



HAPPY NEW YEAR

Welcome to WSNZ 2018 which, judging by the programme laid out on page three, will be another Wagner filled year. On top of our regular events there are a couple of specials. The first comes in the middle of the year when a group of WSNZ members will travel to San Francisco to attend the *Ring Cycle*, and in November when Opera Australia presents a production of *Die Meistersinger* in Melbourne. (See page 3.)

In January we received our allocation of tickets for the 2018 Bayreuth Festival. The seven sets were quickly taken up by members who had previously indicated to WSNZ Secretary, Peter Rowe, their interest in attending. If you'd like the chance to purchase tickets for future

Festivals please contact Peter (Peter.Rowe@minterrellison.co.nz).

Judging by the number of events around the opera, 2018 would appear to be the year of *Die Meistersinger*. Heath's first back page article for the year gets the ball rolling while, through the year, Peter Bassett, Roger Wilson and DVD screenings continue the theme.

Lastly a big thank you to the members who responded to our call for newsletter contributions. We always look forward to hearing from members who have something to say or would like to share their thoughts about a particular performance. Please keep the contributions coming.

ABC - ASHDOWN'S BAYREUTH COMMENTARY

Michael Ashdown, who attended the Bayreuth Festival in both 2016 and 2017, offers us his comments on the productions:

I enjoyed *Parsifal*, which in many ways came off a lot better last year than in its premiere year (2016). Conductor Hartmut Haenchen had much more time to consolidate his reading for the orchestra, and this together with a new, more powerful *Parsifal*, tenor Andreas Schager, resulted in a much tighter, more dramatic experience. Some people found the production too conservative, conventional or even downright provincial, but generally I thought it was an interesting ('post-religious') take on *Parsifal* for our times, and aesthetically pleasing to boot.

The Castorf *Ring*, which I've seen twice now, seemed to me to be largely a wholesale attempt to paint red all over an incomparable masterpiece, with bits and pieces of the original still poking through, rather like a palimpsest. That said, I still enjoyed parts of it and the very impressive sets made up for some deficiencies. However, it shouldn't be forgotten that Castorf allegedly didn't even refer to the score for his inspiration, which, considering that the heart of mature-era Wagner in particular resides in the score above all,

is strictly speaking all but unimaginable. I certainly appreciated Castorf for at least 'going the whole hog' as it were with his 'Konzept' but I remain very ambivalent about it. Whatever way, though, cast and conductor (Marek Janowski) were still very strong and thoroughly dedicated to the cause, and that too counted for a lot. (Rex Benson gives his views of Castorf on page 2.)



Johannes Martin Kränzle as Sixtus Beckmesser.
Photograph: Enrico Nawrath/EPA

Meanwhile, the *Meistersinger* featured a particularly strong cast and conductor (Philippe Jordan), although the Eva, Anne Schwanewilms, was vocally rather less so. The stagecraft was impressive and as such was actually very enjoyable and funny... however, I thought director Barrie Kosky's attempts to highlight perceived/alleged anti-Semitism, etc.

TRUMP ON WAGNER

"You know what?" Trump continued shouting across to me. "Went to the opening of the Met last night. *Ring Cycle*. Plácido Domingo. Five hours. Dinner started at twelve. Beat that. I said to Ivana, what, are you crazy? Never again."

– Extract from *The Vanity Fair Diaries 1983-1992* by Tina Brown, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

The New Yorker music critic and *The Rest is Noise* blogger Alex Ross, writes "Admirers of the perpetually beleaguered art of Richard Wagner will be relieved to know that Donald Trump evidently has a low opinion of the composer. The passage above, dated Sept. 25, 1987, appears in Tina Brown's addictively absorbing *Vanity Fair Diaries*. A curious footnote: although the *Ring* was in the air at the Met that month...the season opened with Plácido Domingo in the title role of *Otello*. The future Horror-Clown seems to have had no idea what he was seeing." #SAD

Alex Ross will be in New Zealand in May touring with Bianca Andrew & Stroma under the auspices of Chamber Music NZ.

interesting but ultimately somewhat questionable, arbitrary and contrived. At the end of Act 2, for example, Beckmesser suddenly appears as a Jewish caricature during the final brawl, and a giant inflated head of this same caricature fills the entire stage at the very end! The articles in the programme booklet included all sorts of arguments to rationalise this approach, which is all very well, but one quote from Cosima's diaries was conspicuous by its absence. On 16 March 1873, Wagner told Cosima, specifically referring to the character of Beckmesser: "With that venerable pedantry, I conceived the German in his true nature, in his best light."

Interestingly, for the most part, Johannes Martin Kränzle played Beckmesser absolutely straight – unlike the notably camp depiction of the other *Meistersingers*. I still cheered Kosky at the end, but my feelings towards his production were, again, ambivalent.

REX PUTS THE BOOT IN

After ABC we have BBC (Benson Blisters Castorf!) Rex Benson shares his opinion of Castorf's Bayreuth Ring.

Having, for some 55 years, listened to and latterly watched various productions of Wagner's music dramas, I decided to 'bite the bullet' in 2017 and attend the Bayreuth Festival, thanks to the good offices of the WSNZ and Michael Ashdown. First up was *Tristan*, featuring some great singing and conducting, but laced with moments that can only be described as bizarre. *Parsifal* was fine, with Georg Zeppenfeld quite splendid as Gurnemanz. I boycotted the production of *Meistersinger*, directed by someone describing himself as a 'gay Jewish kangaroo', and was pleased I had done so when I read the boulezian.blogspot review.

On to Frank Castorf's *Ring*, which quickly became known, for good reasons, as *The Cast-Off Ring*. It is, in my opinion, a travesty, despite the rare and presumably unintended moments of illumination. I did not come to this 'cold', however, as it was shown over a single weekend on a UK Arts channel in 2016 and a friend had sent me the DVDs. I therefore knew what to expect.

Let me be clear: I have no objection, in principal, to unconventional interpretations of a Wagner work, provided the spirit of the original remains intact. My gripe with Castorf is rather that he is unable or unwilling to let the drama run for ten minutes without inserting some fatuous diversion, as if the music and stage action were not enough to sustain interest.

In *Siegfried*, for example, a number of scenes take place, for reasons yet to be fathomed, under the benign gaze of some Mt Rushmore-type heads, namely those of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, an unholy quartet to be sure, given that they include two of the worst mass murderers in history. Gee, thanks Frank. At one point, incongruously and grotesquely, one of the eyes in these heads comes to life and starts winking at the audience! Castorf delights in the inappropriate: characters pulling silly faces, or the sudden appearance of a drop screen with ancient Russian film footage being shown thereon. And look, I haven't even mentioned the crocodiles ... 'Crocodiles??' I hear you cry? No doubt the cognoscenti regard these asides as examples of the type of avant-garde theatre for which Castorf is apparently noted. To my untrained eye it's all pure infantilism.

In *Das Rheingold*, the distractions are primarily of a fleshly nature, with Wotan seemingly intent on committing frothage with all the female cast members,



Das Rheingold: 'Golden Motel' with Wotan's videographer.

including a buxom Erda, at the 'Golden Motel' on Route 66. Adding to the mass of heaving bodies is a chap with a video camera, apparently recording the goings-on for Wotan's scrapbook. As he darts about, the screen outside on the roof shows the events inside the room. At times we see only the motel room itself, at others only the screen, and at yet others both at once! The latter creates a curious disjuncture because, although the cameraman is visible in the room setting, he has disappeared in the screen version above, to general relief.

Eventually Wotan and Loge make their way down to Nibelheim, which in this production involves a short diversion around the corner from the motel. And here they come, threading their way through the petrol pumps, each with a character firmly in tow: Alberich and Mime, with large paper bags squashed down over their heads and their hands tied behind their backs. Er, what was that again?? But wait: there is an upside to this unexpected plot development. If Alberich is already captive when the scene begins, then there is no need for all that malarkey about him changing himself into a serpent, and then into a tiny toad, so that he can be jumped on and overpowered ... you would think? No such luck.

In the end, Alberich curses, Erda buxoms, Wotan gropes, Giants squabble, Donner hammers, Maidens lament, and Loge perorates to this effect: "... they hasten to their end, though they think themselves strong and enduring ... I feel like turning myself into flame and burning them all up ... I'll think about it: who knows what I'll do ...?"

Castorf alas, ever the saboteur, makes mockery of Loge's description, as there is not the slightest sign of hastening from

any quarter. Indeed, these gods ain't going nowhere, lounging about in various states of lassitude, with Wotan, resolutely static, gazing disinterestedly into the distance and puffing on what seems like his 50th cigarette since the show started.

It seems not to have occurred to Castorf that the hollow triumphalism of the coda is fatally undermined if the gods remain rooted to the spot, and are not seen to be making even a token effort to cross the imagined Rainbow Bridge, minimal as it would be in any case, being only a short leaden-footed trek onto the roof of their motel.

I won't comment further, except to say that Michael and I were exposed to a local reaction when we returned to our guesthouse following *Götterdämmerung*. A group of youngish German chaps were there, and one of them asked "Have you just been up The Hill?" "Yes." "Did you enjoy the production at all?" Michael replied (very cautiously) "... in some respects." And that's when the fellow burst out to his companions "See what I mean!? German culture is dead!!"

Make of that what you will.

It occurred to me later to raise the question as to who sanctioned or commissioned this production, since it was clearly undertaken by someone who didn't have a clue what Wagner was 'on about'. This was touched on by the Greek critic Kyriakos Loukakos, who had this to say, among many other things:

"... And, further, whether a festival, so special as indisputably the Bayreuth one has been for more than a century, should endanger its global status by so overtly overlooking its primary cause of establishment, that is the presentation of Wagner's works in ways conforming to his explicit intentions. Lastly what could be evaluated as an ethical matter is whether Wagner's own descendants should host so provocatively alienating an adaptation of his plots in 'their' theatre, long considered a Mecca-like destination for Wagnerites all over the Planet."

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Kathryn & John SinclairAuckland
Richard Hitchings.....Christchurch
Nigel & Kath PrickettAuckland

CHRISTCHURCH - NEW VENUE

The Christchurch branch meetings of the WSNZ will have a new venue in 2018. As the University of Canterbury facilities are still unavailable and after the issues faced accessing the Rangi Ruru Performing Arts Centre, the local committee has decided to re-locate to: The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester Street. The Pro-Cathedral offers modern facilities and, most importantly, plenty of off-street parking.

WSNZ 2018 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday 25 February at 7.00pm

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

The Ring and The Rings, Wagner, Tolkien and Peter Jackson

Heath Lees explores the links that connect Richard Wagner, the original Lord of The Ring, with J.R.R. Tolkien's book, Peter Jackson's film, and Howard Shore's music. Heath reveals how Shore followed the Master's musical legacy, by including bits of Wagner in his soundtracks, and by making free with Wagner's so-called leitmotifs.

Sunday, 15 April at 7.00pm

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

An evening with Terence Dennis

Sunday, 20 May at 7.00pm

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

AGM & The Golden Ring: the 1964 BBC documentary on the first ever complete recording of the *Ring* (the Solti *Ring*)

Sunday, 12 August at 7.00pm

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

Die Meistersinger – Models, Motivations and Misconceptions.

Peter Bassett looks ahead to the Melbourne *Die Meistersinger* that will be staged later this year. What was Wagner's motivation, and what were the models on which he drew when creating his characters, text and music?

Sunday, 30 September at 3.00pm

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

Heath Lees introduces a complete Opera (Details to come)

Sunday, 9 December at 7.00pm

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

Christmas potpourri

Wellington

Sunday, 29 April at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Church

Der Rosenkavalier: a match-maker between Mozart and Wagner,

Heath Lees will present a full evening's 'tour' of *Der Rosenkavalier* demonstrating how effortlessly Strauss combined the elegance of the Mozartian world with the richness of Wagnerian composition.

Sunday, 17 June at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

Documentary - TBA

Sunday, 8 July 2018

Venue: Paramount Cinema

Götterdämmerung: Joint Opera Society/Wagner Society screening

Christchurch

Friday, 2 March at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester Street.

The Ring and The Rings, Wagner, Tolkien and Peter Jackson

See Auckland 25 February

Friday, 18 May at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester Street.

1990 NZ Festival production of Die Meistersinger

Acclaimed NZ bass baritone Roger Wilson will present a talk on the 1990 NZ Festival of the Arts production of *Die Meistersinger* in which he sang the role of Fritz Kothner. Even after a quarter of a century this production is still seen as a watershed in our cultural history.

Friday, 17 August at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester Street.

Die Meistersinger – Models, Motivations and Misconceptions.

See Auckland 12 August

Friday, 7 September at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Centre, St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester Street.

Der Rosenkavalier: a match-maker between Mozart and Wagner

See Wellington 29 April.

Sunday 14 October - Venue & time TBA

DVD presentation of *Die Meistersinger* starting mid-afternoon and including a meal between acts.

Sunday 2 December - Venue & time TBA

Christmas BBQ/Pot-Luck



Hans Sachs (Bryn Terfel) amidst a hellish crowd in Kasper Holten's production of Die Meistersinger. Photo by Clive Barda

Sunday, 19 August at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

Die Meistersinger – Models, Motivations and Misconceptions.

See Auckland 12 August

Sunday, 28 October at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

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

Programmes not necessarily complete and could be subject to change.

Dunedin

Sunday, 4 March at 2.00pm

Venue: Black-Sale House Lecture Room, University of Otago

The Ring and The Rings, Wagner, Tolkien and Peter Jackson

See Auckland 25 February

Sunday, 22 April at 2.00pm

Venue: Black-Sale House Lecture Room, University of Otago

Deep In The Forest: Wagner's Siegfried

Terence Dennis discusses Wagner's musical and dramatic response to the doomed hero of the Nibelungen Saga. The presentation includes excerpts from noted productions on film, along with scenes from *Die Nibelungen*, Fritz Lang's 1924 silent film.

Sunday, 24 June at 10.30am

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room, 192 Castle Street

Parsifal: Terence Dennis introduces Wolfgang Wagner's beautiful staging of Wagner's final masterwork in a 1990s Bayreuth production.

Sunday, 9 September at 2.00pm

Venue: Black-Sale House Lecture Room, University of Otago

Der Rosenkavalier: a match-maker between Mozart and Wagner

See Wellington 29 April.

Sunday, 25 November at 12.00pm

Venue: Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row (Turn Right off Pitt Street)

Christmas Luncheon followed by Wagnerian Christmas Goodies including Flagstad on Film and Herbert von Karajan rehearsing *Die Walküre*...

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg – MELBOURNE: NOVEMBER 2018

As we reported in the last newsletter, Opera Australia will present *Die Meistersinger* in Melbourne during November this year. The production, by Kasper Holten, was premiered at the Royal Opera Covent Garden. In this instance, the WSNZ will **not** be organising a group as we have a party going to the San Francisco *Ring*. For those members who would like to attend the Melbourne production, Renaissance Tours have organised four tours, which include Heath Lees' pre-performance talks. Information is available at: <http://renaissancetours.com.au/?s=meistersinger>

THE GENIUS OF WAGNER'S *Mastersingers*

Most people follow Bayreuth's lead and start their count of Wagner's 'mature' operas from *The Flying Dutchman*. This yields a list of ten items, with the *Ring* operas counted individually as four. Of these ten works, one stands out as profoundly different from all the others: *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*.

An immediate point of difference is that the other nine 'mature' operas are grounded in a fantasy world of myth and legend, but the story of *The Mastersingers* is rooted in real European history. The specific town of Nuremberg still exists, with part of its artistic glory still resting on its famous Renaissance guild of Mastersingers, led by the well-known Nuremberg poet and playwright Hans Sachs. Some of Sachs' fame came from his allegory about the "Wittenberg Nightingale" Martin Luther, bringing a new dawn to humanity. As a further tie-up with real history, Wagner actually uses Sachs' opening line of "Wachet auf!" during his opera.

Another unique aspect of *The Mastersingers* in Wagner's works is that it is a comedy. Apart from one very early attempt, Wagner never wrote comedies. He liked nothing better than when the main characters met their end at the end. Indeed, during one of his boyhood tragic scenarios everyone died before the interval. Undaunted, Wagner brought them back to the stage as ghostly spirits in the second half.

When Wagner first began to plan *The Mastersingers*, it was as early as 1845. At that time he thought of it as a bit of fun, or rather a bit of therapy. Warned off work by his doctor, Wagner decided to entertain himself with a short comic opera as an add-on to his recently completed *Tannhäuser*, something like the slapstick satyr plays that used to follow the great tragedies in classical Athens.

Still keeping to the Greek tradition of comedy, Wagner seized the opportunity for some healthy satire in his new work. In the opera's pedantic figure of Beckmesser, Wagner had in mind Vienna's most famous and most outspoken music critic, Eduard Hanslick. Using the same semi-transparent cloak of reality, Wagner also included himself in the opera, since the 'instinctive' musician Walther is clearly an alter-ego for Wagner himself, whose new creative art had been targeted by so many.

In addition (and this is where the comedy ceases) Wagner inserted himself into another place in this



Beckmesser causes uproar by exposing Walther von Stolzing's 'mistakes' for all to see. (Painting by Michael Echter of the first performance of *Die Meistersinger* in Munich, 1868.)

story since he increasingly came to identify with Hans Sachs — the poet-cobbler who secretly loved Eva but gave her up after learning that she preferred Walther, the younger man. The renouncing spirit of Schopenhauer runs all through this strand of the story, and reminds one of the epic sense of farewell that Wagner experienced just before beginning work on *The Mastersingers*, when he finally abandoned all hope of a permanent relationship with the great love of his life, Mathilda Wesendonck.

A further exceptional feature of this work is its length. Having begun with the intention of writing a short, 'add-on' opera, Wagner found *The Mastersingers* growing almost by itself, until it eventually took its place as the longest single opera in the European repertoire. It also had one of the longest gestation periods in history because, having started on the idea in the summer of 1845, Wagner found it rudely pushed aside by a mental storm of inspiration for *Lohengrin*, followed by an actual storm of revolution in Dresden in 1849, then a long exile in Switzerland, more huge music-dramas . . . when he finally settled down seriously to compose *The Mastersingers* it was 1865, fully 20 years after he had first conceived the idea.

One last exceptional feature about *The Mastersingers* is to be found in its overture. Wagner had already discarded the word 'overture' by the time he came to compose it in 1862. Some seventeen years earlier, the instrumental opening of *Lohengrin* had firmly established the name of 'prelude'. What Wagner disliked most about the typical overture was its empty, tub-thumping character, usually rustled up after the opera had been composed, its opening musical clichés

followed by a motley parade of the opera's most singable tunes, and finally some closing gestures — dramatic for tragedy, sprightly for comedy.

Lohengrin had ushered in a new age for the overture. The work actually depends on the glowing sound-world with which it opens, where the prelude moves us to picture the distant hero's magical arrival, his eventual, majestic appearance, and his quietly sad departure at the end.

Yet the overture — sorry, prelude — to *The Mastersingers* was itself exceptional because it was the one occasion when Wagner actually completed it *before* writing the opera. All the uniqueness of *The Mastersingers* can be seen crystallised into this prelude — a complete symphonic picture that is a miracle of counterpoint and a marvel of orchestration.

Five main themes appear in the prelude, and at the end, three of them are drawn together — the Prize Song theme, the pompous opening theme and the fanfare-like 'long' theme that Wagner copied from an actual tune from the 16th-century mastersingers themselves. The prelude presents the whole story in advance, and it does so in music that mixes 16th-century counterpoint with some of J.S. Bach's best-known procedures, binding them all together in a kind of symphonic development that was unequalled in the nineteenth century.

From beginning to end, *The Mastersingers* stands out in the history of opera — and in the horizon of Wagner's work — not just because it is different, but because its genius is unrivalled.