

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

The Wagner Society in 2006

The 2006 Wagner Society of New Zealand programme is, once again, a strong mix of talks, DVD presentations and recitals. Auckland and Christchurch start the year where Wellington left off with a recital *'Parsifal through the eyes of Kundry'* which according to the review on page 2 is a must. March will see a large number of us converge on Wellington for the two performances of *Parsifal* and hopefully some time to catch up with members from other centres and overseas.

Wagner's birthday will be celebrated in the usual manner, with the AGM. As we move into the second part of 2006 the programmes in each centre become more varied. In July (Auckland) and October (Christchurch), Chris Brodrick will present a talk about the influence Wagner has had on the visual arts. DVD presentations will also be to the fore. Auckland will see *Tristan und Isolde* in one sitting in September while Christchurch will split the *Die fliegende Holländer* over the July and August meetings. Heath Lees will be as busy as ever giving talks ranging from 'A Tale of Two Cultures' to 'The Life Cycle of an Audience'. The year wraps up with the usual Christmas parties and planning for 2007!

Please note that the Wellington programme will be detailed in the next newsletter.

Auckland

Sunday, 19 Feb, 7.30pm -

Parsifal through the eyes of Kundry-
Margaret Medlyn (*sob*) Heath Lees (*Piano*)
Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street

Sunday, 16 April, 7.30pm -

Wagner and France: A Tale of Two
Cultures presented by Heath Lees
Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street

Sunday, 21 May, 7.30pm -

AGM, Wagner's birthday, plus new DVD
version of Harry Kupfer's Bayreuth *Die
Walküre* Act 1.

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

Sunday, 16 July, 7.30pm -

Wagner's influence on the Visual Arts
presented by Chris Brodrick

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

Sunday, 10 September, 4pm -

Tristan und Isolde. Complete performance
with dinner during intervals.

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

Sunday, 26 November, 7.30pm -

Christmas Extras: Requests and Round-ups.
Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street

Christchurch

Friday 17 Feb, 7.30pm -

Parsifal through the eyes of Kundry-
Margaret Medlyn (*sob*) Heath Lees (*Piano*)
Venue: Chapel of the Music Centre,
Barbadoes Street

Friday 21 April 7.30pm -

The *Ring* Cycle and the life-cycle of
an Audience presented by Heath Lees,
followed by a DVD of the making of the
Adelaide Ring

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, Canterbury University

Friday 19 May 7.30pm -

Wagner's birthday Pot Luck dinner
Venue: To be announced

Friday 21 July 7.30pm -

Flying Dutchman Act 1 introduced by John
Pattinson

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, Canterbury University

Friday 18 August 7.30pm -

Flying Dutchman Acts 2 & 3

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, Canterbury University

Friday 20 October 7.30pm -

Wagner's influence on the Visual Arts
presented by Chris Brodrick

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, Canterbury University

Sunday 3 December 6.30pm -

Christmas BBQ

Venue: John and Ann Pattinson's home
37b Highland Place,
Avonhead



Margaret Medlyn as Kundry

News from Adelaide

The Australian reports that the South Australian Tourism Commission estimates the 2004 *Ring* injected \$14.2 million into the economy. Meanwhile the SA Government is to look at the economics of restaging the *Ring* in Adelaide with a feasibility study expected to be completed early next year.

Any restaging would likely be in 2009 or 2010 so in the interim, SA Opera hopes to produce another Wagner opera to reinforce Adelaide as the city for Wagner fans.

Award

In November last year Simon O'Neill, who sings *Parsifal* in Wellington next month, was awarded a New Zealand Arts Foundation Laureate Award. The five recipients, including poet Bill Manhire and artist Julia Morison, each received \$50,000 making the award the most prestigious prize for New Zealand artists.

Newsletter edited by Christopher Brodrick



Margaret Medlyn as Kundry in the 2001 Adelaide production of *Parsifal*

Parsifal through the eyes of Kundry

Massey University Theatre, Buckle Street

4pm Sunday 4 December

Reviewed by Lindis Taylor

The New Zealand Opera Society and the Wagner Society of New Zealand, in Wellington, combined in December to present a special lecture-performance bearing on a particularly interesting aspect of Wagner's compositional and philosophical concerns.

It was entitled '*Parsifal through the eyes of Kundry*', a performance in the form of a duet from Heath Lees and Margaret Medlyn, the two discussing the operas, and the ways in which female characters emerge, and Margaret, with Heath accompanying at the piano, performing a number of excerpts from most of the operas – not just *Parsifal*.

It was a singular and highly illuminating occasion.

Here was a fascinating exploration of the unusually complex and sympathetic view that Wagner nourished towards women. The facts emerged rather against the view that is commonly promoted, that opera deals badly with women, that they are invariably the victims of male violence, an angle that was seriously examined a few years ago by French philosopher/journalist Catherine Clément in '*Opera or the Downfall of Women*', at least as far as Wagner is concerned.

The discussions which were so well prepared that they had an air of spontaneity, ranged over Wagner's own relations with women, his first wife Minna, the musically creative affair with Mathilde

Wesendonck and the ultimate, though by no means exclusive, relationship with Cosima von Bülow (née d'Agoult, Liszt's daughter), and of course over the main female characters in the operas.

Far from being an attempt to depict Wagner's women as manipulated victims, or objects of sacrifice for the redemption of the hero, they showed them as 'part-angel, part-muse, part-soulmate, part-demon'. So Senta in *The Flying Dutchman* is just as much a protagonist as the Dutchman, not simply a silly, romantic child. Margaret sang two verses of Senta's Ballad. There followed Isolde's Monologue from Act I of *Tristan and Isolde* and two of the *Wesendonck Lieder*: '*Der Engel*' and '*Stehe Still!*'

Kundry's main action is in Act II of *Parsifal*: '*Nein Parsifal...ich sah das Künd*' and '*Parsifal Grausamer...*'. Heath and Margaret showed how Kundry, far from being an evil monster, is to be seen as the agent of regeneration of the decayed community of Knights of the Grail, and rather than simply seducing *Parsifal*, is the means of his growth and escape from his own inadequacies. Margaret's final offering was the *Liebested* from the end of *Tristan and Isolde*.

Video excerpts were used to illustrate the topic, and these were drawn from the famous Tony Palmer film about Wagner, from the Wolfgang Wagner production of *Parsifal* from Bayreuth in the 1970's, with Siegfried Jerusalem and Eva Randova.

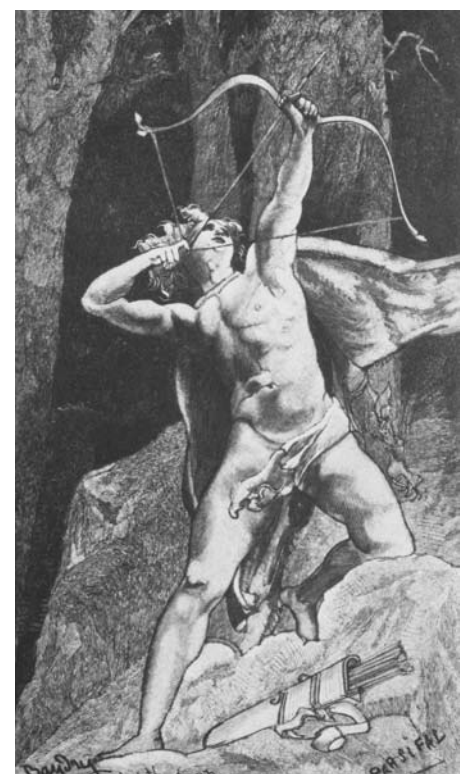
In February, this absorbing and illuminating performance will be repeated in both Auckland and Christchurch.

Parsifal in LA

Neil Jenkins reports on a disappointing Parsifal in Los Angeles in November 2005.

For many opera goers, this *Parsifal* was a non event. Robert Wilson's minimal design and unrealistic and stilted stage movement dominated Wagner's great masterpiece to the point where the focus was being taken away from the music. Unanswered questions were plentiful – the non appearance of the knights in the first act seemed to indicate a spiritual rather than physical importance but why let the visual component interfere with the composer's intention? And an object resembling an iceberg for the Grail? After viewing Wilson's staging of two Gluck operas, now available on DVD, and experiencing a similarity in movement, also with its unnatural hand gestures, I have no interest in seeing any further operas staged by him. Some people attending this *Parsifal* advised me not to see the *Madama Butterfly* next year. They were appalled that L.A.Opera is to stage more performances of a production disliked by so many of their subscribers.

The chorus and orchestra did sound magnificent under the direction of Kent Nagano. A strong cast that included Placido Domingo as Parsifal, Matti Salminen as Gurnemanz, Linda Watson as Kundry, and James Cresswell's offstage voice for Titurel were exceptional. Here, Amfortas was badly characterised and a lifeless interpretation of Klingsor was a disappointment. The First Flower Maiden sang, at times, too loudly, and always with a tedious unwanted vibrato – and she was supposed to seduce *Parsifal*!



Parsifal Snippets

As well as the 'Parsifal through the eyes of Kundry' recitals there are a number of other Parsifal related happenings and news.

Insight into Opera - Parsifal

For Christchurch Opera-lovers, John Pattinson will be presenting two evening sessions on Parsifal to co-incide with the Wellington performances. The illustrated talks will examine the musical and dramatic structure of Parsifal, and discuss the various perceptions which this great work has had and continues to receive.

Dates:- 8 & 15 March 7.30-9.30pm.
Cost \$35.00.

Enrolments: Post:- UC Opportunity,
Uni of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800,
Christchurch or Phone:- 0800 827 828
Online:- www.uco.canterbury.ac.nz

Parsifal: Last but not Least

In Wellington, Victoria University and the NZSO will present two seminars on Saturday 18 March that will offer the chance to discover more about Wagner's last and greatest opera.

Parsifal: Historical Perspectives
With Peter Bassett, Terence Dennis and Warren Drake. 9.30am-12noon

Parsifal: Performance and Staging
With: Bernd Benthak, Elric Hooper and Sir Donald McIntyre 1pm-3.30pm,
Venue for both seminars:- Lecture Theatre 1,
Rutherford House, VUW - Pipitea Campus,
Information: Email conted@vuw.ac.nz,
www.vuw.ac.nz/conted or ph 04 463 6556

Reception

Following the afternoon seminar of **Parsifal: Last but not Least**, the Wellington branch of the Wagner Society are hoping to host a reception for members of the Society and visitors from overseas. The time will be 'late afternoon' and the venue will be close to Rutherford House. Further details will follow in the next newsletter.

The Opera Society - Wellington

The Wellington Branch of the New Zealand Opera Society will present a DVD presentation of Parsifal excerpts (about 3 hours) with commentary by Heath Lees. There'll be a 3/4 hour break, Bayreuth-style, about 5pm for a meal: bring your own hamper and eat in the foyer or, if fine, on the lawns of Parliament Grounds, or buy it at nearby Backbencher Pub.

Date: 12 February, 3pm in the National Library Auditorium, Cnr Molesworth & Aitkin Streets.

Wagner Society members who wish to buy \$20 tickets should send a cheque & stamped addressed envelope to:

New Zealand Opera Society
PO Box 50557,
Porirua



Recording

In last September's newsletter we highlighted a few recordings of Parsifal to aid you in your preparation for next month's performances. One of those recordings featured Donald McIntyre singing Gurnemanz under the baton of Reginald Goodall. EMI have contacted us to say they have recently re-released the recording and that it should be available in most 'good music' stores. Furthermore they have provided a little bit of insight to the recording:-

Originally recorded in 1985, this full-length recording's cast includes Sir Donald McIntyre as Gurnemanz, Waltrud Meier as Kundry, Phillip Joll as Amfortas and Warren Ellsworth as Parsifal and is accompanied by the Chorus of Welsh National Opera and the Orchestra of Welsh National Opera conducted by Reginald Goodall.

The recording was made in only nine days but was preceded by months of rehearsal and individual coaching as well as by stage performances. Using long takes, many between 25 and 35 minutes in length, background noises are sometimes heard - making this an almost 'semi-live performance'.

In Parsifal, Wagner uses his two harps sparingly, more than he originally intended as borne out by the Prelude. But by the stage of writing the full score, he reserved the idea of garlanding the Grail music with the sound of the harp until the drama's closing pages, where he provided elaborate parts for both harps. Accordingly the instruments were placed at the front of the orchestra in this recording so that they could be clearly heard.

"Every detail is laid bare, and we can hear instruments (such as the harps at the very end of the work) where they are not heard in other recordings, and melodic lines that are usually lost in orchestral texture" - Monsalvat (Parsifal home page)

The recording includes a 146-page booklet in English and German containing detailed notes regarding the composition and recording processes in addition to photographs from the original production.

New Members

A big welcome to:-

Mr and Mrs P & D Macdonald	Wellington
Mr R Armitage	Hamilton
Mrs F Pankhurst	Auckland
Ms B Haseltine	Tauranga
Mrs M Bradley	Tauranga
Mr M Shanahan	Christchurch
Ms P Hurley	Wellington
Mr and Mrs C & R Deacon	Wellington
Mr T Stone	Wellington
Mrs M Robinson	Wellington
Ms J Walker	Auckland
Mrs B Little	Tauranga
Mr J Maxwell	Auckland

Sighted the site?

Published in 2001, the book *Multi Media from Wagner to Virtual Reality* looks at the history of digital multimedia. In it the editors Randall Racker and Ken Jordan trace the origins of this relatively new art form back to 1849 and Wagner's "Outlines of the Artwork of the future" - Gesamtkunstwerk - the total work of art.

It is appropriate, therefore, that our society is involved with new technology by publishing our own web site. Unfortunately just because you have a web site does not mean that people will visit it and judging by the relatively static counter we employ to record visits we don't seem to be attracting very many. It's time to do a bit of market reasearch!

We would be extremely grateful if you could spare a little time to ponder these questions and send us back a response.

1. Are you aware of our web site (www.wagnersociety.org.nz)?
2. If you know about it do you visit it?
3. Do you find the content useful?
4. Is there information you'd like to be able to access through our site? For example would leads to Wagner scholarship be of interest or maybe links to information on future performances or to singers web sites. In short what do you want out of the site?

Please email cbrodric@xtra.co.nz with ideas, requests or comments and we will see if we can't make our site more - Gesamtkunstwerk!

The Opera Society - Auckland

On 8 March at 7.30pm the Opera Society will hold their AGM and show a DVD of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* from the Florence May Festival: Zubin Mehta; Eva Mei, Patrizia Ciofi, Kurt Rydl
The Raye Freedman Theatre,
Epsom Girls' Grammar School,
Silver Road,
Epsom.

Birgit Nilsson 1918 - 2005

It was announced in mid January that the great Wagnerian soprano, Birgit Nilsson, had died on 25 December last year at the age of 87.

Nilsson will be remembered as one of the greatest exponents of the roles of Brünnhilde and Isolde. Her vocal brilliance and stamina allowed her to not only tackle some of the most demanding roles but to thrill audiences in all the world's major opera houses. In the *Guardian*, Martin Kettle recalled a forty year old memory as a teenager, sitting in the slips at Covent Garden hearing *"the most astonishing piece of singing I have heard in my life. It felt then, and still feels, as if the woman on the stage had launched an unstoppable laser beam of gleaming sound straight at me."*

Born in Sweden in 1918, Nilsson studied at the Stockholm Academy. In 1946 she made her debut at the Stockholm Royal Opera as Agathe in *Der Freischütz*. But with only three days preparation it turned out to be such an unpleasant experience for her that she contemplated suicide.

The following year she came to the notice of the conductor Fritz Busch who invited her to sing Lady Macbeth. Her success in the role led to engagements at Glyndebourne (1951), Vienna (1953), Bayreuth (1954) and Munich (1955) where she sang Brünnhilde in her first *Ring*. She made her first appearance at Covent Garden in 1957 and New York's Met two years later. It was the latter performance as Isolde that is enshrined in opera folklore because Nilsson ended up singing with three Tristans, one for each act. The Washington Post's Tim Page describes the audience reaction. *"She conquered New York in the last days of 1959, singing a "Tristan und Isolde" at the Metropolitan Opera that was followed by a 15-minute shouting, stomping and standing ovation that became par for the course whenever Nilsson performed. The public*



Isolde (Tristan: Wolfgang Windgassen)



demonstration after a 1980 Met performance of "Elektra," when Nilsson was in her sixties, went on for even longer. Almost a half-hour elapsed before the lights came up and we reluctantly agreed to go home. Never before or since have I seen an audience so hysterically excited -- and for all the right reasons.

As late as 1996, speaking at a gala tribute celebrating conductor James Levine's 25th year with the Met, Nilsson broke into a few bars of Brünnhilde's battle cry from "Die Walküre" and, at 77 and officially retired for more than a decade, she won the heartiest applause of a long and star-studded evening"

As well as being a great Brünnhilde and Isolde, Nilsson was a peerless Elektra, Turnadot and Salome who, as Martin Kettle puts it, *"could ride the wild waves of the Wagnerian orchestra with what appeared to be amazing ease, but was in reality amazing technique. Steel and silver are the words that the critics often summoned to describe her sound. She was always thrillingly, pingingly in tune. When you hear her live Isolde or Ring recordings, it is the unflagging energy at the end of four hours of singing that is most truly awesome."* Sir Georg Solti in his Memoirs tells of Nilsson walking off stage after a triumphant performance of Salome singing one of the Queen of the Night's coloratura passages from the *Magic Flute*. When asked how she could do that after singing such a demanding role, she responded *"Oh I'm just testing my vocal cords"*.

Luckily, we can still experience the thrill of her voice through her recordings. While her Brünnhilde in the Solti *Ring* is mandatory for any collection, there are a number of other recordings of her singing live which I'd urge you to find. To hear the love duet from the last act of *Siegfried* culminating in a radiant top C or the Leibestod from *Tristan*, brings tears to the eyes, goosebumps on the arms and makes the hairs stand on the back of the neck.

The strength that Nilsson brought to her singing also displayed itself in her business dealings. She knew her worth and insisted that she be paid the highest fee the house could afford. This led to the comment from the Met's General Manager of the time, Rudolf Bing, who, when asked if Birgit Nilsson was difficult, responded *"Not at all. You put enough money in, and a glorious voice comes out."* This story has a sequel on the other side of the Atlantic involving the autocratic conductor Herbert von Karajan, who Nilsson, to deflate his ego, called 'Herbie'. During a piano rehearsal, when her necklace broke, Karajan sarcastically asked her if they were real pearls bought with her phenomenal fees from the Metropolitan. *"Oh no,"* came the tart reply, *"they're only imitation ones that I bought out of your low fees in Vienna."*



Brünnhilde in Die Walküre

On another occasion to demonstrate her unhappiness with the gloomy lighting in Karajan's production of the *Ring*, she appeared on stage during a rehearsal wearing a coal miners helmet with search light and wings.

The last word must be her most famous piece of advice: *"the most important thing for a singer is to wear comfortable shoes."*

Leb wohl, du Kühnes,
herrliches Kind!
Du meines Herzens heiligster Stolz!
Leb wohl! Leb wohl! Leb wohl!
*(Farewell, my valiant,
glorious child!
You were the holiest pride of my heart!
Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!)*
Die Walküre Act 3 Sc3