a way of accommodating the music fully into their productions — however bizarre — they will be addressing only half the problem. Maybe it’s time they stopped issuing challenges to the audience, and started picking up a few challenges on their own account. The most important of these is how to get back to Wagner’s fundamental premise that drama and music must be on an equal and interactive footing. Only then can his work come fully alive again.