



WELCOME THE THE WORLD OF 2017

Happy New Year everyone, although we are only half way through the second month of 2017 and already the year seems as though it's six months old!

Despite all the distraction from the other side of the Pacific, the Wagner Society of New Zealand is, once again, able to offer its members a full range of activities for the year. Regular speakers, such as Heath Lees, John Davidson, Terence Dennis, John Pattinson and John Drummond return along with Trevor Clarke who will tour the four centres with his *Wagner and Visual Art* presentation. Two screenings will be held during the year with Terence Dennis introducing *Fidelio*, and John Pattinson, *Lohengrin*. In addition, to co-incide with the Met-live screening, Heath Lees presents "Der Rosenkavalier: A Match-maker between Wagner and Mozart".

This year's Annual General Meeting will return to Auckland where, it should be noted, there will be a new meeting venue. Like Christchurch in 2016, Auckland now finds that the University venue that has been used since our inception is no longer available to hire. The new Auckland venue will be at the St Heliers Community Centre at the slightly earlier time of 7.00pm.

Over the Summer you should have received an email with information

about the San Francisco *Ring* in 2018. The response from members has been extremely positive and it looks as though we will have a party of WSNZ members making the trip. This, along with the strong uptake for Bayreuth Festival tickets for 2017 - we have nine members who will be attending - and for the Jonas Kaufmann *Parsifal* performance in Sydney this August, is most encouraging as it means that we can look to offering more trips in the future with a degree of confidence. We should, at this point, mention the sterling work that Michael Sinclair puts into making these trips happen. With his ear very much to the ground, he is able to ensure any ticket applications that we make are early.

Heath Lees' back page article in this newsletter tells of life-long Wagnerian, Shirley Breese, who became an 'extra' for the Melbourne *Ring* and how being part of the production gave her a different perspective on the work. This passage struck me as being extremely apt: "Like the screams of herself and the other factory-worker-dwarves in *Rheingold* not because they see the ring ... but because they see that the ring is now on the finger of Alberich, and they grasp with horror the domination he intends." Well put!

WAGNER MURMURS

- Christian Thielemann will conduct two cycles of the *Ring* in Dresden in January/February 2018.
- Renowned Wagnerian bass-baritone Gerd Grochowski died suddenly in January, days after performing Wotan in *Die Walküre* in Wiesbaden.
- Melbourne Opera will perform *Lohengrin* in August 2017.
- Simon O'Neill sang the title role in *Siegfried* for the first time with the Hong Kong Philharmonic in January.
- Jonas Kaufmann will sing his first Tristan in concert performances of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in April 2018.
- Opera Australia have another Wagner co-production on the horizon – *Der Fliegende Holländer* by the Spanish troupe La Fura dels Baus, in a co-production with Teatro Real Madrid, Opéra de Lyon and Bergen National Opera.

- Michael Sinclair

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Leonardo Milani Hamilton
Cynthia Rutherford Wellington
Colin Cheyne Dunedin
Richard Clarke Wellington

THERE'S A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

Congratulations to Honorary Life Member Margaret Medlyn who has recently completed her PhD. By using her experience in roles by Wagner and Verdi her thesis illustrates how a performer embodies a character during opera—and how a composer can influence that embodiment through the opera's score.

To coincide with her graduation in December 2016, Victoria University of Wellington has prepared a short video feature, which can be accessed at: www.victoria.ac.nz/news/2017/01/the-stages-of-an-operatic-performance

Margaret Medlyn as Salome
(photo: Gabriela Tylesova)



John Davidson completes his review of the 2016 Bayreuth Festival.

In terms of combined production and musical standards, *Tristan and Parsifal* were clearly the pick of the bunch. Katharina Wagner's *Tristan*, for me, redressed the deficit caused by her unfortunate *Meistersinger*. Her Act 2, which took place in a prison, was extremely effective. Guards trained searchlights on the lovers as they desperately sought the darkness. Act 3, where holograms of Isolde were presented to Tristan in his delirium, also worked very well. Musically, Christian Thielemann elicited a mesmerizing orchestral sound while Stephen Gould and Petra Lang were splendid as the lovers, both individually and in combination. Iain Paterson's Kurwenal and Georg Zeppenfeld's King Marke were of high quality with mezzo Christa Mayer, as Brangäne, completing the stellar cast. What an amazing experience!

There had been excited anticipation for Uwe Eric Laufenberg's new *Parsifal*, and even a minor eleventh-hour crisis when conductor Andris Nelsons withdrew, apparently as a result of perceived interference by Thielemann, the Festspiele musical director. Into the breach stepped the 78-year-old Hartmut Haenchen who proceeded to offer a thrilling rendition of the score. Once again, the cast was outstanding. I doubt that you could hear Gurnemanz sung better than by Georg Zeppenfeld. American Ryan McKinney sang a most moving Amfortas. Gerd Grokowski, sadly recently deceased, and Elena Pankratova impressed as Klingsor and Kundry. Parsifal was Klaus Florian Vogt, and here I experienced something of a surprise since there was little trace of the silvery, 'grown up choir boy' sound which I had heard as recently as 2015 when he sang *Lohengrin* at the Deutsche Oper. This time, I heard a much more 'normal', robust tenor sound. His voice was clear, powerful, compelling and enthusiastically received by the audience.

This was my third *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, and this production is a worthy successor to the previous Stefan Herheim version, the disastrous mess offered by Christoph Schlingensiefel has been consigned to the dust bin of bad memories. Laufenberg's Montsalvat was some kind of community, temple, or monastery located in the Middle East, probably Iraq. At the start, we appeared to be seeing refugees who'd been taken in for shelter. Then tourists, in western dress, wandered in mingling with the 'monks' followed by a squad of American GIs in battle dress who were searching for terrorists. Kundry arrived in Muslim dress, black head scarf and robe.



Parsifal (Klaus Florian Vogt), Gurnemanz (Georg Zeppenfeld) and Kundry (Elena Pankratova). Photo: Enrico Nawrath/Bayreuther Festspiele

Amfortas took his bath in a large bowl/basin and Parsifal arrived in a smart suit. Just before his entrance, there was a surprise when a young boy, apparently belonging to the tourist group, dropped to the ground, seemingly dead. The immediate thought was - the 'swan', but when Parsifal appeared he was carrying the mortally wounded swan.

More surprises were in store. Prior to the Grail Ceremony, there was a perfect example of how the judicious use of video projection can enhance a performance when the entire proscenium arch became a giant screen. Rapid, moving images grew out of one another - starting with the 'monastery', and then zooming out, like Google Earth in reverse, to show the Middle East, the world, the sky, the moon, into the solar system, and the vast spaces of the universe. It was electrifying.

As for the Grail ceremony, what can I say? It is no wonder that Amfortas was reluctant to carry out his duty as, like the crucifixion, he was stabbed in the side so that blood flowed first into a chalice to be drunk by the officiating 'monks', then into a channel round the rim of the now covered bowl/basin from which the entire 'congregation' drew their sustenance. It was intensely dramatic but gruesome in the extreme, and I was not surprised to learn that one member of the audience had thrown up all over the unfortunate person sitting in front.

After this, Klingsor's domain was always going to be comparatively tame, but it was extremely effective none the less. Parsifal, now a GI in battle dress, arrived to be greeted by a crowd of Muslim women dressed as Kundry had been. After recovering from their initial panic, they were soon all over him, only to be given their marching orders by the Flower Maidens who arrived as belly dancers. They proceeded to entertain the increasingly undressed Parsifal in a Turkish bath, complete with a backdrop

of blue mosaics. We had thus had two stereotypes of Muslim females.

Kundry, very much a mother figure in shimmering dress, entertained Parsifal with a glass of wine before jumping on him for the 'kiss'. At the back of the stage was an upper-level glass cabinet filled with captured 'trophy', mainly crosses and crucifixes. At the confrontation with Klingsor, Parsifal grabbed the spear, snapped it in half and made a cross which he held up to cause the cabinet and Klingsor to collapse.

By Act 3, the 'monastery' had sprouted luxuriant greenery, as though now in a fertile tropical environment, and an ancient Kundry was pushing Gurnemanz in a wheel chair. Parsifal arrived as a special forces commando and planted the 'spear' in the ground after Gurnemanz recognized it. More greenery sprouted before Amfortas opened Titurel's coffin to find only dust before climbing in himself. Parsifal, now dressed in a civilian suit, reappeared with the spear. Young women tourists stripped naked and danced discreetly in a rain shower at the back of the stage. Other tourists tossed religious symbols into Titurel's coffin. The entire cast then moved back stage to become obscured in a fine mist.

It was most moving and thought provoking, even if not an illustration of the kind of spiritual journey that purists might have been seeking. The message seemed to be to abandon formal religion and return to nature, and this appeared to be reinforced by the small static figure crouching throughout at the very top of the stage area, above the level of Klingsor's room, which could have been a lifeless and useless God.

Quite apart from the operas, Bayreuth remains a wonderful place to visit, and I'm so grateful to WSNZ for making this possible. You're likely to meet a range of weird and wonderful Wagnerians from all over the world and there's a real buzz in the hotels and in the Festspielhaus auditorium and grounds. The new Wahnfried museum is excellent, and the graves of Wagner and Cosima in the back garden are lovingly tended. Sculptor Ottmar Hörl's contribution this year consisted of dwarf Wagner figures in different colours all over town. Such attractions as parks, palaces and the town cemetery retain their magnetic appeal. Because of the general terrorist alert and a concern that the Muslim theme of *Parsifal* might be provocative, there was strict security around the Festspielhaus and gardens. But the week passed off without incident. I just wish I were going again this year when there will be the bonus of the eagerly awaited new *Meistersinger* which is replacing the *Holländer*.

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2017 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 19 March at 7.00pm

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

Richard Wagner And Visual Art: Trevor Clarke, President of the Richard Wagner Society (Victoria, Australia), presents a talk that reveals stunning artworks associated with the composer, his family, associates, ideas and music dramas

Sunday, 23 April at 3.30pm

Please note earlier starting time

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

Tristan und Isolde: Katharina Wagner's staging from 2016 Bayreuth Festival with Christian Thielemann, Stephen Gould, Evelyn Herlitzius and Christa Mayer

Sunday, 21 May at 7.00pm

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

WSNZ AGM followed by Behind the Score: The Tristan Effect: Concert featuring conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra who, present the story of the opera's creation and its impact on musicians and artists of all kinds. Introduced by Chris Brodrick.

Sunday, 30 July at 7.00pm

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

A Matchmaker between Wagner and Mozart: Heath Lees presents *Der Rosenkavalier*

Sunday, 17 September at 7.00pm

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

Visions of Valhalla: Heath Lees and John Davidson's joint presentation featuring John's recently published collection of Wagner poems. A selection of these will be read, with musical comment, by Heath through recording clips and piano excerpts.

Sunday 10 December 7.00pm

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

Christmas Function: Featuring a Pot-pourri of Wagneriana plus our famous cake and wine



THE INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
RICHARD WAGNER
SOCIETIES

We'd like to draw your attention to the English-language version of the Richard Wagner Verband International (RWVI). The site has a number of interesting items of news and events (including the first ever Wagner production in Singapore!)

www.richard-wagner.org

Wellington

Sunday, 26 March at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

Richard Wagner And Visual Art:

Trevor Clarke presents (details opposite)

Sunday 7 May at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Church

(note different venue)

Visions of Valhalla: Heath Lees and John Davidson's joint presentation featuring John's recently published collection of Wagner poems. A selection of these will be read, with musical comment by Heath through recording clips and piano excerpts.

Sunday 18 June at 11.00am

Venue: Paramount Cinema

Joint Meeting with the Opera Society.

A screening of Valencia *Siegfried*.

Sunday 16 July at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

Documentary Film. Details later.

Sunday 1 October at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

The View from the Stage Part 3 (1924-45) Chris Brodrick presents his illustrated talk about famous and interesting people who attended Bayreuth Festival during the most difficult period in its history

Late November or early December

End of Year Party. Details to be confirmed.

Dunedin

Sunday, 5 March at 1.30pm

Please note earlier starting time

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa Viewing

Lounge, 192 Castle Street

Wagner And His Operatic

Perspectives - Beethoven: Fidelio.

Terence Dennis introduces this legendary performance, directed by Otto Schenk, conducted by Leonard Bernstein

Sunday, 2 April at 2.00pm

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

Richard Wagner And Visual Art:

Trevor Clarke presents (see Auckland, above)

Sunday, 21 May at 2.00pm

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

Legendary Wagner Singers:

Terence Dennis shows rare film footage of some of the greatest Wagner singers of the 20th century.

Sunday, 10 Sept at 2.00pm

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

Weber and Wagner: Kapellmeister in Dresden. Terence Dennis presents film and sound examples from Weber's masterpieces.

Christchurch

Friday, 17 March at 7.30pm

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

The Golden Ring: Chris Brodrick introduces the 1964 BBC documentary on Solti, Decca and the first-ever complete recording of the *Ring* recording

Friday, 7 April at 7.30pm

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

Richard Wagner And Visual Art: Trevor Clarke, President of the Richard Wagner Society (Victoria, Australia), presents a talk that reveals stunning artworks associated with the composer, his family, associates, ideas and music dramas

Friday, 5 May at 7.30pm

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

Visions of Valhalla: Heath Lees and John Davidson's joint presentation featuring John's recently published collection of Wagner poems. A selection of these will be read, with musical comment by Heath through recording clips and piano excerpts.

Friday, 18 August at 7.30pm

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

Lohengrin: John Pattinson introduces and plays some excerpts to lead into a screening of the complete opera on the following Sunday

Sunday, 20 August at 3.30pm

Venue: Cynthia Hawes & Andy Buchanan, 74 Hackthorne Road, Cashmere

Lohengrin: Performance on DVD, pausing after Act 2 for a meal before proceeding to the third and final act

Friday, 27 October at 7.30pm

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

The Most Notorious Chord in the World – the so-called *Tristan* chord.

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

Date to be announced

Venue: TBA

Christmas Social Function

Sunday, 8 Oct at 2.00pm

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

Tuba or Not Tuba? That is the

Question: John Pattinson traces the development of this noble creature from the depths of the Rhine to its emergence on the modern concert platform.

Sunday, 26 Nov at 12.00 noon

A Wagnerian Christmas: Details TBA.

MELBOURNE *Ring* — INS

Heath Lees reflects on last year's Melbourne Ring revival.

Cultural Cassandras tell us that you always lose out when you try to pull off a really good event a second time. Either you never quite reach the standard of the first event, or else an excellent repeat merely takes the gloss off the original.

Nothing could disprove this more than last year's re-staging of the 2013 Melbourne *Ring*. Breathless enthusiasm at the end of every performance made seasoned *Ring*-goers leap to their feet to proclaim the best *Ring* they'd ever seen. Professional Wagnerian careers were set in gold: Lise Lindstrom, a beautifully human Brünnhilde and a godlike singer. Stefan Vinke, whose Siegfried evolved heroically over time, but whose voice was glorious from start to finish. Warwick Fyfe, a last-minute substitute in 2013, now metamorphosed into a sinister, subtly underplayed Alberich. Amber Wagner, the new Sieglinde, whose honeyed tones reminded many of Jessye Norman in the same role. Conductor Pietari Inkinen, another late replacement in the earlier production, now grown confidently into the music and continuously producing thrilling effects from the vast, sonorously spaced climaxes to the tiny, bird-like rustles.

And what about the production? In 2013, Neil Armfield took a lot of critical flak for littering the stage with stuffed animals, for sexing up the Rhinemaidens into a trio of Tivoli showgirls and for creating a rainbow bridge of Andy Warhol-like Marilyn Monroes, dizzily soaring aloft in a V-For-Valhalla shape that reached up to the sky, à la Busby Berkeley.

But just by mentioning that Hollywood genius of the geometric chorus-line, you are revealing Armfield's creative approach. His concern was not so much to mount Wagner's *Ring* in the theatre, but rather to take Wagner's *Ring* and transform it *through* the theatre — through the theatre's history, its practised routines, its famous scenes and its mythic memories (its "tropes" says Armfield).

It's difficult to say how far this succeeded in 2013, when the surprise factor tended to put people off (especially those who continually repeated "is it what Wagner intended?")



This time though, the jokes and surprises had lost much of their sense of shock; people could see the humanity, the originality, and the ever-changing tonalities of the staging.

Most effective (in both versions) was the community impact that Armfield generated through his use of seventy-five 'volunteers' onstage in certain scenes during the four operas. Internally, the volunteers added much to the numbers (eg the gradual unrolling of sleeping bodies at the opening) and of innocence (eg the touching farewells to Siegfried off on his Rhine Journey). Externally, there was a huge element of 'outreach' that many theatrical directors would die for. As well as appearing onstage in a skilful high-tech, multi-million dollar production, these volunteers continued to go about their daily routines in real life, and became living propagandists for Wagner and for *The Ring*. Melburnians through and through, they naturally spoke about their Wagner experiences in the workplace, in the home, among friends . . . people began to think there might be some fun in this Wagner thing after all.

For instance:- Liz and I went into a trendy Chapel Street boutique to buy her a top. The bubbly sales assistant — sixteen if she was a day — wanted to know what we had come to Melbourne for. We ummed and aahed so as not to provide embarrassment. Her years betrayed that she wouldn't have listened to any music earlier than say, Justin Bieber. After our puny attempts to stall, we eventually admitted that it was an opera, it was Wagner, and it was called *The Ring*. "Oh," she said brightly, "I'm in it". And she was! A trainee dancer, she was one of the Tivoli girls with a sparkly head-dress and a technicolour ostrich-feather. And she was loving it!

Another for instance (as Benny Hill used to say):- the immediate past-president of the Wagner Society of Victoria, Shirley Breese, decided in her (slowly) advancing years that she too would become an unpaid extra in a work that she'd known and loved all her life but never been physically involved with. During the 2013 *Ring*, she'd had neither the time nor the courage. No such restrictions the second time around, and the experience of 'doing' Wagner up front opened up her world. She admits (in an article for the Bayreuth Wagner Verband, just published) that she suddenly realised so many things about the music and the drama that she had never discovered in all her time as an audience member. Like the screams of herself and the other factory-worker-dwarves in *Rheingold* not because they see the ring (which is what she used to think) but because they see that the ring is now on the finger of Alberich, and they grasp with horror the domination he intends.

Shirley has now gone on to work out new meanings and insights for other Wagner moments that she once knew just as lines of text. She and the other volunteers have all gone through what amounts to a course of 'hands-on Wagner'. It has altered their perceptions of his work, and some of them would even say that to a degree, it has changed their lives.

And so said many of the audiences, who found themselves similarly transformed and overcome by the superlative performances at the Melbourne *Ring*, second time around. Were the the cultural Cassandras wrong? Was it right to revive the 2013 *Ring*? Had it been worth braving the odds to repeat the whole thing?

You bet it had . . .