

Wagner 2021: the Scene Opens Up, the Plot Thickens

Peter Rowe reports on the Society's 2021 AGM in Auckland, held on 13 June:

Terence Dennis welcomed members and presented his report, as also printed in the May newsletter. This noted the pleasing number of new members. Jeanette Miller presented the financial statements for the Society and the Foundation, and reported that both continued to be in a sound position. She noted that John Hambling has retired as our auditor and that Michael Sinclair has agreed to review the accounts for now. Jeanette thanked John for his contribution over many years. The existing officers and other Members of the Committee were duly re-elected for another year. Peter Rowe then briefly introduced the new Constitution for the Society as notified to members in the May newsletter. It was adopted by unanimous resolution. Terence closed the AGM and then gave an intriguing and highly illustrated presentation on *Wagner on Wagner* (see also below).

Terence Dennis reports on his highly successful recital tour of the country with Abhinath Berry, his *Wagner on Wagner* presentation and the Dunedin screening of Wagner's early opera, *Das Liebesverbot*:

In 2021, all the national NZ Wagner Society centres hosted piano recitals devoted to major works of the Wagner circle, providing a special live concert experience. They featured Terence Dennis, current National President of the Wagner Society of New Zealand and Blair Professor of Music at the University of Otago, and his pupil, Abhinath Berry, who is in the third year of his degree study.

The programme covered a wide spectrum, with Terence Dennis playing the suitably grandiose *Rienzi-Fantasie* of Liszt, dedicated to Hans von Bülow, one of Liszt's greatest pupils, the conductor of the premieres of both *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, as well as being the husband of Liszt's second daughter Cosima (née Liszt/d'Agoult) before she

became Wagner's second wife. He also played the attractive, warmly expressive one-movement *Sonata for the Album of Mathilde Wesendonck*, a special musical tribute from Wagner to the wife of his patron, Otto Wesendonck, and Busoni's magnificent transcription of *Siegfried's Funeral March* from *Götterdämmerung*, a powerful realisation in pianistic terms of the mighty orchestral original.



Terence at St Andrew's Church, Wellington, in May

Abhinath Berry played the *Ballade No. 2 in B minor*, one of Liszt's major works from his middle period, based on the Greek legend of Hero and Leander; in this period, Liszt's individual treatment of thematic development and harmonic sophistications particularly interested Wagner. Abhinath then played the solo piano version of Liszt's mighty *Totentanz*, a set of variations on the *Dies Irae* plainchant from the Requiem Mass, which Liszt sets with extraordinary invention and pianistic virtuosity. Abhinath also performed Liszt's famous transcription of the *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, a setting that floods the piano with resonance and complex pianistic textures, and he concluded the programme with a real rarity: Tausig's powerful ballad, *Das Geisterschiff / The Phantom Ship*, thought to be a dramatic evocation of the legend of the Flying Dutchman. With von Bülow, Karl Tausig was the other most brilliant Liszt pupil, who died very young, and had been introduced by Liszt to Wagner, for whom he made major transcriptions as well as piano scores of the Wagner operas.

It is remarkable that, as well as playing the complex solo version of the *Totentanz*, Abhinath also played the original version for piano and orchestra to great acclaim in the Dunedin Town Hall, in between his solo appearances in these Wagner Society recitals.

Following the Annual General Meeting on 13 June, Terence Dennis presented a session, *Wagner on Wagner*, to the Auckland Wagner Society, highlighting facets of Wagner's own polemics on the composition of opera, ranging widely from the famous *Opera and Drama* and *Art and Revolution* to *Recollections of Auber*, within a wide spectrum of what opera had represented and achieved up until Wagner's day. Illustrations included *Penelope's Lament* from Monteverdi's *Return of Ulysses*, music from Handel's *Atalanta and Alcina*, as well as many historical context references that even included the fall of Byzantium at the hands of Sultan Mehmet II. The Christchurch and Dunedin centres will include this widely embracing presentation in sessions later this year.

At the end of June, the Dunedin Wagner Society also included a viewing of Wagner's second opera, *Das Liebesverbot*. Based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, the opera received what must have been a rather calamitous premiere, and a non-repeat performance when the second tenor was attacked by the husband of the lead soprano just before curtain-up; the lead soprano then fled in tears and the advertised performance was abandoned. Be that as it may, the modern-day production was most inventive, from the Madrid Opera (from 2016, directed by Kasper Holten), in honour of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare. The members of the Dunedin Wagner Society were much intrigued and enjoyed their experience of what is still a great rarity; many also acknowledged the powerful (if rather inexperienced and youthful) hand that created such a work.

WSNZ – 2021 Programme August to December

Auckland

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

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

NB: Please note the different venues as indicated individually below

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

Venue: Te Auaha theatre: NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street

(Opera Society regular programme event, included here for information)

A screening of the controversial 2013 production of *Der fliegende Holländer* from Zurich Opera.

Sunday, 17 October, at 3:00 p.m.

Venue: Te Auaha Theatre, NZ Institute of Creativity, Dixon Street

A special screening of two documentaries showcasing two leading Australasian performers with a strong Wagnerian connection: *Five Faces of McIntyre*, about Sir Donald McIntyre (film also featuring Dame Malvina Major, Timothy Hawley and others – historic TVNZ production from 1979), and *Simone Young: To Hamburg from Downunder* (film originally produced for North German television, from 2008).

Sunday, 28 November at 5:00 p.m.

Venue: Paul and Carol Stigley's home in Khandallah

End-of-year function – more information to follow.

Christchurch

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

Friday, 24 September at 7:30 p.m.

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

Sunday, 28 November

Christmas function – further details TBA.

Dunedin

All venues will be publicised locally.

Sunday, 8 August 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 *Opera 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.

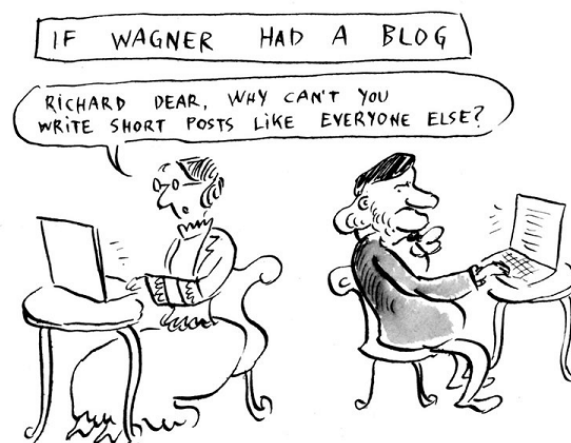
A Presentation in Preparation – 'Wagner and Humour'

At first sight, the association of the words 'Wagner' and 'humour' seems to be an anomaly. The magnificent works that deal with the most serious issues in life in no way suggest anything funny – the (still comparatively heavyweight!) comedy of *Die Meistersinger* notwithstanding. However, there is in fact another side to the equation. First, there are obvious flashes of humour in many if not all of the operas; thus, when Siegfried takes off Brünnhilde's breastplate for the first time and exclaims, 'Das ist kein Mann', a ripple of amusement always runs through the audience. Likewise, the boyish Siegfried's cavorting in Mime's cave is designed for laughs. Many other examples can be given.

Moreover, we know that Wagner did indeed have a great sense of humour, as is clear in his autobiographical writings such as *Mein Leben* and the so-called *Brown Book*, as well as throughout Cosima's diaries. Then we have the reactions to Wagner by both his supporters and detractors. Most amusing accounts of the man himself and his works can be found during his lifetime and right up to the present. He has been an excellent target for caricature, both verbally and pictorially; sketches and cartoons abound. Books about the humorous side have been written, for example Terry Quinn's *Richard Wagner: The Lighter Side* (Amadeus Press, 2013). Amusing productions of his works have been staged as well as rewrites and parodies, such as Unexpected Opera's *The Rinse Cycle*, performed at the Charing Cross Theatre in London in 2016.

With all this in mind, John Davidson and Michael Ashdown are working on a lavishly illustrated presentation to be given in Wellington in 2022. A sample illustration is given below. It is hoped that Wagnerians will be able to shake off their cloak of awe and worship and have a good laugh WITH, but not necessarily AT, the Master!

– John Davidson



(Cartoon by Pablo Helguera)

New Members

A very warm Wagnerian welcome to you all!

Malcolm, Virginia and Jonathan Abernethy.....Wellington
Gabrielle Aumont.....Christchurch

The Original *Parsifal* Conductor, Hermann Levi, and a Belated Tribute to Him in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria – by Michael Ashdown

It is well known that the German-Jewish conductor of the *Parsifal* premiere in 1882, Hermann Levi, didn't always have the easiest time in Bayreuth engaged in performances of Wagner's 'last card' – but he enjoyed success.

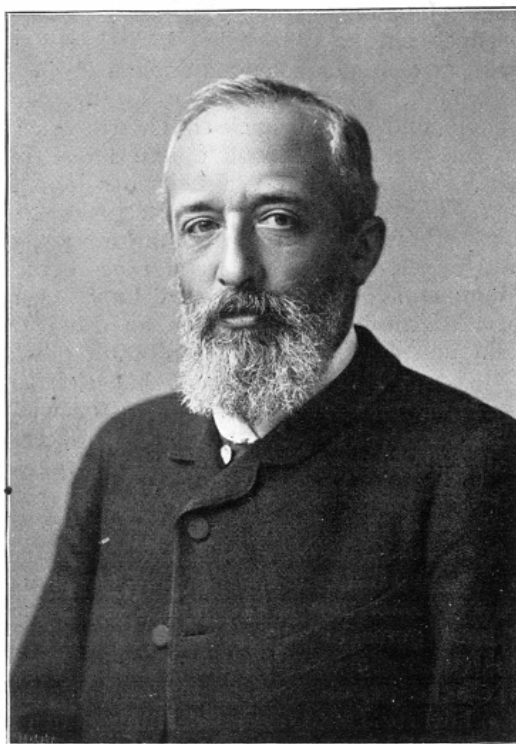
Levi, the son of a rabbi, was born in Giessen in 1839. He studied music at the Leipzig Conservatory during 1856–59, and by the time of *Parsifal* was the Court Conductor of the Munich Court Orchestra, following posts as music director in Saarbrücken, Mannheim, at the German Theatre in Rotterdam in the Netherlands (where he conducted his first Wagner opera, *Lohengrin*) and in Karlsruhe. His first personal contact with Wagner was in 1871, when Levi was conducting *Die Meistersinger* in Karlsruhe; they met in Mannheim in December after Levi had asked Wagner about details of performance practice. From then on, their relationship intensified, and, as early as 1874–5, Levi was heavily involved in the preparations and early rehearsals for the first Bayreuth Festival, held in 1876. Up to that point, he had also been on friendly terms with Johannes Brahms, but, sadly, Brahms decided to break off the contact because of Levi's close association with Wagner. Levi also had to assure his father, Benedikt, that he made a clear distinction between Wagner's music on the one hand, and Wagnerians on the other.

Following the 1876 festival, and after some misgivings regarding some of the musical performances that had been given, Wagner decided early on to engage Levi as the conductor of what was to be his final work, *Parsifal*. Even upon reading the libretto for the first time in 1878, however, Levi had doubts whether he had a suitable background to conduct the work, with its overt Christian elements and symbolism. Meanwhile, during the runup to the premiere, Wagner openly wondered whether Levi ought to be baptised before conducting the performances; according to Cosima, in April 1880, Wagner said to her, 'I can't let him conduct *Parsifal* unbaptised, but I'll baptise them both [Levi and the pianist Josef Rubinstein] and we'll all take communion together.' When Levi was in Bayreuth the following January, Wagner tried then to persuade him to be baptised, but, unsurprisingly, Levi showed little enthusiasm.

Then, in June 1881, Wagner received an anonymous letter warning him that he should not allow the purity of his sacred work to be jeopardised by having it conducted by a Jew, while also insinuating that Levi was in an illicit relationship with Cosima, the latter comment causing the most trouble. After Levi arrived

back at Wahnfried late for a meal, Wagner sent the poor man to his room to examine the letter, which Wagner had sneakily left on his bedroom table. Very upset, Levi claimed that he left Wahnfried immediately after an awkward meal and fled to nearby Bamberg. After he had ignored a telegram from Wagner telling him to turn back immediately, Wagner then wrote him a memorably exasperated letter, with characteristic 'exuberance':

*My dear, best friend! With all due regard for your feelings, you're not making anything easy for yourself or us! It's precisely because of your gloomy way of looking at things that we could end up feeling uncomfortable in our dealings with you! We're all agreed that the whole world should be told about this s**[, but that also means that you mustn't run away from us and arouse groundless suspicion as a result. For God's sake, come back here at once and get to know us properly at last! You don't need to give up anything of your faith, but just gain the courage of your convictions. Perhaps there will still be a major change in your life, but in any event – you are my Parsifal conductor! So, come on! Come on!*



Hermann Levi.

(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Levi returned to Bayreuth and the storm blew over. For his part, Wagner also wrote to his benefactor, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and expressed his full confidence in Levi's 'extraordinary zeal and almost passionate

devotion'. (However, this correspondence culminated in an awkward misunderstanding by Ludwig as to whether Wagner had perhaps now abandoned his anti-Semitic attitudes, but, following some particularly unpleasant remarks made by Wagner to clarify his standpoint, Ludwig no longer replied.)

The *Parsifal* rehearsals went much more smoothly than those for the *Ring* had done six years earlier, and 16 performances were given in the Festival Theatre from 26 July to 29 August 1882. Two days after the final performance, Levi wrote joyfully to his father:

The final performance was magnificent. During the 'Transformation Music', the Master came into the pit, wriggled up to my desk, took the baton from my hand and conducted the performance to the end. I remained at his side because I was afraid that he might make a mistake, but my fears were quite groundless – he conducted with the assurance of one who had been nothing but a conductor all his life. At the end of the work, the audience burst into applause that defies all description. But the Master did not show himself, but stayed with us musicians, making bad jokes, and when the noise in the audience showed no sign of abating after ten minutes, I shouted 'Quiet! Quiet!' at the top of my voice. They heard it above, and really did quieten down, and then the Master, still at the conductor's desk, began to talk, first to me and the orchestra, then the curtain was raised, the whole cast, chorus and technical personnel had assembled on the stage, and the Master spoke with a warmth that reduced everyone to tears – it was an unforgettable moment!

Levi later visited the Wagners in Venice over ten days in February 1883, he and Wagner discussing the cast for the summer's *Parsifal* revival, but he left just before Wagner died on the 13th. Levi was a pallbearer at the burial at Wahnfried, along with Heinrich Porges, another Jewish musician. He was later appointed Festival Music Director and conducted all the performances of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth until 1894 (despite issues with certain anti-Semitic staff), giving him security and ensuring that the festival itself was able to continue as Wagner had envisaged it. In 1896, he went into retirement, and married Mary Fiedler, the wealthy widow of a well-known art historian. This enabled him to

build a lavish villa in Partenkirchen, at the edge of the Bavarian Alps south of Munich, and including several rooms in which Cosima and her family were welcome to stay, although she didn't visit the villa until after he died in Munich in 1900. [Continued overleaf]

[Continued from previous page] Levi was buried in a mausoleum (designed by Adolf von Hildebrand) on the edge of his property. After the Nazis had come to power, they neglected the grave, and instead dedicated Hermann-Levi-Weg, now Karwendelstrasse, to a publisher of anti-Semitic pamphlets. However, it was the local administration itself that demolished the structure in the 1950s, to widen the road, with Levi's remains still in a zinc coffin under a gravestone that was now covered in rubble. Levi seemed to have been forgotten altogether until 2012, when, following an unsuccessful attempt by Garmisch mayor Thomas Schmid to rename part of Hindenburgstrasse after him, Sigrid Meierhofer, Schmid's successor, was able to ensure that his grave would be treated in a more dignified manner. There were further complications, because the grave was located on private property, and at one point it was suggested that his remains be transferred to the New Israelite Cemetery in Munich. Eventually, Meierhofer managed to secure the burial site for the municipality through a land swap, a preferable solution, since a Jewish gravesite was meant to be lasting, and Levi himself had wanted to be buried there.

Most recently, just a few weeks ago, the Munich artist, Franka Kassner, who had won a design competition for Levi's gravesite with her entry, 'The Last Greeting', attended a ceremony to inaugurate her work on-site. She had entered the competition because Levi had been the first person for whom she had developed empathy as a child. The site is now covered with a blanket of bright, hand-cut copper scales arching over the grave and surrounded by clattering pieces of slate and thin metal rods, 'full of melancholy', as she described it. In the presence of the current mayor Elisabeth Koch, too, she spoke a few peaceful words to Levi, saying how she had wanted to shield him in 'armour' against any humiliations he had endured. Conductor Kirill Petrenko then went up to her, and whispered that he liked her work, after having been very sceptical at first. Petrenko later conducted the Bavarian State Orchestra in a memorial concert given in Levi's honour, a programme including Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, Brahms's *Tragic Overture*, Fiordiligi's aria *Come scoglio* (sung in Levi's own translation into German) from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, Max Bruch's *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra, and Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas Overture*.



Munich artist Franka Kassner at Levi's grave
(Photo: Marktgemeinde Garmisch-Partenkirchen)

Gripping New Munich *Tristan*

Leading Wagnerian singers Jonas Kaufmann and Anja Harteros have given their long-awaited role debuts in a brand-new production of *Tristan und Isolde* given by the Bavarian State Opera in Munich from early July. It seems they did not disappoint, with Kaufmann lyrical and assured (and seemingly 'channelling' Ludwig Suthaus!), and Harteros thrillingly impressive, especially in the first act. However, the greatest praise was reserved for Kirill Petrenko, currently one of the two or three greatest living Wagner conductors, here in what have been his final performances as Music Director of the Bavarian State Opera. The reception for Krzysztof Warlikowski's intriguing stage production, updated to the 1920s and making extensive use of back-projections and eerie life-size puppets, was rather more mixed, but still positive. For two highly informative video previews with interviews, click here – www.youtube.com/watch?v=hv5s-Rz3Cpc and here (both these links are subtitled) – www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHEVqyXCS4I – and, for a music-only trailer, click here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvsgnhhkwwY



(Photo: Bayrerische Staatsoper)

Das Rheingold as a Stage Play

Authors Feridoun Zaimoglu and Günter Senkel have reimagined and rewritten the story of *Das Rheingold* as a grim, modern stage play for the Schauspielhaus theatre in Düsseldorf, Germany, claiming 'above all, the author duo shows the victims that the greed for gold and power claims – an old story with new undertones, challenging the composer's belief in myth' – a not entirely new approach, perhaps, after years of *Regietheater* staging:



(Photo: Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf)

The play (in German) is also available in paperback from Solivagus (publishers) in Kiel.

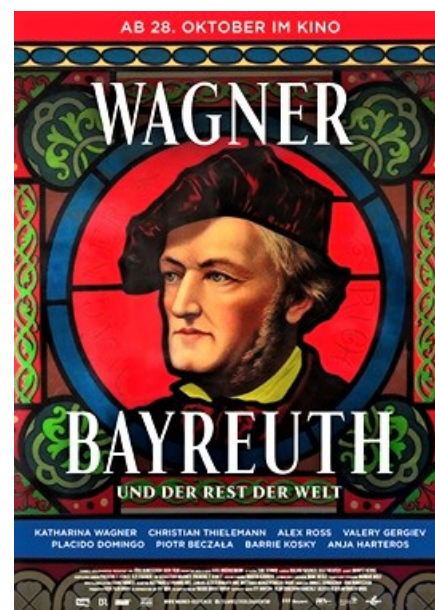
Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- The Zurich Opera will begin a new *Ring* cycle in 2022 with *Das Rheingold*. The cycle will be directed by Andreas Homoki and will continue over ensuing seasons.
- The Tiroler Festspiele Erl has begun a new *Ring* cycle, with *Das Rheingold* presented this year in a production by legendary mezzo-soprano Brigitte Fassbaender.
- The 2022 Salzburg Easter Festival will include a new production of *Lohengrin* to be conducted by Christian Thielemann.
- Katharina Wagner will direct a new production of *Lohengrin* at Oper Leipzig in March 2022.
- Simon O'Neill will sing Siegmund in two cycles of the *Ring* in Leipzig in March and July 2022.

+ Forthcoming Wagner Film

A new Wagner documentary, written and directed by the well-known German director, music journalist and publicist, Axel Brüggemann, will start in German cinemas from late October – it will be modestly titled *Wagner, Bayreuth and the Rest of the World*:



The film takes a new, light-hearted look at the quintessentially German phenomenon of Wagner, as seen through the eyes of Wagner fans throughout the world, and with guest stars such as Katharina Wagner, Christian Thielemann, Alex Ross, Valery Gergiev, Barrie Kosky, Anja Harteros, Catherine Foster and more. As well as Bayreuth itself, the filming locations include Venice, Latvia, Israel, Abu Dhabi, the USA and Japan. It remains to be seen when the film might ever reach NZ, but you can view the trailer here (in German): www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsiYtqloAMI