

GOOD NEWS!

WSNZ to Mastermind Publication of Sir Donald McIntyre's Memoirs for its 25th Birthday in May

It all began on a late February afternoon in 2017, when Sir Donald McIntyre ('Sir Don' to the trade) with his wife Bettina visited New Zealand and paid a call on WSNZ Emeritus President Heath Lees and his wife Liz, the Society's founding Secretary.

For some years now, Sir Don has been working on his memoirs, recounting how he had begun in Auckland as a complete amateur with a fine natural voice, and moving upwards geographically to the northern hemisphere's operatic capitals. Correspondingly, he also moved upwards professionally, to become the world's Number One Wagner bass-baritone, with a reign lasting for more than two decades. Not surprisingly, the memoirs are entitled "The Only Way is Up".

Sir Don's association with Heath went back a long way, right to the pre-founding of the Wagner Society in 1993, when Heath and Liz approached him to be the Society's patron. Typically, the answer was an immediate "Yes".

A musical tit-for-tat took place when Sir Don asked Heath to introduce him on the occasion of his Wellington investiture as a knight, and later to reply to his award as one of NZ's very first Arts Icons. So the links were already there.

But this operatic knight had a sad tale to tell. Despite the McIntyre name and the quality of the text, no Northern Hemisphere publisher would take it on, claiming that the book "would not sell". Could Liz and Heath help to have it published in New Zealand?

Publish in NZ?

First advances were not promising. Private publishers were interested, but wary. Major university presses were approached. Auckland and Otago gave the book a fair reading but regretfully declined. Victoria University Press agreed to take it on, but then lapsed into months of silence until the McIntyres eventually withdrew.

Back to square one then? Well, not quite. In the meantime, Heath had been

canvassing members of the Wagner Society and the Wagner-NZ Foundation with a proposal that the Society itself should publish the book with finance from the Foundation. The committees of both organisations were contacted, and this time there was quick and unanimous agreement.

Then came stumbling-blocks. National Secretary Peter Rowe examined the Rules of the WSNZ and found that

publishing memoirs probably lay outside the Society's stated objects. There were also thorny issues to do with resource and taxation since the WSNZ was just not set up to undertake the business of publishing and selling.

Off his own bat, WSNZ president Chris Brodrick, who has a long pedigree in printing and publishing, approached Quentin Wilson,

a Christchurch book designer and publisher, who was keen to see the project happen. Meantime, Heath had made a formal approach to the committee of the Wagner-NZ Foundation, for a grant of \$10k towards publication. The ready answer was again "Yes".

It soon became clear though that Sir Don's long and scintillating career had resulted in a huge collection of very fine production photos, taken from all over the world. Cost was the problem here, since rights, scanning fees and search charges had escalated enormously. It also followed that the initial, somewhat

basic book would have to be upgraded to quality paper, colour, and extra design features. Quotes eventually came in, totalling about \$30k.

Back to the grant providers. To their eternal credit, (and thanks to a great background paper from Chris Brodrick) the WSNZ committee agreed to support a further request for funds from the Wagner-NZ Foundation, now to the tune of \$15k. Heath's next task was to

approach another player on the grant-provision field: the Auckland-based Sir Donald McIntyre Trust, which has for years been raising money in Sir Donald's name and then gone about distributing it to young and majorly talented Wagner singers. The proposal was put for the Trust to match the Foundation's \$15k, and at the eleventh hour word came back in the form of yet another unreserved "Yes".

After discussions with Chris Brodrick, Quentin Wilson and

legal adviser Peter Rowe, a proposal was hammered out, Heath agreed to continue as the project's NZ 'manager', and finally it was all good to go. Hopefully, the book will be ready by 1 May, 2019, and officially launched on 22 May to mark Wagner's 206th birthday and the 25th birthday of the WSNZ.



Sir Donald McIntyre as Wotan

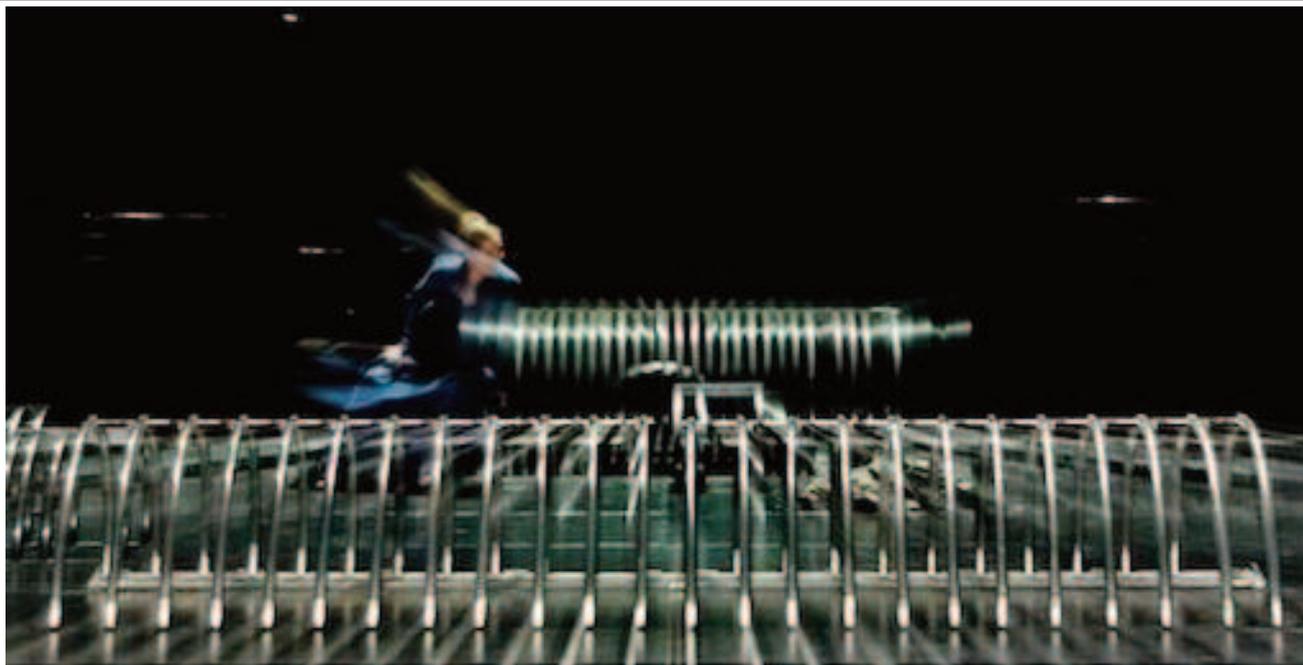
Photo: NZ Concert Pitch

Double Celebration

So that's The Story So Far. Sir Don's fascinating, lifetime book has already gained a happy ending, and a bumper, double celebration is on the cards for May of next year. Good news indeed.

BAYREUTH'S CURRENT *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*

Wellington member Michael Ashdown saw the production last year, and reports:



Act Two: “. . . odd fittings that look like bicycle stands”

Unsurprisingly, in view of her approach to directing, Katharina Wagner's staging of *Tristan* highlights the opera's ritualistic, self-destructive and nihilistic elements. Nevertheless, with its fine cast plus conductor Christian Thielemann, for me this was the most convincing production at last year's Bayreuth Festival. I liked it far more than her controversial *Meistersinger* production (2007); in *Tristan*, she has exercised much greater restraint and discernment. She and Thielemann had wanted to work together on *Tristan* for a decade, and the results reflect their dedication.

Katharina's view of the work is dark and foreboding, with stark, modern, semi-abstract sets by Frank Phillip Schlössmann which, drained of colour, recall Harry Kupfer's celebrated Wagner productions, such as his Bayreuth *Ring* (1988–92). The costumes, too, are highly stylised. This “less is more” approach allows us to concentrate on Wagner's universal



Reviewer Michael Ashdown at the 2017 Wagner Festival. Michael is a Wellington member, speaks fluent German, and often travels to Bayreuth.

perceptions regarding the human condition, with a minimum of distracting or incongruous novelties.

Act One takes place on board ship in a weird labyrinth of staircases and

passageways, like an Escher sketch come to life. Here, the characters' attempts to connect with one another are repeatedly foiled, with staircases or platforms rising or falling away unpredictably. The staging and direction very much showcase the protagonists' emotional states.

Eventually, Tristan and Isolde arrive at the point where they would normally drink the love potion, but here they extend their arms in an iconic gesture and pour out the potion into their cupped hands. Many have argued that the potion is actually superfluous in Wagner's conception of *Tristan*, with the couple very much (sub-?) consciously in love the whole time anyway. Katharina makes this hypothesis a reality on stage — the lovesick couple don't actually drink the draught at all.

Act Two was for many the hardest to take. Our heroes are thrown into a dungeon (an asylum?) containing odd fittings that look like bicycle stands, where they are watched over by an unsympathetic King Marke from a gallery at the rear. Harsh spotlights are shone on the lovers, while Brangäne and Kurwenal try unsuccessfully to escape. During the agitated “Night and Day” section, the lovers pin up a blanket to shield them from the light, hanging luminescent stars on the inside. Eventually however, Tristan tears everything down, leaving them no real privacy, and leaving us bereft of a space in

which to share their passion; instead, we become voyeurs looking on with unromantic detachment. Many felt bewildered, since the crucial transcendental and spiritual aspects of the drama were suppressed as a result.

With the Love Duet's quieter passages (“Descend, o night of love...”), the stage darkens, and projections show Tristan and Isolde separately in silhouette, each walking toward a bright light at the end of a tunnel; a universal visualisation of death. As Brangäne sings her warning, the silhouetted figures shrink and fade away altogether. Then, as the duet's great musical coitus interruptus approaches, the couple indulge disturbingly in self-harm on the sharp extensions of a bizarre cage that forms around them. Marke and his men burst in, dressed in ugly sulphur-yellow costumes. Tristan is blindfolded for Marke's monologue, and Melot stabs him in the back with a dagger before dashing away guiltily offstage.

Act 3 is more conventional, perhaps the most successful act of the production. Kurwenal and co., hold a candlelight vigil over the dying Tristan in the corner of an otherwise bare, dark stage. As Tristan awakes and sings his agonised solo passages, he hallucinates images of Isolde that appear inside translucent pyramids (reminiscent of Pink Floyd's seminal *Dark Side of the Moon* album cover!). The ‘Isoldes’ – actors, mannequins or projections, some at ground level,

others suspended on high – disappear, collapse or bleed as soon as Tristan attempts to engage with them. Tristan then hallucinates multiple images, until the ‘real’ Isolde rushes onstage, only to watch him die.

Finally, Tristan’s body is laid out, and Isolde sings her Liebestod. Instead of her sinking into transcendence, however, Marke simply drags her offstage — an ending that had already been implied in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s Bayreuth production in the 1980s.

Petra Lang, with her creamy soprano, made a highly appealing Isolde, while Stephen Gould was clear and unforced as Tristan. They were well supported by Christa Mayer (Brangäne) and Iain Patterson (Kurwenal). Marke was sung by German bass-baritone René Pape, who was absolutely riveting to watch; musically flawless, yet cool and distanced.

The real star was Christian Thielemann, who employed a very measured, controlled approach to the score, rather than indulging in an all-out four-hour frenzy – ‘keeping the tiger safely at bay’, as he put it. Accordingly, his latter-day *Tristan*



TristanStephen Gould
IsoldeEvelyn Herltzius

readings, have been much praised for their restraint. He also focuses unflinchingly on the drama, so the Liebestod is presented as a dramatically logical conclusion to the proceedings, and not as a grand, oratorio-like finale for the soprano. Thielemann also acknowledges Tristan as a stark warning from Wagner when it comes to real-life consequences. There’s no palace of wisdom at the end of this road of excess.

New Members
A big Wagnerian welcome for the following new arrivals:
Rodney Macann.....Waikanae
Joanne WilkesAuckland

Wagner Murmurs
Michael Sinclair hears that:
• Jonas Kaufmann plans to sing his first staged *Tristan* in about 3 years’ time.
• Simon O’Neill will take on the role of Tannhäuser at the Deutsche Oper Berlin in January 2019, and Parsifal at the Vienna State Opera in April 2019.
• Melbourne Opera will present *Der Fliegende Holländer* in February 2019.
• Longborough Festival Opera is aiming for a new *Ring* cycle in 2019.

JOHN HAMBLING AWARDED LIFE MEMBERSHIP

The committee of the WSNZ has awarded life membership to John Hambling, who has given over 15 years of unbroken service to the Society, first as Treasurer in the decade of the 2000s and then from 2006 as its honorary auditor – a position he still holds. John’s musical background is deeper and more extensive than most members know. For many years he played double bass in performances in Tauranga, and was conductor and music director for the Tauranga Choral & Operatic Society (now Tauranga Music Theatre Inc). Among many sparkling productions, his 1974 *Fiddler on the Roof* won the JC Williamson award for Best Amateur Musical in

Australasia that year. A Chartered Accountant by profession, John, his wife Iris and their three sons moved to Auckland in 1983, when John



John Hambling and Famous Friend

joined the Turners and Growers organisation, becoming its Finance Director until his retirement in 2006.

John became a Wagner-addict in his teenage years, through a World Record Club mono recording of *Die Walküre*, which he thrashed to death. Now he owns all of Wagner’s stage works on DVD, and several complete Rings. In addition, John and Iris have travelled to many Wagner performances, including the Society’s pilgrimage to the very first Adelaide *Ring*.

In announcing the award, WSNZ president Chris Brodrick expressed thanks for John’s long service, and Michael Sinclair praised his creation of the Excel Spreadsheet that is still used today. “John is utterly meticulous in all matters of accounts,” says Michael, “and always a pleasure to deal with”.

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND • 2018 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland	Wellington	Christchurch	Dunedin
<p>Sunday, 12 August, 7pm in St Heliers Community Centre, 100 St Heliers Bay Road Peter Bassett: Die Meistersinger: Models, Motivations and Misconceptions What was Wagner’s motivation, and what were his models for characters, text and music?</p> <p>Sunday, 30 September, 3pm in St Heliers Community Centre 100 St Heliers Bay Road Heath Lees introduces a complete Wagner opera - TBA</p> <p>Sunday, 9 December, 7pm in St Heliers Community Centre Christmas Potpourri</p>	<p>Sunday, 19 August, 4pm in St Andrews Hall, 30 The Terrace Peter Bassett: Die Meistersinger: Models, Motivations and Misconceptions (See Auckland, 12 August)</p> <p>Sunday, 28 October, 4pm in St Andrews Hall, 30 The Terrace John Drummond: The Most Notorious Chord in the World – the ‘Tristan Chord’ What this unique chord is all about, how Wagner came up with it, and why it is so appropriate to the opera’s story.</p> <p>November/December End of year party Date and details TBA</p>	<p>Friday, 17 August, 7.30pm in The Music Centre, St. Mary’s Pro Cathedral, Manchester Street Peter Bassett: Die Meistersinger (See Auckland, 12 August)</p> <p>Friday, 7 September, 7.30 Venue as above Heath Lees: Der Rosenkavalier: A Match-Maker between Mozart and Wagner See Dunedin’s 9 Sep. programme</p> <p>Sunday 14 October Venue TBA Complete DVD of <i>Die Meistersinger</i> with a meal between acts</p> <p>Sunday 2 December Christmas BBQ/Pot-Luck.</p>	<p>Sunday, 9 September, 2pm in Black-Sale House Lecture Room Heath Lees: Der Rosenkavalier: A Match-Maker between Mozart and Wagner A tour of <i>Der Rosenkavalier</i>, showing how Strauss blended Mozartian elegance with Wagnerian effects</p> <p>Sunday, 25 November, 12pm in Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row (Turn Right off Pitt Street) Christmas Luncheon followed by Wagnerian Goodies including Kirsten Flagstad on film and Herbert von Karajan rehearsing sections from <i>Die Walküre</i>.</p>

There were three excellent reasons why Alex Ross should have been in New Zealand last month:

1 As author of that masterly book *The Rest is Noise* he had been bagged as a star exhibitor by the Auckland Writers' Festival.

2 As a specialist in 20th-century music, he had been seconded to a CMNZ tour of the major NZ centres to introduce a contemporary programme by the group STROMA and Wellington's golden-voiced Bianca Andrew.

3 As a card-carrying Wagnerian, he has for years been working on a book called *Wagnerism*, and this was his chance to offer a preview. WSNZ members were out in force.

In the event though, the lecture "On Wagner" wasn't

quite as mind-blowing as we had anticipated. Ross is an urbane New Yorker with a quiet, silvery voice, and he tends to let his material speak for itself. As Stravinsky might have said, he is merely the vessel through which the ideas pass. Still, when the ideas are rooted and grounded in the life and influence of Richard Wagner, who needs more drama or extra sound-effects?

For his one-hour lecture, Ross settled for going over a well-tilled field that combined a beginner's introduction to Wagner with a survey of the world's "literary, artistic, political and intellectual figures" who had been infected by Wagnerism (easier to say who *hasn't* been, said Ross), and then he homed in on the question of just what it is that gives Wagner and his works such a unique and fascinating pull — the "Wagner Vortex" he called it.

As a touching salute to the country of his visit, Ross began with the largely overlooked Wagnerism of Katherine Mansfield, and related it to the rampant Wagnerism of Baudelaire and the French Symbolists, before moving to Wagner-propelled UK writers such as Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot — all of them trying to make words act like music, by having their meanings embodied within their sounds.

Armed with the courage of his expertise, Ross set out to boldly go where no musicologist had gone before — to re-enter the atmosphere of connectivity that leaps out of every page of *The Rest is Noise*, where events seem worlds apart yet can be flamboyantly yoked together. He told us, for example, that

the very word Wagnerian (which he's been tracking for years) is used to bestow epic stature upon completely unrelated events like the ice breaking in the Arctic, the titanic battles between global corporations, and — wait for it — the film *Batman Versus Superman* ... plus many others.

Ross freely admitted that Wagner was a man of crazy contradictions, and yet he said, these help to keep the flame burning, since we are all drawn into the attempt to make some kind of sense of them.

It was when he got to his "Wagner Vortex" that the really fascinating stuff began to appear. The secret of this Vortex, he said, lies squarely in the music, and in particular in the

way it "mimics our nervous system". To me, it seemed

that he had seized the core of it all in that one phrase — that Wagner's music speaks to us at every level, physically, intellectually and emotionally. It makes us feel as though it actually belongs to us, and we to it. "I felt," said Baudelaire, "as though this music was *mine*".

Playing music examples on the usual crappy equipment provided, Ross had us floating through the *Lohengrin* Prelude, and held spellbound by the sorcery of the *Tristan* Prelude ("It's not played for the characters in the stageplay" he said, "it's played for us and it sets up our ambiguous, ecstatic dreamworld." When he got to *The Ring*, Ross homed in on Wotan's long, downward spiral in Act 2 of *Die Walküre*, and related it to the modernists' stream-of-consciousness like that of say, Mansfield, Joyce, Eliot and Woolf. Finishing with *Parsifal*, Ross noted how the four notes of the bells act in sympathetic vibration, imparting the thrilling gift of clairvoyance through their different recurrences.

Before leaving, Ross touched on the two matters that are usually hammered to death — Wagner's anti-semitism and his hijacking by Hitler. In a delicately balanced appraisal, he sketched out these blacker aspects of Wagner, but in the end, merely shrugged his shoulders. Even he couldn't explain all that. But he did remind us of the ambivalence it brings, and this ambivalence, he said, makes us more aware of the honest role that art has to play in the world.

No doubt these and other fascinating aspects will be fully treated in his coming book. We left, all agog.



Alex Ross On Tour

On 10th June, fresh from a brilliant performance of the *Wesendonck Lieder*, Simon O'Neill and the NZSO hosted an unforgettable evening of good conversation and music in the very convivial



Simon O'Neill Back Home

atmosphere of Auckland's Crowne Plaza.

Simon's warm informality in response to questions from NZSO interviewer David Bremner (principal trombone) produced riveting verbal snapshots of an amazing musical life, dashingy illustrated by his own keyboard-accompanied song. In addition, ensemble musical interludes were provided by several NZSO players.

Simon launched his musical career in a brass band, playing the E-flat bass tuba, initially to relieve childhood asthma. Singing in choirs followed, but as a student his study had to be tuba. He stuck at it, and was accepted for singing in his second year

Early on, he learned sheer determination from gigs such as pre-match entertainments at Dunedin's rugby ground. The all-male group sang "The Man I Love" under a hail of beer cans. But he had the time of his life.

Switching from baritone to tenor and moving to New York brought massive change. He won a Fulbright Scholarship and sang to support himself through the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School. Being a finalist in a Met Opera competition brought him work at small opera companies all over the US.

At a Met Opera audition they asked him to sing Wagner. He gave them "Ein Schwert . . ." from *Valkyrie*, holding the famous "Wälse" note for a very long time (he was kind enough to demonstrate this for us!). He became understudy for Placido Domingo at the Met, then was double-cast with Domingo at Covent Garden. His career had taken off, leading to engagements all over the world.

Simon paid eloquent tribute to Sir Donald MacIntyre as a demanding mentor who instilled a passionate love of Wagnerian music.

The evening finished with a rapturous "Winterstürme" from *Die Walküre* and there was also a special vote of thanks to the Wagner Society for its support of Simon's return visit.