

## Welcome to 2021 and a Digital Newsletter!



Michael Ashdown at the 2017 Bayreuth Festival

– A new, digital newsletter for the WSNZ, as announced last year! There is also a new editing team, with Michael Ashdown, here generously supported by

John Davidson, both of whom are serving on the Wellington Branch committee. We would also like at this point to pay all due tribute to our predecessors, Heath Lees and Chris Brodrick, for their sterling efforts in the past, and we aim to maintain a high standard in the future. The newsletter will retain a familiar feel, with a slightly simpler layout for now.

With Covid-19 still raging in most parts of the world, it goes without saying that live performances of Wagner and other composers are comparatively thin on the ground just now. For example, it is currently expected that this year's Bayreuth Festival will still go ahead as planned – after having been cancelled altogether last year – but in a reduced form, with fewer performances and additional protective health measures in place both onstage and in the auditorium. Scheduled performances include *Der fliegende Holländer* (see also 'Wagner Murmurs' at right), *Tannhäuser*, *Die Walküre* (given on its own again, as in 2018), *Die Meistersinger* and a concert performance of *Parsifal*. There will also be two additional concerts to be conducted by Andris Nelsons, primarily celebrated at Bayreuth for his fine conducting of the controversial Hans Neuenfels production of *Lohengrin* (aka the 'Rat *Lohengrin*'!) for several years from 2010 on. The new *Ring*, which was to have been conducted last year by former NZSO Music Director

Pietari Inkinen, will unfortunately not be given this year either.

Meanwhile, the Bayreuth Festival has announced the appointment of Ulrich Jagels as the successor to the former Commercial Director Holger von Berg. Having previously held appointments in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein, Berlin and Chemnitz, Jagels comes to Bayreuth after last serving as the Administrative Director of Leipzig Opera. (The upcoming Leipzig Festival itself, featuring all 13 Wagner operas, is still planned to take place next year, and is already almost sold out.)

Closer to home, another new *Ring* is expected to be given in its entirety by Melbourne Opera in 2023. *Das Rheingold* – conducted by Anthony Negus, well known to New Zealand audiences from the 2006 *Parsifal* – was premiered earlier this month, and was well received. (On the Opera Australia *Ring* in Brisbane, see the 'Wagner Murmurs' column at right.)

And in this issue of the newsletter? As well as the usual programme overview for local branch activities this year, we present two feature articles, the first an unusual summary of German Indology and Wagner by Dilip Roy. If you would like to explore this topic further, we strongly recommend you also check out an earlier, related article by Peter Bassett on Buddhist and Hindu concepts in Wagner's stage works, published in *The Wagnerian* and available to read here: <http://the-wagnerian.com/2014/01/the-use-of-buddhist-and-hindu-concepts.html?m=1>

Last but most certainly not least, we are also proud to present Heath Lees' review (originally published in *The Wagner Journal*) of Alex Ross's fascinating new book *Wagnerism*, here in a condensed form, by kind permission of Barry Millington.

## Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- Simon O'Neill will sing Tristan in a revival of *Tristan und Isolde* at the Glyndebourne Festival in 2021.
- Piotr Beczala will sing the role of Parsifal at the Bayreuth Festival in 2022.
- Oksana Lyniv (below) will conduct a new production of *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Bayreuth Festival in 2021, marking the first occasion that a woman has conducted at the Festival.



(Photo: Bayreuther Festspiele)

- The Aix-en-Provence Festival will mount a new production of *Tristan und Isolde* in 2021, with Nina Stemme and Stuart Skelton in the title roles, and Sir Simon Rattle conducting.
- Lise Davidsen will sing the role of Eva in a revival of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at the Metropolitan Opera in October/November 2021.
- Opera Australia's new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, now scheduled for October/November 2021, is likely to see some cast changes. Watch this space!

# WSNZ – 2021 Programme

## Auckland

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

**Sunday, 21 February at 7:00 p.m.**

Piano recital with introductions by **Terence Dennis** and **Abhinath Berry**: *Feeling Lisztless? Piano Works of Liszt, Wagner and Circle in Recital.*

**Sunday, 11 April at 7:00 p.m.**

*An Evening with Simon O'Neill.*

**Sunday, 13 June at 7:00 p.m.**

The Wagner Society's AGM, to be followed by a presentation from **Terence Dennis**.

**Sunday, 11 July at 7:00 p.m.**

**John Pattinson** talk: *Travelling Hopefully: A Journey Through Siegfried.*

**Sunday, 19 September at 2:30 p.m. (note afternoon time)**

A full screening of *Siegfried* and optional catered dinner.

**Sunday, 5 December at 7:00 p.m.**

The celebratory end to the year: a Wagner 'potpourri', cake and wine.

## Wellington

Venue: St Andrews Hall, 30 The Terrace (except where otherwise indicated)

**Sunday, 21 March at 4:00 p.m.**

Illustrated talk by **Margaret Medlyn** and **Richard Greager**: *Soothing the Rhine: Only Love Can Overcome the Lust for Power: Help for life in today's world – lessons to be learnt from Wagner's Ring.*

**Sunday, 11 April at 4:00 p.m.**

Talk by **Michael Vinten**: *Rienzi: Wagner's Problem Child.*

**Sunday 23 May at 4:00 p.m.**

Venue: St Andrew's Church, 30 The Terrace (note the Church, not the Hall)  
Piano recital with introductions by **Terence Dennis** and **Abhinath Berry**: *Feeling Lisztless? Piano Works of Liszt, Wagner and Circle in Recital.*

**Sunday, 13 June at 11:00 a.m. (note early start)**

Venue: Te Auaha: NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street (note venue)  
Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: a screening of the 2002 Mariinsky Theatre production of Borodin's *Prince Igor*.

**Monday, 23 August at 7:00 p.m.**

(NB: Opera Society regular programme event, included here for information)  
A screening of the controversial 2013 production of *Der fliegende Holländer* from Zurich Opera.

**September/October**

Date, event and venue TBA.

**November/December**

End-of-year party. Date and venue TBA.

## Christchurch

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

**Friday, 19 February, time TBA**

Talk by **Michael Sinclair**: *Cities that Championed Wagner.*

**Friday, 21 May, time TBA**

Piano recital with introductions by **Terence Dennis** and **Abhinath Berry**: *Feeling Lisztless? Piano Works of Liszt, Wagner and Circle in Recital.*

**Friday, 23 July, time TBA**

Talk by **Michael Vinten**: *Rienzi: Wagner's Problem Child.*

**October or November, date and time TBA**

**Terence Dennis** talk: *Wagner on Wagner*, a presentation of Wagner's concepts of opera as defined in his polemic *Music and Drama*.

**Sunday, 28 November**

Christmas function – further details TBA.

## Dunedin

All venues will be publicised locally.

**Sunday, 14 March at 2:00 p.m.**

Venue: Marama Hall, University of Otago

Piano recital with introductions by **Terence Dennis** and **Abhinath Berry**: *Feeling Lisztless? Piano Works of Liszt, Wagner and Circle in Recital.*

**Sunday, 2 May at 2:00 p.m.**

Venue: Marama Hall, University of Otago

Talk by **John Drummond**: *Reforming the Reformer*. John discusses Wagner's extensive revision of Gluck's first French opera, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, for a performance in German at the Dresden Court Opera.

**Sunday, 27 June at 1:00 p.m.**

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room

*Das Liebesverbot* on film: Wagner's second opera. A lively, colourful production from Madrid's Teatro Real.

**August (date TBA) at 2:00 p.m.**

Venue: School of Performing Arts First Floor Seminar Room

Talk by **Michael Vinten**: *Rienzi: Wagner's Problem Child.*

**Sunday, 26 September at 2:00 p.m.**

Venue: School of Performing Arts First Floor Seminar Room

**Terence Dennis** talk: *Wagner on Wagner*, a presentation of Wagner's concepts of opera as defined in his polemic *Music and Drama*.

**Sunday, 28 November at 12:00 noon**

Venue: Carrington Hall, Linten Lounge & Dining Room

Christmas luncheon and concert, with **Terence Dennis** and guests.

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## A Presentation for Our Times?



Margaret Medlyn (soprano) and Richard Greager (tenor) in action

Among the many promising activities listed above, Margaret Medlyn and Richard Greager's upcoming Wellington presentation, *Soothing the Rhine: Only Love Can Overcome the Lust for Power*, strikes us as being particularly apposite given the turbulent era we're currently living through – thanks both, we're looking forward to it!!

*"The protagonists in the most epic drama in all musical history are actually a really nice bunch. Just one common passion unites them in what ultimately seals their fate: they seek to own more than they can afford, and to wield more power than they are entitled to. In their blind, loveless pursuit of material gain, they end up destroying themselves and their world. . . . Fortunately, of course, such things happen only on the opera stage."*

– The well-known German comedian and devoted Wagnerian, 'Loriot' (Bernhard-Victor Christoph-Carl von Bülow, 1923–2011), on the deeper significance of Wagner's *Ring*.

## 'German Indology and Richard Wagner' – by Dilip Roy

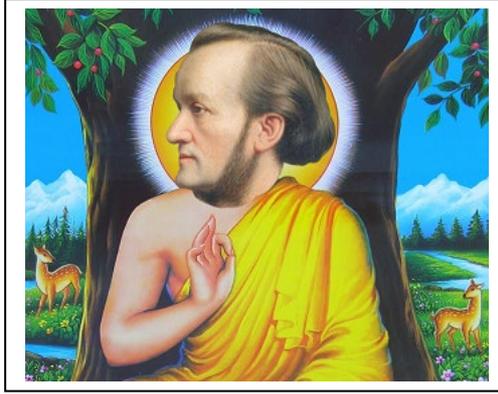
One of the lesser-known sources of Richard Wagner's aesthetic and philosophical ideas was his interest in ancient India. Among his many accomplishments, indeed, he was undeniably an amateur Indologist, that is a student of ancient Indian texts, literature and philosophy.

German Indology has a distinct history and set of traditions that distinguish it from other forms of research into India. In Germany, the term 'Indology' (*Indologie*) has been used to identify a subfield of 'Oriental Sciences', specifically that part of it concerned with the study of ancient India. Wagner himself, along with other German thinkers of the early nineteenth century, strongly believed that their cultural origin stemmed from India and that the language and mythology was originally one and the same. This view was held by other nineteenth-century scholars including the German Adolf Holtzmann (1810–1870), author of *Indische Sagen*, a three-volume publication that articulated his thesis that the German medieval epic the *Nibelungenlied* reflected Indian cultural origins. [Today, scholars posit one original source for all branches of Indo-European languages and mythologies, including those of India. – Comment by the editors.]

The surge of Indology in the late eighteenth century took Germany by storm, and the romance with Indian literature and philosophy blossomed to such an extent that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Germany had produced more Sanskrit scholars than the whole of the rest of Europe put together. By 1903, in Germany, there were 40 full-time professors of Aryan studies, the major component of which was Indology.

One of the leading Sanskrit authorities at the time happened to be Professor Hermann Brockhaus (1806–1877), Wagner's brother-in-law. The two of them would meet on occasion to discuss various aspects of Indian philosophy. Wagner became familiar with German translations of the Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Panchatantra* (Indian folk tales). He always had the highest regard for the *Mahabharata*.

Wagner also highly rated the *Bhagvad Gita* (a component of the *Mahabharata*), comparing it most favourably, on account of its advanced philosophical thought, with Greek philosophical writings. Throughout his prose works, he cites India as the cradle of civilisation, including Graeco-Roman civilisation, the origin of the Nibelungs and the mother of all languages. He also claims that Indian 'Kshatriyas' (those of the military and ruling caste) were actually ancient Germans (Cosima Wagner's Diaries). In other prose works, he traces the history of the Aryans from what he considers to be their



original home in northern India (*Aryavarta*) and hails Brahmanic Hindu religion as supreme above all, its metaphysics being a masterpiece without equal.

In the *Ring*, he makes use of the Hindu concept 'Rasa', an aesthetic that derives from the 'Natyashastra', a Sanskrit treatise on dance, drama and music (second century BCE) that has eight different emotions. This contributed to the thinking behind his idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ('total

work of art'). He used many Hindu concepts in early as well as later operas and was particularly influenced by the philosophical ideas found in the *Upanishads* (the most recent part of the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, the *Vedas*).

His own diary, *The Brown Book* (written between 1865 and 1882), shows him reading the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, the other major Sanskrit epic, which he considers the grandest of grand poems, against which a modern novel would look like a newspaper article.

Wagner's fascination with Indian classical literature and philosophy began long before he came under the spell of Schopenhauer. However, in his autobiography *My Life (Mein Leben)*, he states that the book which inspired him most was Schopenhauer's Vedantic-like philosophical work *The World as Will and Representation*. He seems to have read this four times in its entirety and wrote to Franz Liszt saying that it came to him as a gift from heaven. It became an important philosophical concept underlying his three later operas *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*.

He was also fascinated by the work of India's greatest classical Sanskrit poet and dramatist Kalidasa (first century BCE?), whose work struck a chord with German intellectuals such as Goethe and Schiller, as well as Wagner. Being a dramatist himself, Wagner was spellbound by Kalidasa's play *Malavika and Agnimitra*, which at one point he thought of as suitable for operatic treatment (Cosima Wagner's Diaries). However, since he was not familiar with the opulence of royal court details of the Indian period, he did not pursue it. He did, however, always regard Kalidasa as one of the greatest dramatists.

During his Paris sojourn, Wagner had come across a book called *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* by the French Indologist Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852). On reading this, he fell very much in love with Buddhist philosophy, immediately sketching out a dramatic poem called *Die Sieger (The Victors)*. This was never completed, but much of it found its way into his last opera, *Parsifal*.

It can be seen, then, what a polymath Wagner was, and how much he was influenced by the culture of India.

**Dilip Roy** is an ardent Wagner enthusiast and avid scholar of Wagner's operas and prose works, as well as India's ancient classical literature and philosophy. He is also a keen Indo-German cultural enthusiast. (Editorial adjustments in the article by John Davidson and Michael Ashdown, made with the author's approval.)

## The Back Page – ‘Front-page Wagnerism’ – by Heath Lees

In the following, **Heath Lees** adapts and condenses his review of **Alex Ross’s** momentous new book, **Wagnerism**. The original, extended review was published in **The Wagner Journal** in November 2020.

Alex Ross could easily be described as the musical guru of our age through his regular exposure in *The New Yorker* and the runaway success of his book *The Rest is Noise*. A few months ago, he launched a new book entitled *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* – a *magnum opus* that extends to nearly 780 pages and might just be what the Wagner world has been waiting for since the 1850s, when Wagnerism began. Certainly, there is no volume in existence that has dared to attempt what Ross has done here as a single author. His survey of nearly 150 years of Wagnerism is excitingly set forth, and its coverage is breathtaking.

For most scholars and writers, Wagnerism was a spent force by the end of WWII. Ross, however, demonstrates brilliantly how vigorously the movement has rebounded over the last century, and actually extended its reach into many new areas. There is Gay Wagner, Feminist Wagner, Androgynous Wagner, Black Wagner, Bolshevik Wagner, Nazi Wagner (which includes Hitler’s Wagner and ‘Wagner’s Hitler’), Anglo-Irish Wagner, Silent (movies) Wagner, Art-House Wagner . . . yet strangely, as the academic and cultural labels expand endlessly, the popular appeal of the movement also increases to such a degree that Wagnerism overleaps the boundaries of an intellectual movement, and takes on the trappings of a popular fan club:

*Wagner fandom became global and diverse . . . Wagner Societies arose in over forty countries, from Venezuela to Singapore. The Ring received stagings in Australia, China, Japan, Thailand, and Brazil. The advent of the long-playing record—and, later, of the compact disc, VHS and DVD, the MP3, and streaming audio—meant that home listeners could immerse themselves in the music dramas without interruption. (p. 611).*

As you would expect from a New York writer, Ross has a fond concern for Wagnerism in America, an area that first swam into public ken in 1994 through Joseph Horowitz’s ground-breaking book *Wagner Nights*. Building on this, Ross widens and deepens the subject so as to make it not just a historical panorama, but a social movement and a cultural force. Two of his spotlighted figures illustrate this boundary extension perfectly. First is W. E. B. Du Bois, an early twentieth-century black historian and protest leader whose Wagner story is fascinatingly brought to light in a chapter entitled ‘Jewish and Black Wagner’. Second

is the writer Willa Cather, whose unsung Wagnerian passions are the subject of a loving and memorable examination in the context of a Wagner-inspired cultural enquiry.

The early part of this book – its first half-dozen chapters – offers less eye-opening originality in content, but is fascinatingly presented in style. Here, the author deftly weaves together the birth and growth of Wagnerism with a summary of individual Wagner operas, plus some striking musical commentary. Nietzsche, the first ‘intellectual’ Wagnerite, is backgrounded against *The Ring*, while in France the first ‘literary’ Wagnerite, Charles Baudelaire, is coupled with *Tristan* – though it must be said that *Tannhäuser* might have been a more accurate choice. Still, the eroticism and tonal dissolution of *Tristan* opens the door to the French symbolists – writers, painters and the famous but short-lived journal the *Revue wagnérienne*.

In the later nineteenth century, Wagnerism’s message of passionate rebirth and joyous self-discovery spread quickly. Ross’s survey combines *Lohengrin* with Victorian England, the Pre-Raphaelites and William Morris. Then, in a sudden transatlantic leap, it moves far away from pious English Wagnerism to a Gilded Age America, the land of popular Wagner seasons at that ‘Sodom by the Sea’ Coney Island, complete with sundry ‘Parsifal Entertainments’. America was freely able to view Wagnerism through its own eyes:

*In the United States, Wagner harmonized with a national love of wilderness sagas, frontier lore, Native American tales, stories of desperadoes searching for gold. (p. 135).*

Back in Europe, Ross continues his narrative. Parsifal’s standard, rescued from its American Entertainments, is planted at the door of the many esoteric sects that anticipated the turn of the century as a cataclysmic moment of truth, but eventually the reader is led through a more traditional *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and the court of Munich to the threshold of Bayreuth.

With the 1876 opening of the Master’s own theatre and festival, Wagnerism came of age and took on a hallowed complexion, which much displeased Wagner. The book recounts the famous example of a dedicated Bayreuth audience hushing an enthusiastic rear-seat applauder at the conclusion of *Parsifal*, only to find that it had been Wagner himself.

One way or another, this is a book that deals with Wagner’s afterlife – Wagnerism without Wagner. As the composer drifts out of sight, a huge parade of Wagnerians arrives to fill up the stage. A number of important but rarely acknowledged

Wagnerians make their entrances from the well-known American ‘closet’ in a chapter entitled ‘Venusberg – Feminist and Gay Wagner’. The (often downplayed) plethora of women in Wagnerism’s ranks fully justifies the extended treatment they receive in this book. Their company includes vocal performers, dancers, even a pioneer woman psychiatrist of the day, Sabina Spielrein – all of them making an open secret of their committed Wagnerism. Of the women novelists, Virginia Woolf in London heads the list, but she is closely followed by Colette in Paris, the New York writer Charlotte Teller and the Bostonian diarist Lucy Lowell.

Occasionally, some of the Wagner connections are disappointingly slight. The writer Henry James, for example, is awarded a tick on his membership card thanks to his 1902 novel *The Wings of the Dove*, where the dove is taken to suggest *Lohengrin* or perhaps *Parsifal*. James also serves to highlight the well-known gay ambience that was present in Bayreuth’s own early Wagnerism. For many young men, the sexual *frisson* emanating from the theatre on the Green Hill was a male version of the tension between Tannhäuser’s Venus and Elisabeth – seductively beckoning on the one hand, and earnestly seeking to convert on the other.

No one found the clash of being gay and Wagnerian more dangerous than the troubled Jewish philosopher Otto Weininger. At the age of 23, Weininger committed suicide shortly after publishing a tract entitled *Sex and Character*, ‘a *mélange*,’ we are told, ‘of proto-Freudian psychology, post-Schopenhauerian philosophy, antisemitism, misogyny, and Wagner’. Slain by *Die Meistersinger* at the age of eight, Weininger first saw *Parsifal* in his graduation year at Bayreuth, when he was left speechless and sleepless.

By contrast, the English Gay Wagnerites seem relatively uncomplicated, with Oscar Wilde often using Wagner for his wittier lines or merely as a literary conceit. Aubrey Beardsley, on the other hand, ‘crosses the line into high-end pornography’ (p. 306), and his Wagner-based drawings of the 1890s seem to offer him a means of artistic escape, to say nothing of moral *insouciance*.

Summing up, Ross admits that he can find ‘no clear verdict about the mark that this staggeringly energetic man left upon the world . . . in the story of Wagner and Wagnerism, we see both the highest and the lowest impulses of humanity entangled’. For his own part, over 150 years of Wagnerism, Ross has succeeded in bringing to light and even disentangling a large number of these impulses; a feat of truly Wagnerian proportions.