



Are the Norns Still Working for Us?? – Wagner Here and There

As 2022 passes its mid-point, the resurgence of Wagner activities continues both at home and abroad, with some genuinely major events, one of which we report on in great detail in this issue. Since May, meetings have again been held in the four main centres, with Wellington catching up on two film presentations that had been delayed for months because of Covid-19. These were the 1989 film of *Tannhäuser* at Bayreuth, as a joint meeting with the Opera Society, followed just two weekends later by a tribute to our patron, Sir Donald McIntyre (in a 1979 TVNZ film directed by Peter Coates, who also attended the meeting in person), and the conductor Simone Young (2008 documentary made in Germany). Both screenings were well attended, and, once again, the Te Auaha theatre was a marvellous, state-of-the-art venue. Meanwhile, Michael Vinten gave a talk in Christchurch, on *Tannhäuser*, while Terence Dennis gave a presentation in Auckland, on Wagner and Meyerbeer; Terence's screening of the 1980 Bayreuth *Das Rheingold* in Dunedin had to be postponed, however.

Here, it is with great sadness that we must also pay tribute to five Society members who have passed away since the last issue. These include Ann Trotter (d. 14 July), former Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Humanities) at Otago University, and a long-time member of the Wellington Branch, together with her sister Judith, while former ophthalmologist, Peter Wellings (d. 28 July), was also a Wellington member for many years, together with his wife Jillian. We send Judith and Jillian our most heartfelt condolences – Ann and Peter will be greatly missed. Notable former member, Murdoch Riley, died on 31 July in Paraparaumu – here, see also

www.audioculture.co.nz/profile/murdoch-h-riley. And two long-time Dunedin members have also left us – Louise Kilby (d. 23 June) and Sam Sneyd (d. 21 July) – once again, our sincerest condolences.

On a much brighter note, Terence Dennis also reports that fellow Dunedin member, Prof. Sir Jim Mann, had earlier been knighted in the 2022 New Year's Honours for his services to medicine . . . this time, our heartiest congratulations!



Jonas Kaufmann in the Melbourne *Lohengrin*
(Photo: Opera Australia/Jeff Busby)

May also saw the long-awaited series of Opera Australia performances of *Lohengrin* in Melbourne's sumptuous State Theatre, featuring star tenor Jonas Kaufmann in the titular role and Tahu Matheson conducting. This was otherwise a co-production with Théâtre

most of the kudos going to the musical aspects of the production. Kaufmann, especially, came in for great praise for his burnished tone, precision, admirable restraint and commanding physical presence. There were highly experienced singers for several other roles too, with Daniel Sumegi as King Heinrich, Elsa Magee as Elsa, and, especially, Warwick Fyfe as the Herald. Australian baritone Simon Meadows and the French-Russian soprano Elena Gabouri were similarly fêted as Telramund and Ortrud, respectively, while Australian Tahu Matheson's conducting was also highly praised, as was the OA Chorus.

Py's production, meanwhile, reset the (nominally tenth-century) action in immediately post-WWII Berlin, where it sought to play up certain aspects of the composer's anti-Semitism and also make a symbolic connection to the Holocaust. Spectacular multi-level revolving sets by Pierre-André Weitz helped, although some reviewers found the extra, grafted-on symbolism gratuitous. That said, given the war in Ukraine, others noted the uncanny timing of the bombed-out sets,

which were all too reminiscent of recently blasted cities such as Mariupol. In his five-star review, *Time Out's* Tim Byrne called Py's staging 'brilliantly lucid'.

Finally, on pages 3–4, Liz Lees and Kay Shacklock report in detail on their trip with husbands Heath and Tony (photo at left) to the terrific Wagner 22 Festival in Leipzig, Germany. Note that Heath will also be presenting a roundup of this festival in Auckland on 14 August. Next issue: Bayreuth (minus Pietari Inkinen, who, unfortunately, came down with Covid . . . with luck, he will be returning to Bayreuth next year!).



In Leipzig! – Tony Shacklock, Heath Lees, Kay Shacklock, Liz Lees

Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, and the original director was Olivier Py. Reviews were generally good to excellent, with

WSNZ – 2022 Programme August to December

NB: All events may be subject to change at short notice, in accordance with the prevailing Covid-19 situation

Auckland

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

Sunday, 14 August at 7:00 p.m.

Round-up of Leipzig's Wagner 22 Festival, plus a showing of *Die Feen* (abridged version) on DVD, introduced by **Heath Lees**.

Sunday, 16 October at 2:30 p.m. (note afternoon time)

A full screening of *Rienzi*, and a catered dinner.

Sunday, 4 December at 7:00 p.m.

The celebratory end to the year: a Wagner 'potpourri', cake and wine.

Wellington

Venue: St Andrews Hall, 30 The Terrace (except where otherwise indicated)

Sunday, 18 September at 4:00 p.m.

Talk by **Terence Dennis**: *Wagner on Wagner*, a presentation of Wagner's concepts of opera as defined in his polemic *Opera and Drama*.

Sunday, 23 October at 4:00 p.m.

Michael Vinten returns with a new talk on Wagner's Grand Romantic Opera based on the medieval minstrel knight torn between the poles of sacred vs. profane love: *Tannhäuser – Wagner's Unfinished Opera?*

Sunday, 6 November at 11:00 a.m. – postponed from last year

Te Auaha: NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street (note venue)

(NB: Opera Society regular programme event, included here for information)
A screening of the controversial 2013 production of *Der fliegende Holländer* from Zurich Opera, with Bryn Terfel as the Dutchman.

November/December

End-of-year party. Date and venue TBA.

Christchurch

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

September/October, further details TBA

Presentation by **Terence Dennis** on Wagner's early opera, *Das Liebesverbot*.

Sunday, 27 November at 4:30 p.m., venue TBA

Christmas function.

Dunedin

Venues TBA (except where otherwise indicated)

Sunday, 14 August at 2:00 p.m.

Talk by **John Drummond**: *Reforming the Reformer*. John discusses Wagner's extensive 1847 revision (with rescoring, a new ending and even some of his own music) of Gluck's first French opera, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, for a performance in German at the Dresden Court Opera.

Sunday, 30 October at 2:00 p.m.

Michael Vinten returns with a new talk on Wagner's Grand Romantic Opera based on the medieval minstrel knight torn between the poles of sacred vs. profane love: *Tannhäuser – Wagner's Unfinished Opera?*

November, date and time TBA – postponed from July

A screening of the complete *Das Rheingold* from the epochal 1976 Centenary Chéreau *Ring* production at Bayreuth, as filmed in 1980, with Sir Donald McIntyre as Wotan – introduced by **Terence Dennis**.

Sunday, 27 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: Carrington College Dining Room and Linten Lounge, Heriot Row
Our traditional end-of-year Christmas event.

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- The Dallas Symphony Orchestra will perform *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (as an 'opera-in-concert' version) in 2024 under the direction of Fabio Luisi. Soloists scheduled at this stage include Christopher Ventris as Siegmund, Stephen Milling as Hunding, Lise Lindstrom as Brünnhilde, Tamara Mumford as Erda, and Valentina Farcas as Woglinde and the Woodbird.
- Simon O'Neill will make his debut as Tannhäuser at Opéra de Lyon in October 2022.
- Between October 2023 and February 2025, a new *Ring* cycle will be mounted at La Monnaie, Brussels by music director Alain Altinoglu and director Romeo Castellucci.

New Members

We are pleased to extend a warm Wagnerian welcome to:

Anthea Palmer.....Auckland

The Ring as a Radio Play



Among several 'modern/alternative' adaptations of Wagner's works that we have come across recently, by far the most satisfying has been a radio play adaptation, by Regine Ahrem for the Berlin-Brandenburg Broadcasting Service, of the full *Ring* as a five-hour, 16-part podcast, available here (in German only): www.rbb-online.de/rbbkultur/podcasts/der-ring-des-nibelungen/. This follows Wagner's text closely, but features modern-style narration and dialogue, spoken by well-known German actors. Lavishly produced, and with clips of Wagner's music and new themes, this is great fun for German speakers.

Wagner 22 Festival – ‘If It’s Tuesday, It Must Be *Lohengrin*’



Oper Leipzig (Leipzig Opera House and Opera Company), Germany

Leipzig, Germany, June/July 2022: With help from husband **Heath** and fellow WSNZ member **Kay Shacklock** (for the Ring), **Liz Lees** offers a whistle-stop tour of an unprecedented stage line-up of ‘Every Wagner Opera Known to Man’

Last June/July saw an amazing, month-long Wagner event in the German city of Leipzig, Wagner’s birthplace. The home company, Oper Leipzig, had decided to mount a festival that would feature a chronological parade of every single opera in Wagner’s *œuvre*, including his oft-spurned earliest ones, viz., *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*. This record-breaking odyssey began on 19 June, opening with *Die Feen* (comp. 1833), and came to a triumphant conclusion, 26 days and 13 operas later, on 14 July, with *Parsifal* (comp. 1882).

Heath and I had been invited by the Australian company, Hayllar Music Tours, to lead a doughty group of Australians, Americans and New Zealanders. Heath’s job was to lecture on every performance day and, for good measure, to give two talks on Alex Ross’s book *Wagnerism* (15 lectures in all!), while I was invited along to help with the activities and sociabilities – a once-in-a-lifetime dream job.

For a month, Leipzig turned itself into a metropolitan paradise and a Wagnerian mecca. We met people from all over the world who had sacrificed much to come to this very special event, seeking out accommodation anywhere from a friend’s spare bedroom to a five-star hotel.

Many of the familiar Leipzig line-up of repertory singers sang in various roles throughout the festival, including the wonderful bass, Randall Jakobsh, who appeared in no fewer than six of the 13 operas, and provided a star turn in an

exquisitely Mozartian duet with Drolla, one of the court circle in *Die Feen*. Another fine baritone, Mathias Hausmann, had four substantial roles ranging through *Lohengrin*, *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*. Several others also sang in three or four operas each. All in all, there was a huge number of roles from all 13 operas, and a lot of talented singers around to fill them from Leipzig’s formidable array of soloists.



The set of Oper Leipzig’s *Die Feen* (photo: Tom Schulze)

Two outstanding female soloists were soprano Elisabet Strid (Senta, Elisabeth, Eva, Sieglinde) and mezzo-soprano, Kathrin Göring (Adriano in *Rienzi*, Venus, Magdelene, Fricka, Waltraute). These roles demand not just vocal stamina, but also a very high level of acting ability – a combination of talents that these two women had in spades. None of the soloists balked at tearing around Europe between Wagner gigs. The invincible Stefan Vinke, for example, zoomed back into Leipzig to sing the monumental role of *Rienzi*, having just sung it the previous night in Budapest. He

was also Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung*, all the time continuing to commute back and forth to his hometown in Germany with his much-travelled dog.

Andreas Schager, perhaps the loudest tenor I’ve ever heard, took on the title roles of *Tannhäuser*, *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, and then seemed as though he could sing them all over again. Klaus Florian Vogt appeared only once during the festival in his now-iconic role of *Lohengrin*. I first heard his silvery tones in the role in Bayreuth (2008), and here he was still totally convincing in a Patrick Bialdyga production that was sometimes unsympathetic and sometimes mildly funny with lots of guns being pointed everywhere! But overall, the work was perfectly comprehensible, for which nowadays one must be grateful.

Fortunately, for the major soloists in the *Ring* (all four parts performed back-to-back on consecutive nights), there were two Siegfrieds (Stephen Gould, Stefan Vinke), three Brünnhildes (Allison Oakes, Daniela Köhler, Lise Lindstrom) and two Wotans (Michael Volle in *Das Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*, Thomas J. Mayer in *Die Walküre*). No need to say more here because Kay Shacklock adds a write-up of her first *Ring* cycle later on in this article.

The greatest accolade of the festival must surely go to conductor Ulf Schirmer who directed from the podium with artistic sensitivity and architectural skill through nine of the 13 operas, starting with *Der fliegende Holländer* and finishing with

Parsifal three weeks later. The conductors for the remaining four operas were Matthias Foremny (*Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot*, *Rienzi*) and Christoph Gedschold (*Lohengrin*).

Of course, the Gewandhaus Orchestra played brilliantly throughout all 13 operas, while the fantastic Leipzig Opera Choir were on show all the time, except for one short period, during the first three operas of the *Ring*. They must have been relieved to get the occasional colourful assistance from the Leipzig Children's and Youth choirs. A somewhat crazy moment sticks in the memory: one evening, just before curtain-up, the intendant came out to announce that, 'for various reasons' (read: Covid-19), the choir would be 21 members short that evening. But you would never have guessed it from the sound, thanks to the magnificent chorus master, Thomas Eitler-de Lint, who had prepared his singers for no fewer than nine of the operas, with help from Alexander Stessin, who also directed the feisty male chorus contributions of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Overall, the stage direction was stimulating and enjoyable, from Michiel Dijkema's brilliant imagining of *Der fliegende Holländer* to *enfant terrible* Calixto Bieito's brutal, sometimes pointless *Tannhäuser*, mostly revolving around orgies of flagellation. *Der fliegende Holländer* included one of the most heart-stopping theatrical moments of the whole festival when a huge ship on stage invaded most of the theatre space above the heads of the audience in the stalls. This was so scary that you had to fight the urge to dive under your seat. The production was enhanced greatly by Thomas J. Mayer, who made a powerful Dutchman to Elisabet Strid's Senta – easily her best performance of the festival.



Der fliegende Holländer, cast curtain call

Strid also appeared as Elisabeth in that awful *Tannhäuser*, where she was raped and pillaged by all! This was the only production in which the chorus had obvious difficulties, mainly caused by intrusive pillars that blocked their view of the conductor, and by sundry movements and actions that they had to perform, hindering their sound. So much for the only disappointment of the whole festival.

Renaud Doucet's *Die Feen* was a masterpiece of staging and imagination. It was such a pleasure to see this work performed for the first time. To add to our delight, Kirstin Sharpin (New Zealand soprano) appeared in the principal role of Ada, having been called in as a stunning,

last-minute replacement. We sent her an email the next day to congratulate her, and here is part of her friendly reply:

'It was a very unexpected and very last-minute jump-in, and I feel today a bit as if it might have been *my* fairy dream rather than Prince Arindal's! It is indeed a gorgeous production and it's such a privilege to have sung that opera on stage – not a thing many people can lay claim to at all . . . Hopefully last night will open some doors – it would be wonderful if it started the ball really rolling now.'



Kirstin Sharpin and Heath Lees

Kirstin very kindly travelled down from Berlin a week or so later to talk to the Hayllar group and join them for lunch.

I can't end without special mention of Roland Aeschlimann's understated yet utterly moving production of Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*. It has always had a special place in the composer's *œuvre* since it became a summation of his philosophical thinking over the years, as well as (more practically) a means of easing the financial ruin of the Bayreuth Festival. This production reminded me of the photos of his grandson Wieland Wagner's *Parsifal* production in the 1950s with unencumbered stage settings, symbolic shapes and sombre lighting under which the performers could transform the music into what Debussy once described as 'a monument in sound'. René Pape's Rolls-Royce performance as Gurnemanz lent stature to the production as a whole. An impressive Falk Struckmann appeared here for the only time in the festival (as Klingsor), and Elena Pankratova's Kundry was volatile and dramatic, though she did have a tendency to compete with the volume levels of Andreas Schager's *Parsifal*. However, the drama moved eventually towards its autumnal end, with her and Amfortas entwined in a misty, fading light. A lovely benediction to a marvellous festival. – L. L.

From Kay Shacklock: *The Ring*

This was my first wholesale experience of the *Ring* cycle, having encountered a concert version three years ago in Duisburg with Oper am Rhein. In retrospect, that was a fine introduction, giving focus to the music, without distraction. Now I was ready for the visual impact.

I am something of a Wagner Virgin. Even as a professional musician, my exposure to his music has been limited. I wanted to find out what all the fuss was about, before I die. Cue bucket-list trip that also included Handel

and Bach festivals, making for an intense and rewarding two months in Leipzig. But that is another story, and for my full unfettered blog ('Rings, Rivers and Respite'), the link is: <https://kay2019.wordpress.com>

I was worried about the production standard of putting on a different grand opera almost every night. The revolving stage was used for some of the operas in the festival, but director Rosamund Gilmore kept *The Ring* to static sets – understandable in the circumstances. Hats off to the technicians and crew who must have laboured through the night before every work. All four sets were large but lean, giving focus to the artists. As a foil to the stillness, dancers were employed as animals or unworldly creatures, making these stylistic stagehands a visual chorus in almost every scene. Initially, this was cute, but became a confusing distraction by the end of the cycle.

Imposing, oft-skewed architecture (by Carl Friedrich Oberle) dominated the stage every night, along with underwhelming, vaguely Edwardian costumes and understated lighting. But some whimsical additions in design and direction gave much-needed contrast: a large paddling pool in *Das Rheingold*; a seated, besuited giant puppet and his mini-me's in *Die Walküre*; nursery furniture in *Siegfried*; trotting horse dancers in *Götterdämmerung* . . . not sure I was supposed to chuckle, but I did.

The performances were mostly full and fine. The crowd favourite was Michael Volle's Wotan in *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried*. The rich, steady voice and excellent acting won me over too. But even his replacement in *Die Walküre* (Thomas J. Mayer) gave the striking and poignant god the required vulnerability. Hearteningly, the female leads were all vocally strong throughout, dramatically expressive and, what's more, they looked the part. Both Siegfrieds (Stephen Gould in *Siegfried* and Stefan Vinke in *Götterdämmerung*) were a little less convincing in voice and presence. Standout roles for me were Tobias Kehrer (Hunding) for his superb voice and Dan Karlström (Mime) for his acting.

I'm beginning to understand the fuss.

The production wasn't without flaws, but there was one element that made it more than worthwhile. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, the curtain went up to reveal all 80-odd orchestra musicians on stage carrying their instruments, smiling and proud. The audience rose as one to show their gratitude for what was perhaps the greatest thing about Oper Leipzig's Wagnerfest 2022: the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Ulf Schirmer conducted. We gape at opera stars sustaining hard-yakka singing for hours, but the instrumentalists are there even longer, providing unwavering first-rate music. I hate the word awesome, but, in this context, they really were. – K. S.

(Liz Lees and Kay Shacklock, July 2022)