



## 'Das Wunder von Brisbane' . . . Finally!

. . . Well, it was a 'wonder' in a good many respects at least, as it turned out – in this issue, we will report in detail on the main Wagnerian attraction at the end of last year, the Brisbane *Ring*, and the WSNZ tour to attend the second cycle. First of all, however, a very Happy New Year to you all!

It was only after a number of us had returned home from the San Francisco *Ring* in mid-2018 that the initial, wider murmurings were heard regarding a

spectacular new, hi-tech, digital *Ring* to be given by Opera Australia in Brisbane, in late 2020. Having already organised the WSNZ tour to San Francisco, Michael Sinclair quickly went to work again and began arranging a tour to Brisbane accordingly, along with a second tour to David Pountney's new *Ring* in Chicago, scheduled for 2019. Michael secured 50 prime seats for Brisbane's second cycle, and so we all paid our initial deposits and waited patiently.

At that point, however, no one could have foreseen that the Brisbane *Ring* would be cancelled twice (owing to the pandemic) and then finally 'reanimated' to take place three years later than originally planned, while the doomed Chicago *Ring* would ultimately fall through and never be given in full. Now, finally, 46 WSNZ members have taken part in Michael Sinclair's tour for a great week of performances (second cycle, 8–14 December) and associated activities. More on this starting on page 3, but be sure to read Michael Sinclair's own performance review as well: <https://theoperacritic.com/tocreviews2.php?review=ms/2023/ausring1223.html>



Wellington member, Trish Heuser, pictured with the Brisbane *Ring* director, Chen Shi-Zheng (first cycle).

paring their programmes for the coming year, and there are already some very intriguing highlights to look forward to. On 11 February, Auckland Philharmonia conductor, Giordano Bellincampi, will be in St Heliers for a talk and Q&A session on conducting Wagner's operas, before he conducts *Tristan und Isolde* himself in August. Meanwhile, the Australian director, dramaturg, lecturer and arts administrator, Antony Ernst, will be returning to give illustrated talks all around the country on *Parsifal*, following his successful talks on *Lohengrin* five years ago. In keeping with this theme, several of the regions will be screening *Parsifal* performance films this year as well. In Christchurch, Terence Dennis plans to screen a mammoth film on King Ludwig II of Bavaria while, in Auckland, Heath Lees will screen a performance of Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot*, and in Wellington he will also give a brand-new talk on both that opera and the earlier *Die Feen*.

So there will be plenty to look forward to in the coming year, with more details to come in subsequent issues! We wish you all a fulfilling and enjoyable time at these events.

Meanwhile, another 'advance guard' of WSNZ members had already been to the first cycle (1–7 December) on their own; they formed much the same impressions as those people on Michael's tour. Wellington's Trish Heuser even had a talk with the *Ring* director himself, Chen Shi-Zheng, right next to Brisbane's Lyric Theatre. Many thanks to Trish for her very excellent photo on the left!

In other news, the regions have been busy pre-

## Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- The Tiroler Festspiele Erl has announced two cycles of Brigitte Fassbaender's production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to be performed in July 2024.
- Longborough Festival Opera will present three cycles of its new *Ring* cycle in June/July 2024.
- It has been reported that conductor Christian Thielemann will again conduct at the Bayreuth Festival from 2025. His last appearance there was in 2022.
- Edmonton Opera will present a new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* using Jonathan Dove's reduced version, beginning with *Das Rheingold* in May 2024.
- Simone Young will conduct the *Ring* in Bayreuth this year, stepping in for Philippe Jordan, who has had to cancel.

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## New Member

We are most pleased to extend a warm Wagnerian welcome to:

Hilary Freda Patton.....Wellington

Wie immer, sei recht herzlich begrüßt!

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## In Memoriam

It is with great regret that we must report the death of Wellington member, **Sir Michael Hardie-Boys**, on 29 December 2023, aged 92. A lawyer by profession, Sir Michael was best known as New Zealand's 17th Governor-General, from 1996–2001. Together with his wife, Lady Mary, Sir Michael had been a longstanding member of the Wellington Branch, but they were no longer able to attend the Branch's activities in recent years. Our condolences and very best wishes to the family.

# WSNZ – 2024 Programme

## Auckland

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

**Sunday, 11 February at 2:00 p.m.**

A talk by **Giordano Bellincampi**, Music Director of the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, on conducting Wagner's operas, followed by a Q&A session with **Heath Lees**.

**Sunday, 7 April at 2:00 p.m.**

A full screening of *Das Liebesverbot*, introduced by **Heath Lees**.

**Sunday, 19 May at 2:00 p.m.**

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

**Sunday, 28 July at 2:00 p.m.**

*Parsifal*: a seminar with **Antony Ernst**.

**Sunday, 20 October at 1:30 p.m.**

A full screening of *Parsifal*.

**Sunday, 8 December at 2:00 p.m.**

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

## Wellington

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

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

A brand-new talk by **Heath Lees** on Wagner's earliest dramatic works: *Buried Treasures – Die Feen and Das Liebesverbot*.

**Mid-year**

*Te Auaha*: NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street

Documentary screening. Date and topic TBC.

**Sunday, 4 August at 4:00 p.m.**

*Parsifal*: a seminar with **Antony Ernst**.

**Sunday, 6 October at 10:30 a.m. (note early start)**

*Te Auaha*: NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street (*note venue*)

Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: A full screening of the 2020 production of *Parsifal* from the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, one of the last productions to be staged by the late English director, Graham Vick, and conducted by Omer Meir Wellber with Julian Hubbard as Parsifal, Catherine Hunold as Kundry, John Relyea as Gurnemanz, Tómas Tómasson as Amfortas and Thomas Gazheli as Klingsor.

**November/December**

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

## Christchurch

**Sunday, 18 February at 7:30 p.m.**

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

A screening of the biographical film, *Ludwig* (1972), a monumental Italian/French/German production about King Ludwig II of Bavaria, directed by Luchino Visconti, and introduced by **Terence Dennis**. This lavish film, newly remastered in Blu-ray, is celebrated for its breathtaking location filming – in the original palace settings, with the permission of the Wittelsbachs, the former ruling family of the Kingdom of Bavaria – and for its heavily Wagnerian score. The film stars Helmut Berger as Ludwig II, Romy Schneider as the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, and Trevor Howard as Richard Wagner.

**April/May – date and time TBC**

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

*Richard Wagner and The Spirit of Ancient Greek Tragedy*: **Scott Bezett**, Masters in both Classical Music (Voice) and Classics, presents in *conversazione* with **Terence Dennis** the origins of Greek classical

drama and its influence of the development of opera, and upon Richard Wagner in his writings on Music Drama, and especially in the dramatic concept of the tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

**Friday, 2 August at 7:30 p.m.**

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

*Parsifal*: a seminar with **Antony Ernst**.

**Friday, 4 October at 7:30 p.m. (TBC)**

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room (TBC)

A full screening of *Parsifal*, introduced by **Cynthia Hawes**.

**November/December – date, time and venue TBC**

Christmas function.

## Dunedin

**(Date, time and venue TBC)**

A screening of the biographical film, *Ludwig* (1972), introduced by **Terence Dennis** – *full details under the Christchurch entry at left*.

**(Date, time and venue TBC)**

*Historical Perspectives – Great Singers of the Cosima Era*: **Terence Dennis** continues our fascinating series of historic Wagner performers, heard in some of the rarest recordings from the earliest days of gramophone recording: the era of Cosima Wagner.

**(Date, time and venue TBC)**

*Deep in the Forest* – **Terence Dennis** discusses *Siegfried*: exploring the opera in context, before our winter film presentation:

**Late June – date and time TBC**

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room

2024 Winter Viewing – *Siegfried*: we continue our annual winter viewing series with *Siegfried*, in the 1976 Bayreuth Centennial Ring production of Patrice Chéreau.

**Saturday, 3 August at 2:00 p.m.**

School of Performing Arts T101 Lecture Room, University of Otago

*Parsifal*: a seminar with **Antony Ernst**.

**Sunday, 24 November at 12:00 p.m. (venue TBC)**

2024 Christmas Luncheon & Wagneriana.

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## Speaking of Australian Ring Cycles . . .



Wagner Society in Queensland reception, 2023 Brisbane Ring (first cycle): Paul Stigley, Trish Heuser, John Davidson and Carol Stigley (all from Wellington).

For those who may be interested, note that the entire 2023 Bendigo Ring (first cycle) can now be streamed here, with English subtitles:

*Das Rheingold*: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6F8zvtJ0E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6F8zvtJ0E)

*Die Walküre*: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvgmVdwcT5Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvgmVdwcT5Y)

*Siegfried*: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnyxloONkn8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnyxloONkn8)

*Götterdämmerung*: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg4AggfyJpE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg4AggfyJpE)

The celebrated 2004 Adelaide Ring, directed by Elke Neidhardt and conducted by Asher Fisch, is also viewable, in VHS quality (no subtitles) – in ten parts, see under: [www.youtube.com/@jokanahan/videos](http://www.youtube.com/@jokanahan/videos)



## Impressions from the 'Grand Tour' – Brisbane, December 2023



Curtain call, *Götterdämmerung* (second cycle), Thursday, 14 December – from l. to r. (foreground): Warwick Fyfe (Alberich), Maija Kovalevska (Gutrune), Luke Gabbedy (Gunther), Stefan Vinke (Siegfried), Lise Lindstrom (Brünnhilde), conductor Philippe Auguin, the towering Andrea Silvestrelli (Hagen), Deborah Humble (Gutrune) and Angela Hogan (Second Norn). Photo: Michael Sinclair.

For those of us taking part in Michael Sinclair's tour group, the *Ring* began with *Das Rheingold* on Friday, 8 December, preceded by Peter Bassett's first morning introductory talk in the Queensland Museum lecture theatre, just a few minutes' walk along from the Lyric Theatre of the Queensland Performing Arts Centre on Brisbane's South Bank. Many of the tour group attended Peter's talks and half-day seminar, and so the lecture theatre became a popular daytime meeting point, with the added attractions of the Queensland Museum together with the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art all in the same complex. In the late afternoon, there was also an outdoor poolside welcome reception for the tour group at the Rydges South Bank Hotel, in very balmy summer weather.

*Das Rheingold* itself kicked off in the evening, with very cinematic, light green-on-black, *Matrix*-style opening titles projected onto a scrim (as with all the later instalments as well), and our first glimpse of Leigh Sachwitz's and flora&faunavisions' spectacular digital screen backdrops, with rippling waves and the three Rhinemaiden singers doubled by trapeze artists. In the brightly lit Scene 2, there was

the first indication of Eastern influences in the staging, with two lions' heads next to the enthroned Wotan and Fricka, while the effective costuming (by Anita Yavich) and direction of the singers was mostly relatively traditional. Daniel Sumegi, whom many of us had previously seen as Hagen, proved an expressive and engaging Wotan, with Deborah Humble and Hubert Francis standouts as Fricka and Loge, respectively. As

Erda, a definite visual highlight, although some members felt her singing could have been more powerful. The Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla, however, was for many somewhat marred by a distracting, additional troupe of dancers, whose thigh-slapping antics were oddly reminiscent of lederhosen-clad *Schuhplattler* dancers at a Bavarian beer fest, although that surely wasn't the intention at all! This was all accompanied by some particularly busy visual effects, not always so suggestive of a Rainbow Bridge, with the characters disappearing behind a laser light tunnel, an effect sometimes also used at Bayreuth (e.g., Harry Kupfer's *Ring* and Werner Herzog's *Lohengrin*).

Philippe Auguin's conducting of the QSO Ring Cycle Orchestra, although undoubtedly refined and very musical, was also unusually restrained in this 'preliminary evening' opera, with Donner's hammer blow being

particularly underwhelming. This seems to be an approach followed in not a few recent *Ring* productions, perhaps a strategy to build tension gradually as the cycle progresses, yet the most involving performances of *Das Rheingold* are typically those which fearlessly maintain a high level of tension throughout, never letting the non-stop action drag. Sir



The Valkyries' Rock, Act 3, *Siegfried*, with Stefan Vinke and Lise Lindstrom (photo: Wallis Media).

expected, Warwick Fyfe was excellent as Alberich, with Andreas Conrad also a fine Mime, although the Nibelheim scenes were a little confusing, especially Alberich's Tarnhelm transformations, which were not fully realised as such on the stage. Later, Liane Keegan rose from beneath the stage in an extraordinarily bizarre, twiggy costume as

Georg Solti's classic 1958 *Rheingold* recording is a prime example of this, along with Daniel Barenboim's performances at Bayreuth some three decades later. Nevertheless, Auguin's *Rheingold* was still a solid start to the *Ring*.

The next day, Saturday, began with a half-day symposium in the Queensland Museum lecture theatre, moderated by Peter Bassett, who opened with his own intriguing talk on 'Richard Wagner and the Eternal Feminine' (rudely interrupted by a 'Magic Fire Music' of a very different kind when a fire alarm went off unexpectedly!). Peter's two guests were Colin Mackerras, younger brother of the late, well-known conductor, Charles Mackerras, giving a colourful talk on 'Wagner in China', and Liane Keegan, who spoke with Peter about Erda's role in the *Ring* and her own experiences singing the role, in both Brisbane and the much-admired Adelaide *Ring* in 2004.



Bradley Daley, Colin Mackerras – Tattersall's Club.

Later in the afternoon, many members attended the second of three receptions given by the Wagner Society in Queensland in the downtown Tattersall's Club. A highlight was Colin Mackerras interviewing Bradley Daley, the Siegfried from the Bendigo *Ring* earlier in the year, who then proceeded to sing Siegfried's 'Forging Song' with piano accompaniment. An Italian meal at the OTTO Ristorante beside the Brisbane River on the South Bank then rounded off a very busy day.



At the Wagner Society in Queensland reception, Tattersall's Club: Yvonne Chetwin, Mary Lou Herdson and Juliet Rowe, all from Auckland.

Following another morning introductory talk from Peter Bassett, Sunday then saw *Die Walküre*, which, again, began in a rather restrained fashion, also featuring a gigantic onstage bonsai tree in Act 1. Anna-Louise Cole proved to be a powerful Sieglinde; she later 'graduated' to the role of Brünnhilde in Brisbane's third cycle, to considerable acclaim. Meanwhile, Andrea Silvestrelli was a menacing, earthy Hunding – although his best

role of all was still to come. The Brünnhilde for the first two cycles was, of course, Lise Lindstrom, who managed to match her earlier performances in the 2016 Melbourne *Ring* and was almost everything one could wish for in a Brünnhilde, even if some people found her to be a little squally under pressure. Daniel Sumegi, meanwhile, was once again a fine Wotan (as well as being a fine Wanderer in *Siegfried*). During the Death Annunciation Scene in Act 2, Grane the horse was depicted as a kind of silvery flying phoenix, silently manipulated by onstage puppeteers. At the climax of Act 2, almost silhouetted against a bright orange background, Hunding's clansmen were unusually sinister, brandishing long spears with especially threatening curved knives affixed to the ends.

Then, suddenly, the orchestra really took off at the start of Act 3, with the Valkyries descending on another, much larger phoenix against a swirling, fiery, digital background – a real spectacle. (Dancers appeared again at this point but were much less intrusive than those in *Das Rheingold*.) The rest of Act 3 was truly thrilling, highlighted at the end by further puppeteers bringing in a long dragon laid out in a circle, which then gave off real flames as the 'Magic Fire', the heat from which could even be felt in the gallery seats.

Monday the 11th was essentially a free day, although some of us still went to Opera Australia's performance of Verdi's *Aida* that evening (again given in the Lyric Theatre) to 'keep in shape'! It was well played and sung, employing much the same movable digital screen technology as in the *Ring*, although the backdrops tended to be a little cheesy by comparison, which further underscored the excellence of the *Ring* in this respect.

Tuesday was the day of *Siegfried*, once again following a talk by Peter Bassett in the morning. In the evening, both the staging and performance standards went up a notch further still, with Stefan Vinke outstanding in his signature role of Siegfried; several of us had already seen him in this role at both Seattle and Bayreuth. The dark, brooding forest settings in Acts 1 and 2 were exceptionally effective, this time highlighted by the appearance of the Woodbird, who, here too, was doubled by a trapeze artist, leaving a delicate digital tracery of light in her wake as she swung high up in the dark woods – an especially lysergic effect if ever there was one. Both conductor and orchestra had really settled in by this stage, and Act 3, climaxing with the 20-minute Love Duet, was superbly done, with an extraordinary digital mountainous backdrop with the Valkyries' rock onstage, where the action took place.

Wednesday the 13th was entirely free, except for another poolside reception with a delicious buffet dinner for the tour group in the evening, again at the Rydges Hotel. That left only the concluding *Götterdämmerung* on Thursday, and this proved to be the highlight of the entire cycle, with absolutely

everyone performing at their peak. The four *Ring* instalments had also been meant to be representing the seasons of the year, but this was most evident in *Götterdämmerung*, which was intended to represent winter . . . although just how the poor Rhinemaidens cavorting in the icy river might have felt about that was a moot point, even if their singing and swimming seemed much the same as before! Along similar lines, the Hall of the Gibichungs was a cavernous, icy palace, with even the props seemingly carved out of ice; meanwhile, the Act 3 hunting scene was set against a spectacular mountainous backdrop almost reminiscent of Fiordland. Deborah Humble was a fine Waltraute in Act 1, with Latvia's Maija Kovalevska very characterful as Gutrune in Acts 2 and 3. Aside from Stefan Vinke and Lise Lindstrom, however, the most impressive singer may well have been Andrea Silvestrelli as a magnificently malevolent and terrifying Hagen, his tall and rugged physical stature and gritty vocal delivery combining to create an unforgettable character. Everything culminated in a terrific Immolation Scene, leaving everyone to try to get a good night's sleep afterwards, before (in many cases) a very early flight home the following morning.



Dining out on the steps of the Lyric Theatre: Ann Mallinson, Hilary Patton (rear) Susie des Tombe (rear) and Virginia Breen, all from Wellington.

To sum up, then: in all, this was a highly successful *Ring*, in which the slightly diffident start (*Das Rheingold*) was all but forgotten about later in the week. Most people seemed to be very satisfied at the close, in many cases having enjoyed their first real taste of live Wagner since before the pandemic. One or two members noted that they still preferred the Bendigo *Ring*, however, saying that they had found Brisbane's digital displays too busy and distracting for their taste. Fair comment, although relative to the very successful 2007 'proto-digital' *Ring* in Valencia (staged by La Fura dels Baus), for example, Brisbane's more sophisticated digital backdrops were a good deal more subtle and restrained (even if Valencia may have had the better dragon). If Wagner is held to be 'proto-cinematic', then in theory it makes sense to attempt some kind of cinematic interpretation, but of course there are also long, intimate passages in the *Ring* with just a few characters in which 'calm' is called for. Whatever way, Brisbane remained for many a marvellous experience.