

'Hiding in the wings, forever / we'll take the stage, 'cos it's now or never!'

Mid-2023 finds the 'Wagnerian world' in a comparatively quiet state overall, although things are now gearing up again for several significant productions abroad. Here at home, meanwhile, all the main centres still have a good range of meetings to look forward to between now and the end of the year, with Terence Dennis still taking his Meyerbeer talk around the regions, while there is also a brand-new talk from Wellington's Michael Vinten. In Wellington, it is with sadness that we also note the passing of Hugo Rusbridge on 14 April this year, at age 78; originally from Christchurch, Hugo was a member for many years – a quiet and always agreeable personality.

In the previous issue, Ashley Day gave us a lively account of the Melbourne Opera *Ring* in Bendigo. Since then, the two *Tannhäuser* concert performances in Melbourne's Hamer Hall have also come and gone, given on 14 and 20 May. These were to have been conducted by Asher Fisch, well known to Kiwi Wagnerians for his conducting of the *Ring* in Adelaide in 2004, and also in Seattle in 2013, for example. Later, he went on to conduct a particularly well-received *Tristan* in Perth in 2019, with Stuart Skelton and Gun-Brit Barkmin as the leads. Recordings of all the above productions have been issued commercially on CD, and Fisch was also a guest in Heath Lees' highly acclaimed documentary exploration of the *Ring* back in 2013, *Wagner's Ring – A Tale Told in Music*. Most unfortunately, however, Fisch was indisposed this time; his late replacement in Melbourne was Johannes Fritzsich, Principal Conductor and Artistic Adviser of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra since 2011.

The role of *Tannhäuser* himself was sung by Stefan Vinke, again well known to those members who may have seen him in Seattle, Melbourne or Bayreuth as

Siegfried in the *Ring*, or in Melbourne as Walther in *Die Meistersinger*, in 2018. Vinke will also be returning to sing Siegfried in the Brisbane *Ring* later this year. The two other star singers were the American soprano, Amber Wagner, as Elisabeth, and Australian soprano, Anna-Louise Coles, as Venus, with Australian baritone, Samuel Dundas, well received as Wolfram, and Finnish bass, Timo Riihonen, as the Landgrave. They were further supported by a large mixed choir of 60 singers under chorusmaster Paul Fitzsimon. The production by Opera Australia was admittedly unstaged, but the musical values were evidently paramount, and so this was undoubtedly a major event in Australia's Wagner calendar, even without conductor Fisch. One reviewer even suggested that Melbourne audiences have now become so accustomed to and enthralled with experiencing Wagner's ten canonical works that they might well be outraged if a year were to pass by without at least one of the works being programmed! (We in New Zealand should be so lucky!)



Stefan Vinke and Amber Wagner in *Tannhäuser*
(Photo credit: Opera Australia/Jeff Busby)

Elsewhere, various other productions are in preparation. After he had firmly established Seattle as a prominent US Wagnerian centre, former Seattle Opera General Director Speight Jenkins' departure in 2014 was followed by a very long Wagner drought there, but now, following a concert of *Die Walküre*

highlights in 2021 and a full production of *Tristan* last year, Seattle Opera will be presenting a Minnesota Opera production of *Das Rheingold* from 12–20 August, with a 78-piece, onstage (!) orchestra. Seattle regular Greer Grimsley returns as Wotan, while Denyce Graves will make her debut there as Erda. It all sounds quite promising, although fond memories of Stephen Wadsworth's much-admired 'Green' *Ring* (2000–13) are still very much in Seattleites' minds.

Meanwhile, in London, the Royal Opera House is preparing for the initial performances of Barrie Kosky's new production of *Das Rheingold*, from 11–19 September. Working together with conductor Antonio Pappano, Kosky's production promises to be a 'bold new imagining of the first chapter of Wagner's *Ring* cycle'. Hang on to your hats! Kosky's Bayreuth *Meistersinger* was already a prime example of how bold Kosky can be in Wagner, all further underlined with his impeccable stagecraft. Whatever Kosky is coming up with for the *Ring*, it's bound to be both highly original and intriguing. General bookings open in early August.

And so, to Bayreuth: this year, Valentin Schwarz's controversial *Ring* returns (this time hopefully to be conducted by Pietari Inkinen, at long last), along with Tobias Kratzer's *Tannhäuser*, Roland Schwab's *Tristan und Isolde* and the new production this year, Jay Scheib's *Parsifal* (see p. 3). There will also be an open-air festival (free entry) on two days, conducted by Markus Poschner, with soloists Daniela Köhler, Magnus Vigilius and Olafur Sigurdarson.

Finally, Peter Bassett in Australia has very generously sent us another article, with further details on the upcoming *Ring* in Brisbane, where he will be heavily involved in the ancillary events (see p. 4).

WSNZ – 2023 Programme

July to December

Auckland

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

Sunday, 6 August at 7:00 p.m.

Michael Vinten returns with a talk on Wagner's Grand Romantic Opera based on the medieval minstrel knight torn between sacred and profane love: *Tannhäuser – Wagner's Unfinished Opera*?

Saturday, 14 October at 2:30 p.m. (note Saturday afternoon time)

A full screening of *Tannhäuser*, and a catered dinner.

Sunday, 3 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, 27 August at 4:00 p.m.

A brand-new talk by **Michael Vinten** on another area in which Wagner has exerted an enormous influence: *Wagner as Conductor*.

Sunday, 3 September at 4:00 p.m.

Talk by **Terence Dennis**: *Wagner and Meyerbeer*. Terence discusses Wagner's infamous *Jewry in Music* and the music of Giacomo Meyerbeer, the most successful of French Grand Opéra composers, including a film of the complete 4th act of *Les Huguenots* – held to be the finest act of Grand Opera before the 4th act of Verdi's *Don Carlos* – and also music from *Le Prophète* and *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*.

Sunday, 1 October at 10:30 a.m. (note morning starting time)

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

Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: A screening of the highly acclaimed 2011 production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* from Glyndebourne, directed by David McVicar, conducted by Vladimir Jurowski, and featuring Gerald Finley as Hans Sachs, Marco Jentzsch as Walther von Stolzing, Johannes Martin Kränzle as Sixtus Beckmesser and Anna Gabler as Eva Pogner.

November/December

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

Christchurch

Friday, 21 July at 7:30 p.m.

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

Talk by **Syd Kennedy**, entitled: *Who Is Brünnhilde, What Is She?* This will include some ancient history, Norse legend and Wagner, rolled together with extracts from the 1976 Bayreuth *Ring* production as filmed in 1979/80 (directed by Patrice Chéreau, conducted by Pierre Boulez, with Dame Gwyneth Jones, Sir Donald McIntyre and others).

Friday, 6 October at 7:30 p.m.

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

Talk by **Terence Dennis**: *Wagner and Meyerbeer*. Terence discusses Wagner's infamous *Jewry in Music* and the music of Giacomo Meyerbeer, the most successful of French Grand Opéra composers, including a film of the complete 4th act of *Les Huguenots* – held to be the finest act of Grand Opera before the 4th act of Verdi's *Don Carlos* – and also music from *Le Prophète* and *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*.

Sunday, 3 December – time and venue TBA
Christmas function.

Dunedin

Sunday, 17 September at 2:00 p.m.

Venue: University of Otago School of Performing Arts, 145 Union St East

What are we to make of the *Ring*? Emeritus professor **John Drummond** explores Wagner's most monumental work in the context of the artform to which it belongs: music-drama. Given the ever-new contexts afforded the complex and at times contradictory tetralogy, John asks, 'Is the *Ring* Cycle flawed, or impenetrable, or what? What sort of response should we have to it? Does analysis help? Should we just lie back and enjoy it?'

Sunday, 26 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: Carrington College

Wagner Christmas Luncheon and Conversazione/Concert. To end our year, **Scott Bezett** and **Terence Dennis** discuss the origins of Greek Classical Drama and how these inspired the origin of opera and, by extension, Wagner's music-drama. Many will remember Scott's vocal MMus Recitals, with Terence, and he is completing his Masters in Classics. He also performed memorably at one of our past Christmas Luncheons. Scott will also sing the first great scena for the male singer in operatic history: the *Lament of Orpheus* from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607).

New Members

We are delighted to extend a warm Wagnerian welcome to:

Ingrid Dunckley.....Dunedin
Elizabeth Wilson.....Dunedin

Wie immer, herzlich willkommen – seid Euch gegrüsst!

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair (just the one item):

• La Scala will launch a new *Ring* cycle, beginning with *Das Rheingold* in October 2024, and culminating in full cycles in 2026. Christian Thielemann will conduct, and David McVicar will be the production's director.

(Our thanks to Michael for sending in the above from the UK!)



'Sieglinde assists Siegmund in his heroic deed.'

Bayreuth's New 'AR' Parsifal



Hi-tech 'augmented reality' glasses for *Parsifal* at this year's Bayreuth Festival
(Photo: Bayreuther Festspiele)

In a new first for the spirit of Bayreuth's reputation as a driver of both tradition and innovation, American director, theatre arts professor and technology enthusiast, Jay Scheib, is incorporating AR (augmented reality) elements in his new production of *Parsifal*, to be premiered at Bayreuth later this month. *Parsifal*, he claims, is the perfect work for this: 'It's about a mysterious realm of magic, about religion, about breaking on through to different universes and about changing our world.' Nevertheless, realising his dream has been a rocky road, with an outcome that is still not entirely ideal. Conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado, the cast will include Bayreuth regular Georg Zeppenfeld as Gurnemanz, Joseph Calleja as Parsifal, Derek Welton as Amfortas and Jordan Shanahan as Klingsor, with the role of Kundry to be shared between Eliška Garanča and Ekaterina Gubanova.

The snag is that the special glasses that are required for enjoying the AR experience will not by any means be available to all those in the audience. Originally, some 2,000 pairs of glasses had been envisaged, enough for everyone in the auditorium, but this number has since been cut back to just 330, for now. This has partly been the result of a struggle for the required financing, and, ultimately, for artistic self-identity as well. The Festival's private financiers tend to favour more conservative productions, but the extra cabling required for the seating alone – to power the glasses – has proved very costly.

So that the remaining glasses are optimally distributed within the auditorium, they will be available only in the back rows of the stalls (*Parkett*), and, further behind, in the front rows of the boxes (*Logen*), balcony (*Balkon*) and gallery (*Galerie*). A percentage-based surcharge will be imposed on the ticket price, probably not exceeding 80 euros.

The glasses themselves are somewhat bulkier and heavier than a pair of sunglasses and feature customised nose clips, plus corrective lenses (up to a strength of –8 dioptries) for those who need them. Patrons report to one of the theatre service points up to two hours in advance for a 10-minute fitting session, after which they will have priority entry to the auditorium. The customised glasses are then in place when the patrons take their seats. Using the glasses' immersive 3D technology, additional digital images are superimposed onto the existing stage action within the spectator's field of view, and in time with the music. The glasses are transparent, so that the stage can be viewed normally even when no additional digital imagery is present. Users will also need to 'calibrate' the glasses at the start of each act, by staring directly at the stage for about one minute after curtain up.

(In view of the shortage of glasses, one witty online commentator suggested that cheap AR alternatives also be made available, such as 3D cinema glasses (many people would still have theirs from the first *Avatar* film), LSD squares or 'psychedelic mushrooms locally sourced from the nearby forest'! Another wag then pointed out: 'Isn't *Parsifal* "augmented reality" enough as it stands? Gorgeous music, though.)

In Memoriam

Grace Bumbry

4 January 1937 (St Louis, USA) – 7 May 2023 (Vienna, Austria)



Grace Bumbry after receiving her Kennedy Center Honor Award at the White House, Washington DC, USA, 2009 (photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Back in early May, we'd only just completed the previous newsletter when the news came through that the legendary American mezzo-soprano, Grace Bumbry, had just died in Vienna, as the result of a stroke last October. For a great many Wagner-

ians, Bumbry will forever be synonymous with the 1961 Bayreuth Festival, famously causing a sensation when, having already received guidance from the great Wagnerian soprano, Lotte Lehman, she appeared as the 'Black Venus' in Wieland Wagner's new production of *Tannhäuser*, conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, with an impressive cast featuring Wolfgang Windgassen in the titular role, Victoria de Los Angeles as Elisabeth and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Wolfram. In that now far-off time, her appearance on the Green Hill (which, it should be added, still predated her debut at the Met Opera by four years) was highly controversial, but her performance proved so endearing that it elicited 30 minutes of applause and 42 curtain calls. A fascinating contemporary French television report (with selectable English subtitles under 'Settings') reveals the then 24-year-old Bumbry to be highly eloquent and already fluent in French herself (just as she was in German) – www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPYM5d-sWdc – while the audio of her impressive Venus in the complete premiere performance of 23 July 1961 can be sampled here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaLi1pyYAqM. It should also be noted that the full flowerings of both the civil rights movement and the careers of many groundbreaking 1960s Afro-American cultural figures were still several years in the future at this time; singers like Bumbry, Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price were true pioneers.

Following her success at Bayreuth, Bumbry took on many additional roles, making her 1963 debut at Covent Garden and her 1965 debut at the Met as Eboli in Verdi's *Don Carlos*, while for her Salzburg Festival debut she appeared as Lady Macbeth (Verdi), again opposite Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Another well-known high point for her was the titular role of Herbert von Karajan's production of *Carmen* in 1966, again for the Salzburg Festival; a highly acclaimed film of the complete opera (with Bumbry, and Jon Vickers as Don José, as conducted by von Karajan) is still widely available on video. Although essentially a mezzo-soprano, she increasingly took on diverse soprano roles later in her career, including Salome, Tosca, Bess (Gershwin), Jenůfa and Turandot. Her further honours included a UNESCO award, a Grammy Award in 1972 for Best Opera Recording (for her superb, imaginative Amneris in *Aida*, under Leinsdorf) and the French government title of *Commandeur des Arts et Lettres*.

Grace Bumbry also came to New Zealand in 2005, as adjudicator of the final of the first Lexus NZ Song Quest, and she gave the set of Lexus masterclasses. She told Terence Dennis – official Mobil/Lexus Song Quest pianist for the final and the masterclasses – that, given the controversy of her appearing at Bayreuth, Wieland Wagner made a statement in the German press that his grandfather 'composed for voices, not nationalities'. Terence recalls that she told him many other fascinating details of her career during her two-week visit.

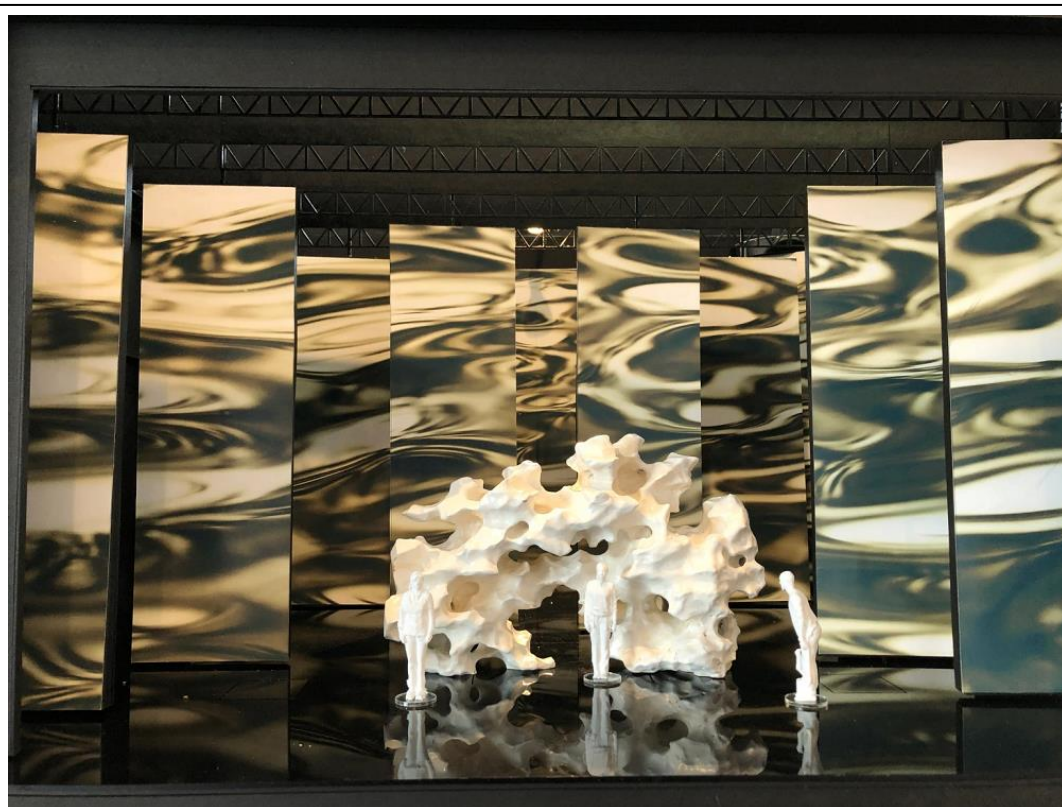
'More on the Upcoming Brisbane *Ring*' – by Peter Bassett

The new production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* planned for Brisbane in December this year is hugely exciting. There is still nothing quite like the *Ring*! Wagner described it as a 'festival drama for three days and a preliminary evening', and everything we associate with the word 'festival' applies. Spread over a week or so, it can be savoured by audiences without distraction, while ancillary events, such as the symposia and pre-performance talks that I shall be presenting, broaden and enrich the experience.

The *Ring* draws us into its story of ambition, lust, sacrifice, love, generosity, fear, and deceit; the embrace and beauty of nature and, above all, wisdom, and the promise of a better world. During the past quarter of a century, I have witnessed the *Ring* phenomenon all over the world. Like all great works of art, it speaks of universal and timeless human experiences, and so, productions can remain true to the drama's inner workings even when being viewed through the eyes of different cultures and in different times. The *Ring* in Brisbane promises to resonate with the culture in which it is being performed, just as the original Bayreuth production resonated with its time and circumstances in 1876.

It will be great to have French conductor Philippe Auguin with us in December. He has conducted more than a dozen *Ring* productions around the world, and I have attended two of them – the first in 2005 in Beijing, when he took the Nuremberg State Theatre's production to China, and the second in 2016 for Washington National Opera, of which he was also music director. At various times, he was musical assistant to both Herbert von Karajan and Georg Solti.

Chen Shi-Zheng is the director and production designer of the Brisbane *Ring*, a production that will use giant LED video screens, and so, visually, all things will be possible. Chen Shi-Zheng was born in China in 1963 and lost both of his parents during the Cultural Revolution. He developed a deep knowledge of Chinese opera and



Set model image for *Das Rheingold* (Scene 1), Opera Australia's 2023 *Ring* cycle. Image supplied.

emigrated to the USA in 1987. As well as staging traditional Chinese works, he has directed many western operas in the United States and Europe, including *Eugene Onegin*, *Nixon in China*, *La traviata*, *The Coronation of Poppea*, *Orfeo*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Così fan tutte* – and *Turandot* for Opera Australia's 'Opera on the Harbour' in 2016.

He has been quoted as saying: "Wagner productions, in recent history, are always trying to relate the story of the *Ring* to current western society. But this story is fantasy, a myth. So, what I want to do is take the myth as a platform to dive into, and re-imagine it in the twenty-first century, in Australia, in this very landscape. The references also relate to where I come from. What we are trying to avoid is using the familiar methods of European cultural reference. We are trying to get away from that." He has assigned a different 'season' to each of the operas, starting with *Das Rheingold* in spring (with the Rhinemaidens frolicking around the Great Barrier Reef), and ending with the winter of *Götterdämmerung*. He will be careful to not impose too much visual baggage on the music because Wagner should be allowed to speak for himself. He compares his task to that of a Chinese painter – knowing where to provide detail, and what to leave to the imagination. "You have to leave enough for

people to imagine, but you also want to provide a framework for people to enter into that world. When I listen to Wagner's music, I respond in my mind. I hope people will have a similar kind of journey, but I don't want to dictate every second of what people think."

Consider how he approached Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* for the Spoleto Festival in 2017. Prominent among Chinese mythological figures is the Moon Goddess. She had been a woman who had drunk a draught of immortality out of love for her husband, but this action had separated her from him. She then flew upwards to the heavens and chose the moon as her place to live. Her sad husband was left to worship her from afar – which, when you think about it, is not unlike the fate of *Onegin*. In his production, Chen Shi-Zheng set Tatiana's 'Letter Scene' against a backdrop of a Russian birch forest, through which the moon could be seen passing slowly across the sky as Tatiana wrote passionately of her love. *Onegin*, after receiving the letter, callously rejected Tatiana's expressions of love, only to regret this deeply when it was too late. Chen's handling of the Spoleto production strikes me as a simple but beautiful evocation of Chinese aesthetics and visual simplicity, which augurs well for the Brisbane *Ring*.

– Peter Bassett