

# WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

## NEWSLETTER

# Dunedin comes into Valkyrie View



2008 will mark another milestone in the history of the Wagner Society of New Zealand with the launch of a Dunedin branch. The first meeting will be held on 16 March and appropriately will feature one of the instigators of the new branch, Terence Dennis, who will present his recital of *Wagner piano music*. The other driving force behind the launch, Lesley Kendall, will be well-known to Auckland members as she held the role as the society's minute secretary for a number of years before moving South.

Terence and Lesley have already put together what looks like a most interesting programme that should not only attract Otago Wagnerites but members from other centres. *Wesendonck-Lieder* and *Wagner in Zurich with Wagner's instrumental music of that time* will be presented by Terence in

May and later in the year he will talk on *A Return from Riga - Wagner, Weber and The Flying Dutchman*

Moving north, Christchurch have also arranged an interesting programme opening with Terence's recital and including Heath Lees on *Liszt and Wagner*, John Pattinson with what should be a very entertaining talk titled *Drink, Drugs & the Rest: Wagner's History of Substance Abuse*, and Michael Sinclair on *theoperacritic.com*. In October Christchurch has arranged for Elric Hooper to talk about *the evolution of Wagnerian productions*.

Wellington and Auckland have the first six months of their programmes planned. Auckland opens the year on 24 February with Chris Brodrick's presentation *Wagner at the Movies*. In April Heath Lees will present *Wagner and the Sea* a wide-angled view of *Tristan* and *The Flying Dutchman*. This talk,

along with Terence Dennis' *A Return from Riga - Wagner, Weber and The Flying Dutchman* is presented with an eye on the Melbourne concert performances (see story on page 3).

In Wellington the year opens with Terence Dennis *Wagner/Liszt recital* on 20 April and will be followed by Heath Lees *Wagner and the Sea* talk on 15 June. The rest of year's programme will be finalised soon and will include Chris Brodrick's *Wagner at the Movies*.

2008 looks a like being another great year for the Wagner Society of New Zealand.

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## Ring Road

The long and winding road that leads to another *Ring* in Adelaide has seen plenty of talk but little action. In October last year a feasibility study, commissioned by Arts SA from Ernst and Young, was released. The report looks at "...options available to the state in staging a remount of the 2004 Adelaide production.." Running to 80 pages the report highlights the costs and benefits of a re-run.

The financial deficit of remounting the production is estimated at \$A5.8 to \$A7.5 million, while the estimated economic benefit to SA could be as much as \$A9 million and a further \$A3 million to Australia. With funding of the deficit required from State and Federal coffers it would appear that the matter remains firmly in the hands of the politicians.

Unfortunately without a funding commitment Stephen Phillips, general director of the State Opera South Australia, is hamstrung as he's unable to begin the three year task of casting a *Ring*. Singers like Stuart Skelton and Lisa Gasteen are already booked up that far ahead. All this means that the earliest we can expect to be back in the Wunder Bar will be 2011. Watch this space!



## Terence Dennis Recital and a Surprise Guest

*Michael Sinclair looks back at an extra-special meeting in Auckland last December.*

The final meeting of the year for Auckland members of the NZ Wagner Society proved to be an intoxicating mix of music, talk and song. Special guest Terence Dennis was on hand to launch his new CD *Liszt and Wagner: Piano Works* and to offer insights into the somewhat unknown world of Wagner piano pieces. And there were some surprises too!

Dennis, in association with Ode Record Company, has put together an interesting and unusual selection of piano works composed by Wagner, in addition to pieces by Liszt that had been influenced by Wagner. This is Dennis' first recording and he admitted that he wanted to produce a CD that explored a hitherto uncharted repertoire. He has certainly succeeded in this respect.



*Gudrun Wagner with husband Wolfgang and daughter Katharina, Bayreuth 2007*

### Gudrun Wagner (1944 – 2007)

*Michael Sinclair reports on the death of Gudrun Wagner.*

In November last year the Wagner world was rocked by the unexpected death of Gudrun Wagner, wife of the aging Bayreuth Festival patriarch, Wolfgang Wagner. Gudrun had been in a Bayreuth hospital for a routine operation, which apparently had proceeded normally. While the exact cause of her death remains unclear, the Guardian in the UK reported subsequently that she had been diagnosed with terminal cancer three years ago.

Nevertheless her death came as a complete surprise, at a time when all the focus was on Wolfgang Wagner and the hotly debated subject of his successor. In a statement after her death Wolfgang said, "*it is with deep emotion and with silent grief that I must convey that this morning my loving wife and close co-worker Gudrun Wagner died fully unexpectedly.*"

Born in East Prussia in 1944, Gudrun first became associated with the Bayreuth Festival in 1967 when she was employed in the press office. In 1970 she married the then festival dramaturge Dietrich Mack, with whom she had two children. She then went on to work as Wolfgang's personal assistant during

The evening consisted of excerpts from the CD, live performances by Dennis and illuminating discussion on the works themselves. He contrasted live excerpts from the Wagner/Liszt *Fantasy on themes from Rienzi* with the CD version, explaining the underlying compositional techniques. He then played a selection of Wagner's own piano pieces, most of which are little more than vignettes and many of which are dedicated to Mathilde Wesendonck.

The success of the evening lay very much in Dennis's ability to combine musical excellence with a relaxed conversational style that was both informative and entertaining. And if Dennis wasn't entertaining enough there was a surprise vocal treat in the form of Simon O'Neill singing '*Wo ist mein Schwert*' from *Die Walküre*. O'Neill was of course fresh from his success as Siegmund in The Royal Opera's *Ring cycle* in October

which time their relationship flourished. Both partners divorced their spouses in 1976 and were married the same year. In 1978 their only child, Katharina was born.

As the years progressed and Wolfgang became older it became increasingly clear that Gudrun was exercising an increasing amount of control over the festival, so much so that in 1999 she put herself forward to succeed Wolfgang. However she was bitterly opposed by Eva Pasquier Wagner and Nike Wagner, both of whom had similar ambitions. Her application was rejected by the festival's ruling body and Wolfgang remained in control.

More recently both Gudrun and Wolfgang had been strongly promoting their daughter Katharina as the rightful successor, although her less than successful production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at last year's festival posed more questions about the succession than it answered.

The death of Gudrun certainly adds urgency to the succession debate. At 88 Wolfgang had become increasingly dependent on Gudrun for the day to day running of the festival and her death leaves a serious gap at the top of the organisation. While the succession machine has been somewhat muted since Gudrun's death this is sure to heat up again this year. The Bayreuth soap opera continues.



*Two K̄avis at the Royal Opera. Sarah Castle and Simon O'Neill after a performance of Die Walküre*

last year. His vibrant singing captivated the large audience and no doubt left them longing for more! Unfortunately he had a plane to catch!

As a final musical treat, Dennis and NZ Wagner Society President, Heath Lees, played a piano-duet arrangement of Wagner's sublime *Siegfried Idyll*. The performance was dedicated to the memory of long time Wagner Society member Margaret Saunders, who had succumbed to cancer the previous day.

Christmas cake and wine (kindly donated by Marbecks) plus lots of convivial chatter brought another Wagner year to a close. The evening once again demonstrated the potent ability of Wagner to engage and entertain us like no other composer. And we all look forward to more of the same in 2008!



# 2008 PROGRAMME

## Auckland

**Sunday, 24 February 7.30pm**

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

Chris Brodrick presents *Wagner at the Movies* - a taste of the wide range of films in which Wagner's music has featured.

**Friday, 13 April 7.30pm**

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

Heath Lees presents: *Wagner and the Sea* - a wide-angled view of *Tristan* and *The Flying Dutchman*

**Sunday, 18 May 7.30pm (Please note this is a Provisional Date)**

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

AGM followed by WSNZ highlights of the last 15 years.

**Sunday, 20 July**

**Sunday, 14 September**

**Sunday, 7 December**

Programmes to be announced.

## Wellington

**Sunday, 20 April 4.00pm**

**Venue:** National Library Auditorium, Molesworth/Aitken Streets, Thorndon  
**Terence Dennis Wagner/Liszt recital**

Excerpts from his newly released CD featuring Wagner's piano music. Heath Lees will also join Terence to play a piano-duet version of the *Siegfried Idyll*.

**Sunday, 15 June 4.00pm**

**Venue:** Massey University Theatre, Buckle St

Heath Lees presents: *Wagner and the Sea* - a wide-angled view of *Tristan* and *The Flying Dutchman*

**Remaining dates & programme to be announced**



Terence Dennis will give recitals and lectures in 2008

## Dunedin

**Sunday, 16 March 3.00pm**

**Venue:** Marama Hall,

University of Otago

**Terence Dennis Wagner/Liszt recital**

Excerpts from his newly released CD featuring Wagner's piano music including two piano versions of the *Siegfried Idyll*, with Heath Lees, & *Die Meistersinger Overture*, with Jaroslav Novak.

**Sunday, 18 May 3.00pm**

**Venue:** Marama Hall,

University of Otago

Terence Dennis presents *Wesendonck-Lieder* and *Wagner in Zurich* with Wagner's instrumental music of that time

**Sunday 7 September 3.00pm**

**Venue: to be confirmed**

Terence Dennis presents *A Return from Riga - Wagner, Weber and The Flying Dutchman*.

**Sunday, 7 December**

**Venue and time to be confirmed**

Catered lunch followed by *Tannhauser* DVD.

## Christchurch

**Saturday, 29 March 7.30pm**

**Venue:** Music Centre Chapel, Barbadoes Street

**Terence Dennis Wagner/Liszt recital**

Excerpts from his newly released CD featuring Wagner's piano music. Heath Lees will also join Terence to play a two piano version of the *Siegfried Idyll*.

**Friday, 11 April 7.30pm**

**Venue:** Lecture Theatre A6,

University of Canterbury

Heath Lees presents: '*Liszt and Wagner: unlike artists, uneasy friends, and uncomfortable relatives?*'

**Friday, 23 May 7.30pm**

**Venue: to be confirmed**

Pot Luck meal for Richard Wagner's birthday.

**Friday, 27 June 7.30pm**

**Venue:** Lecture Theatre A6,

University of Canterbury

Michael Sinclair will talk about his web site, *theoperacritic.com*, the leading internet site dedicated to opera and give a presentation of Wagner productions in the last year

**Friday, 19 September 7.30pm**

**Venue:** Lecture Theatre A6,

University of Canterbury

John Pattinson presents: '*Drink, Drugs & the Rest: Wagner's History of Substance Abuse*'.

**Friday, 24 October 7.30pm**

**Venue:** Lecture Theatre A6,

University of Canterbury

Elric Hooper presents '*From Maestro to Myth*' - the evolution of Wagnerian production'.

**Sunday, 7 December**

**Venue and time to be confirmed**

Christmas BBQ.

## Trivia

When researching for a talk it's amazing the information that one uncovers. Unfortunately not all of it fits with the presentation and has to be discarded. Some of it is too good to put aside like this gem from Mike Ashman in the Gramophone regarding Wagner in Film. In the 1930's *Wagner's private life was deemed colourful enough for Hollywood treatment with Leopold Stokowski slated for the lead*. The project never got off the ground because Stokowski eloped with Greta Garbo. According to the internet site garboforever.com in 1938 Stokowski also suggested a film with himself playing *Tristan* to Garbo's *Isolde*.

Chris Brodrick presents *Wagner at the Movies* in Auckland on 24 February.

## Melbourne and Seattle

Expressions of interest are invited from members who would like to join a possible WSNZ trip to Melbourne in August to attend a concert performance of *Der fliegende Holländer* with a cast that includes Lisa Gasteen, John Wegner and Stuart Skelton. Three performances are to be given (25, 28 & 30) as part of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's season.

We would also like to gauge if members would like us to organise a tour to the Seattle *Ring* in August 2009. If you'd like to experience a *Ring* true to Wagner but with the advantage of modern technology this production is for you!

Email your interest to Michael Sinclair:-  
msinclair@xtra.co.nz

## Farewell



Margaret (left) with WSNZ members in Potsdam, 2002

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Margaret Saunders after a long illness. Margaret and her husband Ron were among the founding members of the WSNZ and have been regulars on Society trips. Margaret loved her Wagner and, although unwell, even managed to make the trip to Adelaide in 2004 for *The Ring*

*Leb Wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind!*

## The Possible Dream

*'...You got to have a dream,  
If you don't have a dream,  
How you gonna have a dream come true?'*

Oscar Hammerstein II

**South Pacific has more than one link to this story. Chris Brodrick reports.**

We all dream - and once in a while those dreams do come true! Put yourself in the shoes of a singer. What would you dream? In the case of Simon O'Neill I'm sure his dreams came true working with Pavarotti and Domingo, or for Kiri it was getting her big break at Covent Garden as the Countess in the *Marriage of Figaro*. So what do you think was Ian Storey's dream? Ian Storey? Yes! Ian Storey! Not a name that springs to mind when talking about singers.

I wonder if he dreamt of singing the role of *Tristan* with Waltraud Meier as *Isolde* in a production by Patrice Chereau and looking down to see Daniel Barenboim conducting and looking up to see the Presidents of Italy, Austria, Germany and Greece as well as the emir of Qatar sitting in Italy's most famous opera house, La Scala? No! It's too far fetched for a dream!

The opening day of La Scala's new season is held each year on 7 December to honour Milan's patron saint, St Ambrose. With top price tickets selling for \$US2,900 and standing-room at \$US73, the opening night

## Luciano and Richard?

**Chris Brodrick tries to find out the truth about Pavarotti and Wagner.**

It all started with the BBC web site. On a page titled 'On This Day 30 July 1991; Pavarotti sings in the British rain', the Beeb ran a story about the late great Italian tenor giving a free concert in Hyde Park London to celebrate 30 years in opera. It went on:-

*A crowd of 100,000 - out of an expected 250,000 - stood in the rain to watch Pavarotti perform 20 arias by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet and Wagner.*

When Pavarotti died in September the column inches flowed. The Times for instance ran 'The life of Pavarotti' in which they reported the same Hyde Park concert:-

July 1991: **150,000** people, including Prince Charles and Diana, Princess of Wales, stand enthralled in pouring rain in Hyde Park to hear Pavarotti perform 20 arias by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet and Wagner

Soon news agencies and papers from all over the world, including the Times of India, Brisbane's Courier Mail and the Citizen in South Africa were reproducing this information in obituaries or as background for news stories coming out of Modena.

So what's so interesting? Well, Luciano Pavarotti never sang Wagner! Or to be more accurate there is no evidence that he did. He was the consummate Italian Singer who concentrated quite rightly on what he

is, according to The New York Times, *'the gaudiest event of the opera season in Europe... As scheduled, Italy's haute couture designers got to flaunt their ingenuity at cantilevering and buttressing'*.

La Scala's new Principal Guest conductor Daniel Barenboim chose to open the 2007/08 season with *Tristan & Isolde* which had not been performed at the house for nearly 30 years. Unfortunately his original choice for *Tristan* pulled out of the production leaving La Scala to find a replacement. With the small number of singers available to sing the role all booked up, Barenboim and La Scala were in somewhat of a dilemma until they found 49 year old English based Ian Storey who was virtually unknown, even in the UK. Ian Storey was born in Co Durham into a family of coal miners. He studied furniture design at University before - and wait for it - moving to New Zealand to teach in Hamilton. While recovering from a sports injury he



*Ian Storey as Tristan & Waltraud Meier as Isolde*  
Photo: Marco Brescia



*Pavarotti as Lohegrin??*

sang well, the bel canto Italian repertoire. The idea of his beautifully smooth Italian delivery being adapted to guttural German is not something to consider.

The recording of that Hyde Park concert includes Verdi, Puccini and a number of arias from the Italian repertoire, but no Wagner or Bizet for that matter. To be fair the recording has 16 tracks and the Times mentions 20 arias, so it just might have been possible, but unlikely.

What was uncovered in the research into this strange story was he did 'consider'

took singing lessons, studying with Anthea Moller, and then on returning to the UK with another New Zealander, Bryan Drake. In 1991 at the age of 33 he began his singing career when he performed with Opera East, before other engagements with Opera North and Scottish Opera, but has never been at the forefront of singers in the UK.

When the La Scala approach was made he hadn't sung any Wagner and spoke no German, so for 6 months prior to opening night he studied the role in Milan for up to 10 hours a day earning praise from Barenboim for his tenacity and discipline.

As you would expect this fairy-tale generated world-wide coverage with headlines like:-

***From the pits to operatic heights***

and

***The Billy Elliot of opera -***

Generally, he received good reviews despite having vocal problems in the second performance, but the dream continued with offers for work flooding in from all over the world including an *Otello* for LA opera whose director is none other than Placido Domingo.

But he hasn't forgotten NZ. In an email he told me "*my connections to NZ these days apart from friends there, is that I am a NZ citizen and in my heart NZ is home.*"

Keep dreaming!

singing a Wagner role. In a report of his death in Bloomberg Magazine 'Remembering Pavarotti, King of the High C' Manuela Hoelterhoff recalled:

*Once, when we had ice cream at his apartment on Central Park South, Pavarotti said he hoped some day to sing Wagner's *Lohegrin* -- which would have been his first German role on stage. The swan never picked him up, though he did hoist himself aboard *Otello's* skiff in 1991 for a concert performance at Carnegie Hall that was unusually funny.*

*Suffering from some ailment or other, he arrived with a bigger handkerchief than *Desdemona*, who was sung by an archly amused Kiri Tē Kanawa. Now and again, he'd pour himself lubricating glasses of water or reach into a basket of fruit. Crouching behind him, half hidden from view, was Leone Magiera, a friend from the Modena days, who whispered cues.*

*For all that, the tenor made lovely sounds, but he did not have the stamina to sing the entire role on stage. In our era, the part has belonged to Domingo, who, however, did not have Pavarotti's pingy high C, even as a young divo.*

And there lies the answer - voices suit certain roles. Yet even prestigious news agencies such as the BBC and The Times fail to pick up on these inaccuracies and before we know it they have become the truth. But would they get away with reporting Don Bradman as one of the great bowlers of all time?