

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre



NEWSLETTER

2009 — Another stimulating year

2009 has all the elements of being another stimulating year for the members of the New Zealand Wagner Society. Once again each centre has developed its own programmes which, when looked at nationally, show what a tremendous variety of events are on offer to our members.

The year starts almost immediately. Heath Lees visits Christchurch with his reflection - *15 Years of the New Zealand Wagner Society* and two days later he presents *Exploring Wagner's Music and Theatre* in Dunedin. Auckland starts the year with the first of three scheduled presentations on the *Ring*, a DVD screening of *Das Rheingold*. In early March Wellington gets underway with Heath Lees' look at *15 Years of the New Zealand Wagner Society*.

In April, meetings take place in all the centres. Chris Brodrick will present Christchurch with *A View from the Stage* - a look at the 1876 Bayreuth audience. Dunedin members will view a DVD of Siegfried Jerusalem (International Judge of the 2009 Lexus NZ Song Contest) featuring some of his famed Heldentenor roles at Bayreuth. Heath Lees will enlighten Auckland with *The music of the Ring* and in Wellington Michael Sinclair will present his highly entertaining look at *Wagner on the World Wide Web*. Dunedin members have a second meeting in April where, in the presence of Siegfried Jerusalem, the first three place getters in the Lexus Song Contest will give a Recital, accompanied by Terence Dennis.



Richard Wagner, Paris 1860

The 22 May is the Master's 196th birthday and the WSNZ will join other Wagner Societies, world wide, in the celebrations. Christchurch will hold their traditional pot-luck dinner. Terence Dennis will talk to Dunedin members about *Wagner in Paris* while Auckland will host the AGM.

The variety continues in the Winter months and into Spring with Michael Sinclair giving the last of Auckland's three *Ring* talks in which he examines *The story of the Ring* and how the text evolved. Terence Dennis travels from Dunedin to Christchurch with *Wagner in Paris* while Chris Brodrick goes the other way with *Wagner and the Visual Arts*. This talk will also be given in Christchurch. Auckland welcomes

Elric Hooper who will present his most informative *From Maestro to Myth* in which he examines the evolution of Wagner production.

It is always nice to welcome new speakers and this year we are delighted to do just that. Professor Chris Ackerley from Otago University's English Department will talk on *Wagner and Literature* in which he looks at *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* in TS Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

Both Christchurch and Dunedin will hold meetings in October. Dunedin will screen Luchino Visconti's film *Ludwig* which looks at the life of Wagner's patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria. In Christchurch John Pattinson will present his talk *The Black Sheep of the Family* on Wagner's early opera *Rienzi*.

The year winds up with the traditional Christmas programmes - a Wagner pot pourri for Auckland, a BBQ in Christchurch and a function in Dunedin which will include a screening of *Lohengrin*.

All this plus a Society trip to the Seattle *Ring* and a *Flying Dutchman* in Adelaide. 2009 looks like being another exciting year!

Full details of the 2009 programme are on Page 3. Please note that the Wellington programme is being finalised and once complete will be published in the newsletter.



Deborah Riedel
1958 - 2008

The very sad news arrived in early January of the death of Australian soprano Deborah Riedel who sang the role of Sieglinde in the 2004 Adelaide *Ring*. She had battled cancer for 10 years and died at the age of 50.

Her career included many of the great parts in the repertoire, including Violetta in *La Traviata*, Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* and *Tosca*.

She spent much of her career overseas, singing at such leading theatres as the Bastille in Paris, the Metropolitan in New York and the Vienna State Opera.

In The Australian her agent, Graham Pushee, said "her cancer had been diagnosed in 1999. It was only in the second half of last year that it started to become difficult for her... Riedel brought expressive depth to her roles and she connected with audiences emotionally."

"It was a gorgeous sound, an absolutely beautiful sound with incredible warmth," he said of her soprano voice. "I think her emotional commitment was exceptional."

To this writer, one of the highlights of the Adelaide *Ring* will always be the moment in *Die Walküre* Act 1 when Sieglinde, realising that she is now free, ran across the whole width of the back of the stage drawing her finger along the length of the green curtain. The resulting waves in the material not only foretold what was about to happen but also demonstrated the wonderful sense of freedom (and love) that she now felt.

Wotan's words to Brunnhilde in *Die Walküre* are especially appropriate.

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 Sc 3

WAGNER BRIEFS

Bryn Terfel to sing Hans Sachs

The world famous bass baritone Bryn Terfel will sing the role of Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* for the first time with Welsh National Opera during its 2009/10 season. This new production will be directed by Richard Jones. Terfel is also scheduled to sing Wotan at the Metropolitan Opera in their new Robert Lepage production of the *Ring* which will get underway in 2010.

Los Angeles Opera announces details of its new *Ring*

The Los Angeles Opera has just announced final details of its new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The four operas will be mounted individually over the next year and three complete cycles will be given in May/June 2010 as part of a wider Los Angeles Arts Festival. *The Ring* will be conducted by James Conlon, directed by Achim Freyer and the principal roles will be sung by Vitalij Kowaljow (Wotan), Linda Watson (Brünnhilde), John Treleaven (Siegfried), Gordon Hawkins (Alberich) and Plácido Domingo (Sigmund). Further details can be found on the LA Opera website at: www.losangelesopera.com.

Christoph Schlingensief to direct at Bayreuth again?

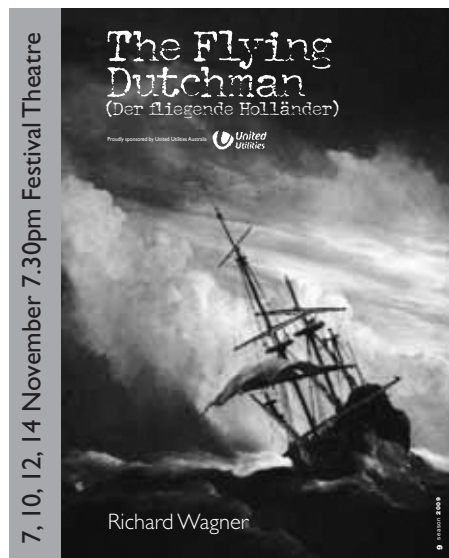
Despite the controversy over his radical staging of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, Katharina Wagner has indicated her desire for Christoph Schlingensief to direct at Bayreuth again. However, due to other commitments this is unlikely to be until after 2015.

Washington National Opera shelves plans for its *Ring* cycle

Due to the current economic climate, Washington National Opera has cancelled plans for performances of its full *Ring* Cycle. The company will go ahead with performances of *Siegfried* this season, but the final instalment, *Götterdämmerung*, will only be given in concert performance during the 2009/10 season and as yet there are no indications as to when it will be staged or when the full cycle will be presented. It also remains unclear how this postponement will affect planning at the San Francisco Opera who is also presenting this Francesca Zambello production.

Eva and Katharina get seven year tenure

Eva Wagner-Pasquier and Katharina Wagner have been given a seven year tenure as new leaders of the Bayreuth Festival. The half sisters took over the leadership of the Festival on 1 September 2008 after their father, Wolfgang, stood down after 57 years at the helm. They have indicated that the seven year term is enough time to give the Festival a new direction.



Dutchman: John Wegner
Senta: Margaret Medlyn
Erik: Stuart Skelton
Daland: Daniel Sumegi
Mary: Gaye MacFarlane
Steersman: Angus Wood
Adelaide Symphony Orchestra
State Opera Chorus

In our newsletter last November we reported on the rumour that the State Opera of South Australia (SOSA) was planning to mount a season of the *Flying Dutchman* in Adelaide during November this year. Very soon after we went to print the SOSA 2009 programme was announced and the rumour confirmed. We are delighted that Margaret Medlyn will sing Senta to John Wegner's *Dutchman* and Stuart Skelton's Erik.

Adelaide is a favourite haunt for members of the WSNZ and we would like to gauge how many of you would be interested in joining a tour to see the production. Unfortunately it is difficult to say how much a package will cost as this will be determined by the number of people wishing to go and the rapidly shifting exchange rate. An **indicative** price would be around \$2,000 per person for travel, 2 nights accommodation and ticket. With performances on 7, 10, 12 & 14 November, the ideal would be to depart NZ on a Friday, attend the performance on a Saturday and return on Sunday.

We will need to have your response back reasonably quickly if we are going to be able to put a tour together. If you are interested please contact Chris Brodrick - cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz or (03) 343 0353; Michael Sinclair - msinclair@xtra.co.nz or (09) 528 0776; George Risk - G.Risk@gns.cri.nz or (04) 4766394; Lesley Kendall - lvkendall@xtra.co.nz or (03) 4878229, **before 28 February 2009.**

WSNZ 2009 Programme details

Auckland

Sunday, 22 February 7.30pm

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

DVD Screening: An introduction to *The Ring – Das Rheingold*

Sunday, 19 April 7.30pm

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

Heath Lees presents: *The music of the Ring* – How the music changed and why

Sunday, 24 May 7.30pm

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

AGM followed by *A Tribute to Wolfgang Wagner* – Wagner's birthday celebrations

Sunday, 12 July 7.30pm

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

Michael Sinclair presents: *The Story of the Ring* – How the text evolved and what it really means

Sunday, 6 September 7.30pm

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

Elric Hooper presents: *From Maestro to Myth* – The evolution of Wagner production

Sunday, 6 December 7.30pm

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

Wagner Pot Pourri – A Christmas celebration. An evening of requests, roundups, selections and surprises

Auckland entrance fee of \$5.00 per person, per meeting except for the AGM which is free and the 6 September meeting where the fee will be \$10.00 per person.

Christchurch

Friday, 20 February 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Heath Lees presents: *The Wagner Society in New Zealand – 15 years on*

Friday, 3 April 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Chris Brodrick presents: *The View from the Stage*. A look at the 1876 Bayreuth audience

Friday, 22 May 7.30pm

Gloria & Garth Streat's home, 20 Pentre Terrace, Cashmere

Pot Luck meal for Richard Wagner's birthday plus DVD *The Wagner Clan*

Friday, 14 August 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Terence Dennis presents: *Wagner in Paris* – Exploring Wagner's periods of crisis and ultimate inspiration in the City of Love

Friday 18 September 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Chris Brodrick presents: *Wagner & the Visual Arts*. A repeat presentation from 2006

Friday, 9 October 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

John Pattinson presents: *The Black Sheep of the Family* – An introduction to *Rienzi*

Sunday, 29 November 6.00pm

Venue: Jonet & Tony Ward's home 949 Shands Road, Christchurch

Christmas BBQ

Wellington

Wednesday 4 March, 7.30pm

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace

Heath Lees presents: *The Wagner Society in New Zealand – 15 years on*

Sunday, 26 April 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace

Michael Sinclair presents: *Wagner on the World Wide Web*

Further details of Wellington's 2009 programme to come.

Dunedin

Sunday, 22 February 2.00pm

Venue: Marama Hall, University of Otago

Heath Lees presents: *Exploring Wagner's Music and Theatre*. Uncovering Wagner's enormous impact on music, theatre, and the arts

Sunday, 5 April 2.00pm

Venue: Music School Lecture Theatre, Sale-Black House, University of Otago

DVD viewing of Siegfried Jerusalem (International Judge of the 2009 Lexus NZ Song Contest) featuring some of his famed Heldentenor roles at Bayreuth

Tuesday, 28 April 7.30pm

Venue: Glenroy Auditorium

Recital by the first three place getters in the Lexus Song Contest, accompanied by Terence Dennis. Siegfried Jerusalem will be present and will speak to the audience

Sunday 24 May 2.00pm

Venue: Music School Lecture Theatre, Sale-Black House, University of Otago

Terence Dennis presents: *Wagner in Paris* – Exploring Wagner's periods of crisis and ultimate inspiration in the City of Love

Sunday 12 July 2.00pm

Venue: University of Otago (Venue TBC)

Chris Ackerley presents: *Wagner and Literature*. 'Chantant dans la coupole' – the voices of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* in TS Eliot's *The Wasteland*

Sunday 27 September 2.00pm

Venue: Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Chris Brodrick presents: *Wagner and the Visual Arts* – A look at some of the artists who were influenced by the Master of Bayreuth. (In conjunction with Friends of the Art Gallery)

Sunday 8 November 2.00pm

Venue: Music School Lecture Theatre, Sale-Black House, University of Otago
Ludwig - Luchino Visconti.

A DVD screening of the film based on the life of Wagner's benefactor, King Ludwig II of Bavaria.

Sunday, 6 December 2.00pm

Venue: Music School Lecture Theatre, Sale-Black House, University of Otago

Complete viewing of the famed Bayreuth production of *Lohengrin*, and our end-of-year Christmas function

New members

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Bruce & Hazel Martin Christchurch

David & Sheila Ward Dunedin

Deaths

Sadly, we report the death of Wellington member Peg (Margaret) Hutchison.

Our condolences go out to Margaret & Helen Medlyn on the death of their mother.

A Riotous Rienzi – But Still A Revelation

After years of waiting, Heath Lees finally got to see a live performance of Wagner's early opera Rienzi. Some things were not quite what he had expected . . .

You may not hear much about it, but Bremen is a great city for opera. Proudly claiming its 1200-year-old place as the seaport-capital of North-West Germany, it boasts a founding membership among those medieval towns that once made up the Hanseatic League. You can still see the monument to the Bremen Town Musicians, immortalised in fairy-tale by the brothers Grimm. Nowadays, the city has been re-developed and beautified, the river Weser curls in and out of its wooded banks, offering a gently moving foreground to the showpiece architecture that embraces both the medieval and the modern. Bremen is twinned with the port of Bremerhaven, and its inhabitants number just over half a million, about a third of Auckland's population. Situated near the edge of the North Sea, it is about as close as Germany gets to Denmark.

So what made Katharina Wagner choose this city for the revival of her great-grand-dad's first French-style Grand Opera *Rienzi*, a work that she has often sought to re-claim from its carefully ignored Bayreuth status — and a work that many of us have waited a lifetime to see on a professional stage?

For a start there's the Goethe-Theater opera-house's new director, Hans-Joachim Frey, full of new ideas for the place, and with lots of contacts in today's opera-scene. The city also has an amazing tradition of opera-giving, with regular repertoire throughout the year, and visits from some of the biggest names. Above all, there's a keen republican history in a town where patricians, artisans, seafarers and commoners once rubbed shoulders with each other, bent on achieving a strong but democratic political organisation that reflected the urban glories of Rome.

Rienzi is of course based in 14th-century Rome and, as this production underlines, the city is as much a character in the opera as any of the human players. That said however, the whole thing revolves around the single figure of Rienzi, which narrows the focus, and creates an impossibly Herculean role for the tenor. In Bremen, this lot fell to Mark Duffin who managed to stay standing to the end, and still had some high notes to spare. Amazing. But he was also supported by other singers of excellent quality, notably the two women, Patricia Andress and Tamara Klivadenko. In addition, he had an orchestra that was ably directed by Christoph Ulrich Meier.

Rienzi is the opera that attracted the famous story of Wagner climbing up a ladder to put



Mark Duffin (*Rienzi*) in Katharina Wagner's production.

the hands of the clock back when he saw just how long it was. In Bremen, Katharina Wagner made numerous cuts to condense five large acts into three reasonable ones, without losing too much of the story.

And what is the story of *Rienzi*? Easy. The first half has him arriving in Rome, determined to clean it up and make it strong (this is the part Hitler is supposed to have liked best). In the second half however, things go against the flamboyant leader, now a self-proclaimed Tribune. He becomes lustful, arrogant and cruel, causing many of Rome's dissident groups to unite in planning his downfall and death.

In this production however, modern shocks abound, seemingly for their own sake, while the importance of the political milieu and classical tradition seems entirely ignored. Rome's opening nobility is signified by a huge, classical statue of Mother Republic squarely placed on the steps of the Capitol but as the opera continues, she metamorphoses from maternal ideal to sexy caricature. Partisan conversation takes place in a hairdressing salon. Stalinesque "rivers of blood" flow down the stage-wide steps into convenient trays near the footlights. *Rienzi* himself becomes a faded rock-star in a too-obvious parallel that is boringly overdone. As a righteous warrior, he holds aloft something like an industrial cleaner (cleaning up Rome, get it?) and a flame-thrower (ah no, it's really a modern hero's brandished sword). Mother Rome's original orb becomes a bomb with a lit fuse. Pink underwear abounds, probably thanks to the old story that Wagner wore it whenever he felt like a bit of cross-dressing.

In a sentence, this is the Theatre of the Overwhelmingly Shocking, with which Katharina Wagner has already scandalised traditional Bayreuth audiences at *Die Meistersinger*, but seems for some people to promise a young and revolutionary approach to Wagner production. We shall see. If the current reviews are anything to go by, she has

few supporters. 'Farce', 'mockery' and cringe-making excess' are just a few of the labels that reviewers of *Rienzi* have thrown at her.

And what of Wagner's work in the midst of all this apparent below-the-belt mockery and over-the-top production? Despite everything, there was a wonderful sense of revelation: the work is not just a ham-fisted, over-inflated apprentice piece from a learner-composer who was simply trying to stun the Meyerbeerian audiences of the day. It has genuine strength, musical richness, and some aspects that are highly prophetic of the Wagner of the Future.

Many writers will tell you that anyone with the misfortune to see/hear *Rienzi* must sit through hours of third-rate note-spinning until the appearance of the famous number *Allmächt'ger Vater*, the only item that points to the promise to come. This is wrong, especially from a musical point of view. Prefiguring Wagner's leitmotif technique, there are recurring themes that bring with them clear dramatic gestures, and are sometimes artfully combined to produce more complex psychological effects within the drama. The famous opening trumpet note has crucial recurrences too, occasionally with a different chord and character to follow it. Every so often, the orchestra is thrillingly handled, thanks to Wagner's already-unerring ear for solo colour, dramatic tension and, above all, for moments of transport where the orchestral wave seems to surge out and carry you away into a new, symphonic world.

In the end of course, you have to admit that *Rienzi* is not a well-formed opera. Maybe it's not even a good opera. But it is certainly an important work, and doesn't deserve to be locked away in embarrassed silence. Even this wayward, no-holds-barred production points to real dramatic and musical power, and reveals a vital stepping-stone where all Wagner's important innovations and concerns are already apparent and, better still, are beginning to work their special magic.