



Western Art Through Wagnerian Eyes



Education of Dionysos by Apollo's Muses (Genelli). The scene inspired Wagner's *Artwork of the Future*

This year opened with an unusual topic for all four NZ Wagner centres. From 19 March to 7 April, the universal theme was *Wagner and Visual Art* as the President of the Wagner Society of Victoria, Trevor Clarke, toured both islands with his wife Maija, spreading light and wonder among the New Zealand Wagner Society branches with the ever-fascinating topic of Wagner and Wagnerism through the fine and decorative arts.

The couple began their Kiwi trek in Auckland on 19 March. Following their own carefully devised itinerary, they proceeded through Rotorua (where the Lady Knox geyser erupted spontaneously for their benefit) and on to a large Wellington meeting on 26 March.

Then, with the sun shining all the way, Trevor and Maija took a mighty leap into the South Island, to be received by an enthusiastic showing of members in Dunedin (2 April) and Christchurch (7 April).



Trevor Clarke

The tour lasted three weeks and included just about

everything New Zealand can offer: breakfast trout at the Tongariro River, some *Lord of the Rings* forest walks near Wellington's Mt. Victoria, Valkyrie-like thunder-clouds on a Bombardier bound for Invercargill, breathtaking vistas of Valhalla grandeur while strapped into a helicopter, and then on to Dunedin to keep company with penguins, sea lions and albatrosses, till at last they came up for air in a roomful of Wagner Society members. "No seats to spare!" exclaimed Trevor with delight.

After visiting the Moeraki boulders on their way past Oamaru (with Maija, the geologist of the pair, quite upset by carefree tourists scabbling over the exposed veins) they met up with the Christchurch Wagner Society — "a wonderful mob" said Trevor — and again the talk was received with huge enjoyment.

Trevor and Maija may have relished having their eyes opened by the grandeur and beauty of the scenery, but the New Zealanders in all four Wagner centres responded with equal pleasure to having their eyes opened by Trevor's superb guidance over the vast number of Western artworks that

have shared the same themes as Wagner's operas and writings, or have been directly inspired by Wagner's works, ideas, and surroundings.

The links that Trevor followed during his talk were usually direct, often subtle, and at times gloriously eccentric. His opening gambit was in the last category — the once-idolised English painter J.C. Dollman, whose most vital Wagnerian vein was captured in *Ride of the Valkyrs*, a canvas that has amazingly found its home on the walls of the WA Art Gallery in Perth. Trevor segued smoothly through another Dollman painting, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, to alight on a subject that recurs endlessly in the fine arts: the *Tannhäuser*-like agony that happens when sexual and spiritual love collide. "The theme of temptation and renunciation, of pure and profane love, permeates visual art," said Trevor, "but its musical treatment is almost entirely confined to the works of Wagner." Of course. Apart from *Tannhäuser* there's *Parsifal*, and in terms of the search for love's personal redemption, there's *Tristan* and the *Flying Dutchman*, not to mention *Lohengrin*.

Trevor went on to reveal a complete gallery of paintings relating to Wagner himself, and to those who had anything to do with him. All the works held the attention, sometimes because of their directly Wagnerian connection, e.g., *Self Portrait* by Ludwig Geyer, Wagner's stepfather, or Minna Wagner aged 44 with Peps, her adorable King Charles Spaniel. Sometimes the Wagner link took second place to the

ELECTIONS

The following members were elected to office and committee at the AGM:

President	Chris Brodrick
Vice President	Ken Tomkins
Secretary	Peter Rowe
Treasurer	Jeanette Miller
PR/Liaison	Gloria Streat
Committee:	
	John Davidson, Lesley Kendall, Juliet Rowe

artistry of the picture, e.g., John Singer Sargent's Impressionistic sketch of Judith Gautier as a wind-blown ragdoll. Sometimes the relation to Wagner was merely one of sharing the same time or place, e.g., Genelli's *Education of Dionysos*, which helped to inspire Wagner's "Artwork of the Future" and fanned the flame of Nietzsche's idea of tragedy being born through the spirit of music.



Minna Wagner
(Clementine Stockar-Escher)

desire to take art out of the gilded corridors of the aristocracy into its own dedicated surroundings (think of the no-nonsense design of Bayreuth). All the Nazarene paintings Trevor showed were linked to Wagner's world, for example through the works of Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, who was the father of Wagner's first Tristan, and father-in-law of the first Isolde. Like

other German painters of the day, Carolsfeld drew a number of his subjects from the same Nibelung tales that were also casting their spell over Wagner's imagination.

Some of the paintings and illustrations that reached Trevor's projector were only marginally Wagnerian, but no less enjoyable for all that, and some didn't quite achieve the status of 'art', such as the charming paintings of family affection and tribute that Wagner's children brought together for his 67th birthday, decorated rose-pot wrappings, long forgotten in Wahnfried until 2013, when the world saw them again, in tribute to his 200th birthday.

By the end of the talks it was clear that lots of new and refreshing insights into Wagner had been opened up and that Trevor's wide knowledge and easy scholarship had shown a wonderful way of appreciating Western culture through a Wagnerian lens that embraced an amazing period of no less than a thousand years.



Judith Gautier (John Singer Sargent)

Time was rightly devoted to painters who were contemporary with the young, idealistic Wagner, especially those who led the way into the renewed study of German myth and legend. Here the often-overlooked school of the Nazarenes came up for discussion because of their closeness to Wagner's own artistic outlook that embraced a return to simpler, folk-based subjects and a



Fasolt and Fafner (Hans Makart)

STEMME IN STOCKHOLM



Photo: Tania Niemann

Wagner diva Nina Stemme returned to Stockholm, the city of her birth, to sing Brünnhilde in its recent Ring Cycle. A number of WSNZ members were there and Peter Rowe sent this review.

The Stockholm *Ring* was performed in the city's late 19th century Opera House which is an elegant, intimate theatre, seating about 1200. It has a warm resonant acoustic which allowed the full power of the Royal Orchestra to engulf the audience and the voices to have a strong, immediate presence. The direction was by Staffen Valdemar Holm, who first conceived and directed this production a decade ago. It honoured this great work and thankfully there was never a hint of European sleaze.

The orchestra, conducted with clarity and momentum by Slovenian Marco Letonja, went from strength to strength throughout the cycle. All the cast were Swedish except for Falk Struckman (Hagen), and the singing was uniformly excellent. Of course Nina Stemme (Brünnhilde) was the star, giving a passionate and powerful performance, particularly in her confrontation with Siegfried in Act 2 of *Götterdämmerung* and in the Immolation Scene. However she did not overshadow the other singers, who included John Lundgren's authoritative Wotan, the radiant Sieglinde of Cornelia Beskow (surely on the brink of international stardom), a very fine and sympathetic Fricka in Katarina Dalayman, and a firm, tireless tenor in Lars Cleveman as Siegfried.

The operas appear to start in the mid 19th century and generally take place in a rectangular room which has windows, apertures or panels at the back, through which moving or still pictures portray the outside world. This intimate, domestic setting tends to demythologize the work, and warm human relationships are created among the characters.

The opening scene of *Das Rheingold* is set in a formal drawing room. The Rhinemaidens, dressed in formal



Kriemhild Accuses Hagen
(Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld)

WAGNER MURMURS

from Michael Sinclair

- According to her Facebook page Christine Goerke is currently studying the role of Isolde, but says she won't sing it for a couple of years yet.
- We hear that Dresden's most recent *Lohengrin* will be out on DVD this month.
- The Bayreuth rumour machine tells us Nike Wagner has abandoned any aspirations to direct the Festival.
- Sad to learn of the death, on 14 April, of Manfred Jung, the ebullient Siegfried in Bayreuth's famous 1976 Centenary *Ring*

crinoline gowns, walk about making swimming movements with their arms. Alberich is youthful and dressed in knickerbockers. Fish swim behind the rear windows. In Scene 3, Alberich is transformed into a formidable stocky mill owner.

Act 2 of *Die Walküre* takes place in an elegant billiard room. Initially, Wotan points a billiard cue at Fricka, but later she picks it up and smashes it on the billiard table – a dramatic prefiguring of Siegfried's severing of Wotan's spear in *Siegfried*. The end of this scene is poignant as Fricka embraces a broken Wotan who then curls up on the billiard table. The following dialogue with Brünnhilde is tender and very moving.

Act 2 of *Siegfried* is disconcerting. It is set in a room covered in leaves. A group of people dressed in white and holding flowers are sitting on wooden chairs. Eventually you realise that they represent the forest flora and fauna. The dragon Fafner sings through a megaphone (as Wagner had first requested) with a dragon shape capering in the rear windows.

Act 3 of *Siegfried* takes place on a street outside a building which appears to be the Opera House itself. An elegant soirée is taking place through the windows of an upper storey. Wotan accosts Erda and then Siegfried on the street, as though he has already been sidelined.

During Act 1 of *Götterdämmerung*, the decadence of the Gibichungs is exaggerated by Gunther and Gutrune being physically disabled, and using walking sticks.

In the closing Immolation Scene, Brünnhilde is left alone on the stage with a film of the flooding Rhine being shown on the rear wall. At one point Wotan's tearful face appears on the screen, but at the end the screen goes completely dead white—a total void, notwithstanding the glorious orchestral music. A cathartic yet exhilarating conclusion to a *Ring* cycle that was not surpassed by any other cycle we had seen, either live or on DVD.

Simon O'Neill

Congratulations to New Zealand's international heldentenor and WSNZ life member Simon O'Neill on being awarded an ONZ for services to opera.



WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2017 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 30 July at 7.00pm

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

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

Lively and informative musical background to the NZ Met screenings of *Der Rosenkavalier*, beginning 12 August, Rialto Newmarket. Learn how Richard Strauss marries Wagnerian richness to Mozartian elegance. Auckland Opera Forum have been invited to join us.

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 presentation of John's recent collection of Wagner poems. Readings, interview and comment, plus recordings and a few piano excerpts.

Sunday, 10 December at 7.00pm

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

Christmas Function: A pot-pourri of Wagneriana (including our very own Wagner TV Spectacular) and of course our seasonal cake and wine.

Christchurch

Friday, 18 August at 7.30pm

Venue: *The Music Suite, Room P2, Rangī 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: *74 Hackthorne Road, Cashmere*

Lohengrin: Performance on DVD, with a meal between Acts 2 and 3.

Friday, 27 October at 7.30pm

Venue: *The Music Suite, Room P2, Rangī 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 TBA: Christmas Social Function

Dunedin

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, plus Wagner's music for the burial of his 'spiritual father'.

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 instrument — mysterious, misunderstood and mis-named — from its emergence out of the depths of the Rhine to its appearance on the modern concert platform.

Sunday, 26 Nov at 12 noon

Venue: *Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row*

Christmas Luncheon

Followed by a telecast of the Wagner concert recorded at the opening of the Sydney Opera House. Stunning excerpts from *Meistersinger*, *Tristan*, and *The Ring*.

Wellington

Sunday, 16 July at 4.00pm

Venue: *St Andrew's Hall, 30 The Terrace*

Documentary Film: *The Golden Ring*

A behind-the-scenes look at the making of Decca's historic *Ring* in 1964. Alec Robertson in *Gramophone* hailed Decca's 1964 *Götterdämmerung* recording as 'the greatest achievement in gramophone history yet, a judgement the years have largely endorsed'.

Sunday, 1 October at 4.00pm

Venue: *St Andrew's Hall, 30 The Terrace*

The View from the Stage Part 3 (1924-45)

Chris Brodrick travels from Christchurch to present his illustrated talk about famous and interesting people who attended the Bayreuth Festival during the most difficult period in its history.

Date TBA: End of Year Party

Sir Jeffrey Tate 1943-2017

The death of conductor Jeffrey Tate at 74, was reported in June this year. Knighted just a few months before, he was a dedicated worker on behalf of music performance and maintained a huge workload.

Tate will always be remembered in Wagner circles for the work he did with Boulez during Chéreau's centenary *Ring* at Bayreuth, and closer to home, for his magnificent pulling together of the first Australian *Ring*

Cycle in Adelaide in 1998.

He returned to Australia to conduct a memorable *Parsifal* in 2001, when a grateful City of Adelaide presented him with the Keys to the City.

A fuller notice will appear in the next WSNZ Newsletter.

New Members

Hearty Wagnerian greetings to

Michael ElsworthChristchurch

Bernard JohnsonTe Awamutu

David PooleAuckland

LOHENGRIN — AN OPERA TREMBLING ON THE BRINK

August sees a new production of this opera by Melbourne Opera, and the WSNZ has TWO sessions devoted to it in Christchurch. Here, Heath Lees attempts to 'place' the music of the Swan Knight within Wagner's operatic growth

Wagner finished the score of *Lohengrin* in 1848, at the age of thirty-five. If you fast forward another thirty-five years you arrive at 1883, the year of the composer's death, which means that *Lohengrin* marks his life's exact mid-point.

In a striking parallel, *Lohengrin* also marks the mid-point of Wagner's growth as a composer for the theatre. Putting it bluntly, you could say that before *Lohengrin* you get Romantic Opera; after *Lohengrin* you get Music-Drama. For Wagner himself, *Lohengrin* was very much before rather than after i.e., an end rather than a beginning. In his title-page he announced the work as a "Romantic Opera in Three Acts", and soon after its completion, he consigned it firmly to the past, with an almost embarrassed dismissal.

The most telling indication that *Lohengrin* was an end rather than a beginning was the five years of almost complete musical silence that followed the opera's completion. *Lohengrin* had demonstrated to Wagner that he needed to re-configure his musical language, and to re-draw his theatrical goals. So, over the next five years of searching thought and hard-won theory (think *Opera and Drama*), Wagner was to position himself for his first real music-drama, which was *Das Rheingold*.

Online, Wikipedia jumps the gun and states that *Lohengrin* was actually Wagner's first music-drama. But only two reasons are given. First is the lack of musical 'numbers' that traditionally marked out recitatives, choruses, duets etc. Yes, Wagner did dispense with these progressive counters in *Lohengrin*, but if you scratch the opera's apparently 'seamless' surface you will quickly find the many breaks where one typical number gives way to another. The fact that the numbers aren't printed doesn't mean that they aren't there.

Wikipedia also points to the leitmotif, in particular the doom-laden 'forbidden question' theme. But here Wagner is simply using the 'motif of remembrance' that was already common in the operas of the day. His later development of the leitmotif was light-years away from this. In the works of his last twenty-five years — all post-*Lohengrin* — the leitmotif was not just a musical statement but a musical embodiment of a person or a thing — "an instinctively entrancing moment of feeling" as he was

to put it in *Opera and Drama*.

Certainly, music-drama-like moments do appear in *Lohengrin* — moments that strain so hard against traditional practice that they tremble on the brink, thrillingly poised on the edge of a great leap forward towards what will become Wagner's Music of the Future.

Take the traditional Italian *bel canto* opera. *Lohengrin*'s two famous solos —



the Farewell to the Swan in Act 1 and, in Act 3, the Grail Narration — are both very lightly accompanied, and presuppose a tenor voice of luminous charm and tonal purity à la Bellini rather than the normal Wagnerian requirement of passion wrapped up in strong delivery.

But now turn to Elsa's prayer in Act 1. She too begins softly in a vocally radiant *bel canto* style, but when she recalls her dream, a totally original harmony surges out. Enharmonic changes tumble over each other in an astonishing mixture of keys and chords such that the music acts out the idea of an intermixing of two different worlds. For a moment, the old *bel canto* opera has suddenly lit up with the future flame of music-drama.

Wagner's use of the chorus in *Lohengrin* is another example of new direction. Act 1 begins with typical choral greetings by King Henry's armies, and it ends with the expected rejoicing and lusty farewells. But in the centre of the act, listen to the way Wagner splits up his choir at the moment of the

swan's arrival: first a few soft voices, then others, more definite, join in to lead the transition from amazed perception

to gradual acclamation. The chorus is not merely relaying events to the audience; it gradually *becomes* the audience, and its music swells into life, seemingly of its own volition.

This is an exciting glimpse of what Wagner was to describe in *Opera and Drama* as the ideal function of the chorus. Contrary to what most people believe, he did *not* ban the chorus. What he deplored was the kind of chorus he had inherited from the old school, with its overpowering spectacle and large choral mass. "A Mass can never interest but only dumbfound us" he said. He aimed, he said in *Opera and Drama*, for the gradual appearance of "the surface of Melody out of the depths of Harmony". The arrival of the swan is a fine example, but so too is the soft, choral awe that greets Elsa's first arrival, or on a larger scale, her gradual (interrupted) procession to the Minster in Act 2.

One very forward-looking feature in *Lohengrin* is Wagner's use of instrumental sonority. It was unique, continually futuristic, and utterly musical. *Lohengrin* shows his unerring instinct for perfectly chosen instrumental wrappings and naturally suited keys. It's a

"It's in *Lohengrin* that Wagner's special kind of sound-cathedral first takes shape."

gift that shows itself from the first notes of the *Prélude*, and continues to the end. Indeed it continues after the end, flowing over into all the later works, including

Parsifal. It's in *Lohengrin* that Wagner's special kind of 'sound-cathedral' first takes shape. The *Prélude* (no longer just an overture) is a wholly new conception, a masterpiece of sculptured sonority. It seems to arrive from above and spreads itself out in three dimensional space, beginning sky-high with barely perceptible violin harmonics and gradually filling the orchestral space with an increasingly warm bath of sound before slowly draining away, leaving only memory behind.

So *Lohengrin* is not yet music-drama. It is Romantic Opera, though in many parts it is prophetic, and was to provide Wagner with the most tangible springboard yet to his new musical language. It is not an opera of the past nor is it music of the future. It is rather a music of Becoming. It "trembles on the brink", and it's this trembling that makes it such a unique and fascinating work.

(This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in the Newsletter of the Richard Wagner Society of Victoria. Used with permission.)

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