

Tristan und Isolde with the APO in Auckland, on 10 August



(Image: Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra.)

Save the date! – for Saturday, 10 August will be the day when a complete Wagner music-drama finally returns to a New Zealand stage for the first time in nearly a decade. The last time that happened was in July 2014, when the APO gave a concertante performance of *Tristan und Isolde* under the baton of its former music director, Eckehard Stier, with a strong cast that included several impressive Scandinavian singers. Having conducted *Das Rheingold* somewhat conservatively three years before, Stier's interpretation of *Tristan* was considerably more energised and dramatic, and was generally very well received.

Since that time, however, things have become a little quieter on the Wagner performance front, and so the 2015 Wagner Gala in Wellington was the last time that a major 'Wagner only' concert was given in this country, with Pietari Inkinen conducting the NZSO in extended excerpts from *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, with soloists Simon O'Neill and Christine Goerke. In short, the return of Wagner to the Auckland concert stage is something of a red-letter day, and, hopefully, as many of our members as possible will be able to attend. The cast is looking most promising, with Simon O'Neill as Tristan, Ricarda Merbeth as Isolde, Katarina Karnéus as Brangäne, Johan Reuter as Kurwenal, Albert Dohmen as Marke, Jared Holt as Melot, and

Andrew Goodwin as the Sailor, Shepherd and Steersman, with the support of the New Zealand Opera Chorus. Simon O'Neill has already sung the role of Tristan at Glyndebourne (for example), in 2021, just as Katarina Karnéus sang Brangäne in Nikolaus Lehnhoff's acclaimed original production there, while Bo Skovhus, from the 2014 APO concert, also sang Kurwenal together with Karnéus in the same production. Meanwhile, Albert Dohmen has for years been a greatly admired bass-baritone at Bayreuth, where he has sung Wotan/Wanderer, Hagen and Alberich in the *Ring*, and the Landgraf in *Tannhäuser*.

There has been one notable cast substitution this time, namely Ricarda Merbeth, who will be replacing Manuela Uhl as Isolde. Merbeth is a powerful and highly experienced German soprano, having also performed at Bayreuth, going as far back as the Jürgen Flimm *Ring* in 2000, and at many of the great European opera houses as well. Her more recent role debuts have included the major Wagnerian roles of Isolde and Brünnhilde, and so we ought to be in for a bit of treat if the following trailer (from Amsterdam in 2018, partly in English) is any indication: www.youtube.com/watch?v=43D7Ej8doQs.

You can book second-interval meals at <https://aucklandphil.nz/experience-akl-phil/whats-on/tristan-und-isolde-meal-deal/>. **Please also note** that, during both intervals, the Balcony room on the first floor of the Town Hall will be reserved for WSNZ members to meet and greet (BYO food and drink only). The concert itself will also be live-streamed – full details at <https://aucklandphil.nz/watch/livestream/>. Additionally, on the evening of Wednesday, 31 July, there will be a special lecture given by Dr David Chisholm, Head of Auckland University's School of Music; then, on the morning of Sunday, 4 August,

there will be a 'Sunday Singalong with Wagner'. Both these events are free, but prior registration is required. See under <https://aucklandphil.nz/concert/tristan-und-isolde/> (scroll to 'Phil Opera Fest').

In the rest of this issue, see page 3 for an article on recent films influenced by the legend of Tristan and/or Wagner's opera; meanwhile, on pages 4–6, we are most indebted to Peter Bassett for kindly sending us a '20 years on' retrospective article on the Adelaide 2004 *Ring*, with which he was intimately involved. Peter's article is of such interest that we decided to include it here in full, so this issue is six pages long, instead of the usual four. Our ongoing programme of events is given overleaf – in particular, see also the notice regarding classical CDs and LPs for sale.

This year's Bayreuth Festival will run from 24 July to 27 August. The premiere event will be Thorleifur Örn Arnarsson's *Tristan und Isolde* production, conducted by Semyon Bychkov, with soloists Andreas Schager and Camilla Nylund. The *Ring*, *Parsifal*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der fliegende Holländer* are also in the programme.

Finally, we would like to note the sad passing in early April (at age 88) of the British philosopher and author, Michael Tanner, whose well-regarded, strikingly inspirational *Wagner* guidebook has doubtless found its way into many a jacket pocket at Wagner performances since its original publication in 1996, and is now often regarded as a classic. Contributing a weekly opera column to *The Spectator* for 20 years, Tanner liked to communicate his love and knowledge of Wagner in pithy, no-nonsense English, while promoting a genuinely holistic appreciation of opera as a mixed artform. In doing so, he strove to explain not how Wagner achieved his effects, for example, but simply what they were – to great acclaim.

WSNZ – 2024 Programme

July to December

Auckland

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

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

Parsifal: a seminar with visiting Wagner presenter **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, 4 August at 4:00 p.m.

Parsifal: a seminar with visiting Wagner presenter **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, Sir Graham Vick, here 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

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

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

Parsifal: a seminar with visiting Wagner presenter **Antony Ernst**.

Sunday, 6 October at 2:00 p.m.

Venue: 74 Hackthorne Road

A full screening of *Parsifal*.

November/December – date, time and venue TBC

Christmas function.

Dunedin

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

Venue: Ground Floor Seminar Room, 192 Castle College (at 192 Castle Street)

Parsifal: a seminar with visiting Wagner presenter **Antony Ernst**.

Sunday, 22 September at 2:00 p.m.

Venue: Ground Floor Seminar Room, 192 Castle College (at 192 Castle Street)

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.

Sunday, 24 November at 12:00 noon (venue TBC)

2024 Christmas Luncheon & Wagneriana.

New Members

A warm Wagnerian welcome to two new members – wie immer, seid recht herzlich gegrüsst!

Wolfram Nader.....Dunedin
Charmian Smith.....Dunedin

'Wagner Murmurs'

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- Grange Park Opera has announced that it will present Wagner's *Ring* cycle between 2026 and 2029, to be directed by Charles Edwards and conducted by Anthony Negus.
- Glyndebourne's first-ever production of Wagner's final opera *Parsifal* will be staged at the festival in 2025. Jetske Mijnsen will direct the production and Daniel Johansson will sing the title role.
- The Vienna State Opera will revive its Sven-Eric Bechtolf *Ring* in May and June 2025. Philippe Jordan will conduct.

*** Classical CDs and LPs for Sale ***

Steph Gray, daughter of deceased Wagner Society member Royston Palmer, has contacted the Society with the news that she is selling off his vast collection of music CDs and LPs, which are in excellent condition and include a substantial range of Wagner items (around a hundred of them!). These will be made available to interested members at a cost of \$4.00 per CD or \$7.00 per LP plus postage; multiple-disc issues will be sold at the above rates per individual disc in the issue (e.g., \$8.00 for a double CD issue). If any members are potentially interested in making a purchase, please send your enquiries to Peter Rowe at peter.rowe2000@gmail.com for further details, including comprehensive catalogues of the items for sale.

Notable Wagner Films for Streaming

In view of some of the Wagner films currently available for streaming, we would like to draw your attention to YouTube's 'Shakespeare Network' channel. Overview of latest videos here – www.youtube.com/@ShakespeareNetwork/videos – recent additions (to be found near the top of the above Web page) include Tony Palmer's complete, eight-hour *Wagner* epic from 1983, with Richard Burton, in its original 'open matte' (non-widescreen, non-'pan-and-scan') format, and in good quality (4K scan of a clean, if non-HD, source). This is among the better streaming the film has had online, so if you haven't yet seen it this is a good opportunity. (You can also enter the search terms 'Wagner', 'Burton' and 'Redgrave' in Google or YouTube.)

Other items near the top of the above Web page include Stephen Fry's *Wagner and Me* documentary (2010), here with 40 minutes of rare outtakes tacked on at the end that weren't included in the original theatrical release – all well worth a look. Meanwhile, there are also HD transfers of Leonard Bernstein's live *Tristan* performance filmed in Munich in 1981, and Karl Böhm's legendary live *Tristan* at Orange, France (1973), with Birgit Nilsson and Jon Vickers as principals. The latter, too, has been significantly upgraded, and, while the sound and image remain comparatively murky, this latest restoration is still a big improvement on most earlier video transfers. Both *Tristan* films lack English subtitles, but they're still must-sees, especially the Böhm. Just how long these items may remain available on the 'Shakespeare Network' channel is unclear, so best be in quick!

Several Theatrical Films Inspired or Influenced by *Tristan und Isolde*

In addition to the titles already outlined by Alex Ross in his seminal *Wagnerism* book, there have been other recent movies that were directly inspired or influenced by *Tristan und Isolde*, whether by the legend itself or Wagner's masterpiece – or both! Read on. . . .

The Tristan legend has been told in many ways over the centuries, and this is also the case with the first three films we discuss here. The first of these is watchable, but not especially well regarded: *Lovespell* (1981, filmed in 1979), directed by Tom Donovan and partially scored by Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains, to give an Irish flair. It is perhaps also of marginal interest to Wagner fans, since it features Richard Burton (as King Marke), seen just a few years before he played the composer himself in Tony Palmer's epic *Wagner* biopic in 1983. Others may be intrigued (astonished?) by the presence of a young Kate Mulgrew (as Isolt), best known for her role as Captain Janeway in the popular sci-fi series, *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001)! That all said, *Lovespell* mostly fails to strike an optimal tone in interpreting the legend, although it is generally quite well acted, with Mulgrew admirably forthright. But Nicholas Clay is bland as Tristan, Donovan's direction is flat, the script is rather clichéd, and the film plays like an average TV effort. Watch it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGKmW9DvPJc

Veith von Fürstenberg's subsequent *Fire and Sword* (1981) was a late entry in the 'New German Cinema' stakes. His film was an altogether more earnest effort, most faithful to the legend, and closer to Wagner's *Tristan*, but with the story expanded to include more characters and events. As in Wagner, Tristan kills Morholt in a sword fight, but is badly injured himself. He washes up in Ireland in a boat and pretends to be the minstrel 'Tantris'; having met him, Isolde now lovingly tends his wounds. Later, Tristan leaves again for the Cornish court, pledging to return for her later. When he does, however, he comes as himself, not realising that the Isolde he knew is also the Irish king's daughter, whom he has been sent to collect to be married to his uncle, Marke. Isolde weds Marke in Cornwall, but she and Tristan are now already bound by a love potion that she has prepared and drunk with him. Scheming court adviser Andret tells Marke of their tryst. They escape, but after several years Isolde must return to Cornwall; Tristan flees to Brittany. Later, he lies dying and sends for Isolde. She sails to be with him, but the Breton girl he has befriended betrays him; he expires, and Isolde joins him in death.

The somewhat inexperienced but highly attractive young leads also appeared in subsequent films of note: Antonia Preser (Isolde) was a Flower Maiden in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1982 filmization of *Parsifal*, while Christoph Waltz (Tristan) eventually shot to international stardom in Quentin Tarantino's

scathing World War II satire, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). While the script of *Fire and Sword* could have been tighter, the film is simply but beautifully shot, mostly on moody, remote locations in Ireland, some of which were also showcased in John Boorman's better-known *Excalibur* (1981). However, the (typical 1980s) synthesizer music soundtrack sounds fairly dated today. Some of the scenes are also quite explicit, although the film is still very clearly intended as a serious romantic drama. Just recently, 40 years on, it was re-released in a definitive director's cut – the full original release can be viewed here (mostly in English): <https://archive.org/details/tristan-isolde-feuer-und-schwert-english>



Original film poster for *Fire and Sword* (1981). (Image: Wikipedia.)

In 2006, *Tristan + Isolde* was a very solid, if slightly Hollywoodised, retelling of the legend from mainstream American director, Kevin Reynolds; Dean Georganis was inspired to write his screenplay after seeing Wagner's *Tristan* at LA Opera. Here too, Isolde is the daughter of the Irish king, while Tristan is presumed killed by Morholt (her betrothed) in battle, his still-living body sent in a funeral boat over to Ireland, to be found by Isolde. She heals him and they become lovers, but she tells him she is 'Bragnae'. Tristan returns to Cornwall alone and eventually fights in a tournament in Ireland, where, unwittingly, he wins Isolde as a wife for Lord Marke. Returning to Cornwall by sea, the pair resume their affair until they are exposed by Marke during a nighttime hunt. Tristan is imprisoned, but later redeems himself in a climactic battle with the Irish. Badly wounded, he dies in Isolde's presence; she then leaves forever. Notably, there is no love potion, and, at the end, Tristan initially sends Isolde away and returns to fight the Irish. *Tristan + Isolde* fared poorly at the box office, but garnered a strong following among younger viewers. The film features a lilting, Celtic-tinged score by British composer, Anne Dudley, while the muted colour palette recalls Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's classic *Tristan* staging for Bayreuth. Sophia Myles is a lovely, regal Isolde, while character

actor, Rufus Sewell, makes a genuinely three-dimensional Marke. Wagner's 'Night and Day' dichotomy is also sensitively mirrored when Tristan claims one can also live for 'duty and honour', and Isolde replies: 'But they are not life, Tristan. They are the shells of life, and empty ones if in the end all they hold are days and days without love.' Brief scene collage: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vENAdiWN9s4

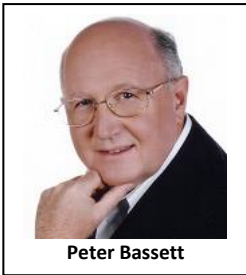
Finally, no discussion of recent *Tristan*-influenced films would be complete without mention of Danish arthouse director Lars von Trier's beautiful but polarising end-of-the-world drama, *Melancholia* (2011). Unlike the films above, *Melancholia* features Wagner's *Tristan* on the soundtrack, mostly the Act 1 Prelude, first heard in a slightly abridged form in the film's very striking, dream-like prologue – <https://vimeo.com/195006092> – as lavishly conducted by Richard Hein, with the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. Allegedly, von Trier had been directly influenced by Marcel Proust's enthusiasm for the Prelude in particular, since it recurs throughout the film, with the mournful Act III Prelude playing over the end credits. *Melancholia* otherwise tells its own story entirely, but there are still a few transmuted Wagner/*Tristan* tropes, centring on the familial love of two present-day sisters and their conflicts in the face of impending doom. . . . for 'Melancholia' itself is a rogue planet that threatens to collide with the Earth! Opening at a wedding reception from hell, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) then represents 'Day', with her loyalty to social mores, while depressed sister/bride Justine (Kirsten Dunst) is indifferent to such concerns, representing 'Night', and she is also far better able to face oblivion. (Her gloomy quip, 'The Earth is evil – we don't need to grieve for it', eerily echoes a grim letter Wagner once sent to Liszt.) Von Trier's films can be a nasty surprise for the uninitiated, although this one is an exception. That said, things *don't* end well (spoiler alert!): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueAYUp4rHZI

At first, von Trier might seem an unlikely candidate for tackling Wagner, yet he has enviable Wagnerian credentials, having been asked by Wolfgang Wagner in the early 2000s to direct a new *Ring* at Bayreuth. Following elaborate preparations, however, von Trier ultimately chose to withdraw, partly on cost grounds, and a replacement production then had to be conceived by Tankred Dorst. One can but wonder just how von Trier's own *Ring* might have turned out, and his thoughts on the subject remain intriguing nonetheless: <https://mostlyopera.blogspot.com/2007/10/lars-von-trier-on-nibelungen-ring.html>

. . . Meanwhile, many websites devoted to *Tristan* (especially on YouTube) have since been visited by film fans who otherwise might never even have bothered with Wagner in their lifetime – often dutifully leaving the comment: '*Melancholia* brought me here.'

20 Years On – The Dramaturgy of the 2004 Adelaide Ring

– an essay by Peter Bassett



Peter Bassett

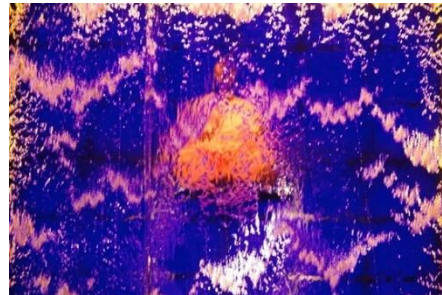
On 25 October 2001, three weeks after the Adelaide curtain fell on the first Australian staging of *Parsifal* – also directed by Elke Neidhardt – the

creative team for the new *Ring* began a week-long ‘retreat’ in the Blue Mountains to discuss production concepts and designs. Neidhardt was open to many ideas, but she had a few general guidelines. The story must be told clearly. Extremes were out. She did not want a conventional *Ring*, nor did she want a self-consciously avant-garde production, one that divorced action from meaning – “a German-style, deconstructed sort of concept where very often you don’t recognise what is on stage. . . . It’s terribly successful”, she said. “I don’t know why. I hate this stuff.” Unveiling the four operas as a complete cycle added even more pressure to an already daunting task. Unlike the Bayreuth tradition where a *Ring* is staged for five or six years running, and directors have the chance to come back each year and refine it, the Adelaide production would not have that privilege. “We have to get it right and successful and acclaimed the first time”, said Neidhardt. Basically, she was working with a clean slate which permitted a fresh – even uniquely ‘Australian’ – vision.

Water and fire are persistent elements in the story of the *Ring*, and it seemed natural that they should feature prominently in this production. One image that had fired Neidhardt’s imagination was the enormous cauldron which Michael Scott-Mitchell had designed for the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony in September 2000, which rose out of the water and blazed high above the stadium. Might there be some way of adapting this for the *Ring*? As a direct consequence, a circular platform which rose and fell on a central pillar surrounded by jets of flame became a key feature of *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.

An early element of the design process was a conception of the goddess Erda as a depiction of the Rhinegold in its pure state – a fecund Earth Mother representing nature at its most pristine and fundamental. Scott-Mitchell and Neidhardt imagined her seated, Buddha-like, virtually naked but caked with mud and with a vein of gold running down her. I had already told them about Wagner’s fascination with Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism, and this connection caught their imagination. Erda was to emerge from the gloom during the Prelude to *Das Rheingold* and remain visible in the depths of the river. When the gold on her body glowed at the

appropriate moment, Alberich would lunge through the water and the golden gleam would be extinguished. The notion of a ‘water curtain’ filling the entire proscenium space also made its way onto the ‘clean slate’ early in the piece, although at that point nobody had any idea how it might be realised.



Das Rheingold, Scene 1. The Rhinegold seen through the waters. Photo: Michael Scott-Mitchell.

Another idea which gained early acceptance was Scott-Mitchell’s concept of the ‘Rhine frame’ – a frame of blue Perspex panels lit from behind, which would surround the proscenium arch and be a constant reminder of the proximity of the River Rhine in, on, and beside which most of the drama takes place. These images – the primal Erda on her moveable platform, the real water, and the blue Rhine frame – clean, bright, modern, and architectural – provided the visual syntax for the designs still to come.

It was around that time that Neidhardt invited me to join the creative team as Dramaturg. This was entirely her initiative. The position of Dramaturg has its origins in German theatre/operatic practice, and it spread elsewhere, especially to America. The Dramaturg is a provider of information on the opera itself and on performing practices elsewhere. With complicated works like the *Ring*, stage directors do not have enough time to do all the research that might be necessary, and therefore rely on a Dramaturg to ‘speak for the author’. To give one example, in January 2003 Elke had a query about Loge: “I wonder if you could enlighten me a bit about Loge. I never quite understood why he is so unpopular will all the other gods, why Wotan says he is his only friend. What happened in the past???” As you remember we have costumed him rather like Mr Teflon, smooth and surviving all upheavals. I have arrived at the moment of his entrance in my blocking/production concept and noticed that my picture of Loge is really not clear.”

I replied: “I think that the key to Loge’s character lies in his symbiotic relationship with Wotan. They need and use each other, and the other gods resent this. Like many leaders, Wotan makes agreements of convenience that he has no intention of keeping. Then he resorts to cunning and dishonesty to get around them and, in so doing, undermines the very basis of his own

authority. Loge aids and abets him in this. The other gods have little or nothing to gain from such behaviour but everything to lose. If Wotan falls, they fall with him, and so they deeply resent Loge’s involvement with and encouragement of such perilous goings-on. Wotan is playing with fire – literally!”

As early as December 2001, the design team had had preliminary discussions about *Die Walküre*, but not a lot of progress had been made. In an email to me, Neidhardt summarised in simple terms her vision for the whole work at the outset: “Modern, somewhat politically relevant, clean as against dirt, dark against light, rich against poor, Western World against Third World without necessarily recognizable figures on stage. The gold is not necessarily gold but a substance that the superpowers want. We would like to leave it to the audience to imagine what Alberich is fossicking for rather than have the invariable awful props of gold. So, ours will look more sinister.” Not all of the contrasts mentioned in these preliminary thoughts survived in the finished work, and those that did were represented obliquely and not in any simplistic or obvious way.

On 19 December, not long after the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, Neidhardt commented to me: “Can hardly bear to read the papers these days. . . . All the more important that people like us try to bring something exciting and uplifting into this world of gloom and threat.” She mentioned that she had been looking at the brilliantly executed white cardboard models of Scenes 1 and 4 of *Rheingold*. So, these designs had been finalised as early as December 2001, three years ahead of the historic performances.



Das Rheingold, Scene 3. Richard Greager as Mime and John Wegner as Alberich. Photo: Michael Scott-Mitchell.

At a meeting on 11 January 2002, a question was raised as to whether Wotan might be involved in some way in the events in Act I of *Die Walküre*. I pointed out that, unlikely as it now seemed, there was indeed a precedent for Wotan’s presence in this Act. In Wagner’s early drafts, he had Wotan entering Hunding’s hut during the meal and thrusting a sword into the ash tree. It seems that the composer’s main reason for dropping this visible intervention was to

allow the dramatic tension to build gradually towards the exciting business with the sword at the end of the Act. For the Adelaide production, it was decided that Wotan (or Wälse, as the twins remembered him from childhood) would appear just as the great door to the hut burst open, and he would draw the coming of Spring across the scene in the form of a gorgeously painted curtain. And this is what happened.

When the discussion turned to the depiction of Hunding's hut on stage, I mentioned that behind the action in this Act had been Wotan's plan to prepare Siegmund to claim the sword, defeat his enemies and do what the god, bound by his laws and treaties, was unable to do alone. That had been the whole purpose of the boy's tough and tragic upbringing. The hut, therefore, might be likened to a hunter's trap set for Siegmund. Wotan could not simply give his son the sword, for that would have compromised his own authority and the cosmic laws, but he could lure him to it and leave it to the heroic nature of the young man to do the rest. Since the spear was the instrument and symbol of Wotan's will, it seemed appropriate to conceive of the hut as a circle of spears that would fly up out of the floor and stop the fleeing man – in the way that a trap might catch a fleeing animal. Scott-Mitchell and Neidhardt quite liked this idea, and this was how the hut was depicted in the final staging.

The main idea for Act II was to divide it into two scenes, the first one being in Wotan's 'office' in Valhalla, surrounded by the trappings of executive power. He is also accompanied by life-size statues of heroes in suspended animation pending future use to defend Valhalla. The challenge was how to move the heroes in and out on a lightbox floor. The result was highly dramatic, and it mirrored the power of the music.



Die Walküre, Act III. The Valkyries joined by Brünnhilde.
Photo: Michael Scott-Mitchell.

In respect of Act III of *Die Walküre*, some observers of the Valkyries' scene considered the Neidhardt/Scott-Mitchell 'punk' treatment of the warrior maidens disrespectful, but it certainly had the desired effect of providing emotional release after

the long and, at times, gruelling second Act. The Valkyries' exchanges as they arrive are flippant and coarse, and often pass unnoticed amongst the fast and furious music and overlapping voices. One of the mythological functions of the Valkyries was to serve drink to the heroes in Valhalla as 'cup bearers', so the 'Wunder Bar' associations did have some justification.



Die Walküre, Act III. Elizabeth Stannard as Gerhilde, Gaye MacFarlane as Siegrune, Donna-Maree Dunlop as Rossweisse. Photo: Sue Adler.

For several weeks in February/March 2002, Neidhardt and I corresponded about aspects of *Siegfried* as she marshalled her thoughts and decided on an approach to this, the trickiest of the *Ring* dramas to stage convincingly for a modern audience. I made the point that "it would be a mistake to imply that Wotan's ultimate intention is to make possible the birth of Siegfried. At this stage, it is Siegmund who is intended to be the saviour of the gods. Siegfried, by contrast, will be genuinely independent of his grandfather and doesn't figure in his plans at all." Elke was surprised to hear this, but I was able to demonstrate its accuracy with references to Wagner's actual text.

In May 2003, Neidhardt turned her attention to rehearsal plans for the Wotan/Alberich scene in Act II of *Siegfried*, prompting me to offer my belief that this scene was written as

homage to Carl Maria von Weber. Its opening, with the spooky musical atmosphere, soft timpani beats and lights in the forest, is reminiscent of the Wolf's Glen scene in *Der Freischütz*. The latter had made a great impression on the young

Wagner, and Weber had been a visitor to the Wagner/Geyer household. The Wolf's Glen's mood of German romanticism fitted perfectly with the Grimm-like spirit of *Siegfried*. In the Scott-Mitchell design, developed a year earlier in March 2002, the forest canopy was

to comprise hundreds of green helium-filled balloons, swaying gently in the breeze (I had shown the designers photos of the Bayreuth canopy of upturned green umbrellas from the Rosalie-designed production I had seen in 1998). The balloon canopy suggested both the fragility of the natural environment and the childlike vulnerability of Siegfried.

Neidhardt asked about the Woodbird in Act II, noting that the Ring and Tarnhelm would have escaped Siegfried's attention had it not been for the Woodbird advising him to take them. So, she asked: "Who was manipulating the Woodbird? In Kupfer's [Bayreuth] production it was Wotan and that makes sense to me. Or was the Woodbird intending that through Siegfried, nature would be repaired, ie the Ring returned to the Rhinemaidens?"

I had never agreed with Kupfer's interpretation, and responded as follows: "The bird takes fright when it sees the Wanderer in Act III, which shows it is aware of who he is. But why would it be so clearly alarmed (*flattert ängstlich hin und her* [flutters anxiously to and fro]) if it is merely doing Wotan's bidding? The Wanderer's own remark: '*Ein Vöglein schwatzt wohl manches*' ['A bird may chatter all sorts of things'] also suggests that its advice had nothing to do with him. . . . I am inclined to the interpretation that the voice of the Woodbird is 'nature' caring for its own. In the abandoned text for *Der junge Siegfried* [dating back to 1851] when listening to the Woodbird, Siegfried exclaims: 'It is as though my mother sings to me!' Again, at the end of the music for the Woodbird's warning about Mime's treachery, we hear the Wälzung motive. Wagner explained this in a note to King Ludwig: 'We hear, softly, softly, mother Sieglinde's loving concern for her son.' So, it could be said that the Woodbird is also the voice of his mother's (nature's) love, warning her son of danger and leading him to Brünnhilde." Neidhardt replied on 5 March 2002 that many German commentaries referred to the Woodbird as Wotan's tool, but: "Your argumentation makes colossal sense."



Siegfried, Act III. Fafner as dragon.
Photo: Michael Scott-Mitchell.

When discussion turned to depicting Fafner in *Siegfried*, we considered the prospect of a huge prosthetic hand, leaving the audience to imagine the nature and size of the creature to which it belonged. After further discussion, this hand became an

enormous articulated claw – a splendid and sophisticated piece of machinery – but it cost in the vicinity of a quarter of a million dollars to build!

I drew Neidhardt's attention to Kupfer's depiction of Erda in *Siegfried*, Act III, in which she had appeared beneath a raised stage, entangled in luminescent yellow fibre optic rope against a deep blue background – a solution that was copied in Adelaide for the three Norns in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*.



Götterdämmerung, Prologue. Timothy Mussard as Siegfried and Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde. Photo: Sue Adler.

By the end of August 2002, the scenic plan for the entire *Ring* had been mapped out, but the director continued with the painstaking business of conceptualising the production and analysing the characters. She emailed me early in September: "I am struggling with some things in *Götterdämmerung*. Brünnhilde's last monologue, for example, when she mentions that Siegfried put the sword between herself and him. After all??? Did he or didn't he?" I replied that the strongest evidence suggested that Siegfried (as Gunther) and Brünnhilde spent the night with Notung lying between them . . . not out of respect (his brutal action under Hagen's influence had already put paid to that), but because of his commitment to his 'blood brother'.

As work on the 2004 *Ring* continued, our attention turned to *Götterdämmerung* and to ways of depicting the hall of the Gibichungs. A few years earlier, I had visited Beijing and had been impressed by the Forbidden City. I suggested to Michael Scott-Mitchell that, because the Gibichungs existed in a different social and cultural world from the earlier

characters of the *Ring*, the Forbidden City might offer a suitable inspiration. He liked this idea, and the result took the form of grand red lacquered arches that could be extended for the full depth of the stage, moved back to a half-way position, or stacked up against the rear wall like Chinese boxes – one inside the other. The resulting scene was unforgettable and highly dramatic. During the funeral music, the hall of the Gibichungs was in a half-open position with space in front. Later, it moved upstage for the final conflagration. Siegfried lay 'in state' with the people filing past, and he was then carried upstage and through the partially opened screen doors and out of sight. Brünnhilde remained alone for her long peroration and, after throwing the brand (metaphorically) on the funeral pyre, she disappeared through the upstage opening. A fire batten was lowered and ignited behind the mesh screen, illuminating the red portals of the hall; other fires sprang out of downstage vents. When Hagen dashed for the Ring, the water curtain was activated, and the downstage rake (riverbank) rose, sweeping him beneath it. Fire remained visible through the water curtain, before both fire and water ceased for the final, sublime 'O hehrstes Wunder' music of hope and renewal.



Götterdämmerung, Act III. Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde, Timothy Mussard as Siegfried, Duccio dal Monte as Hagen. Photo: Sue Adler.

The production concept and designs of this historic production won consistently glowing reviews. The *Adelaide Advertiser* critic was extravagant in his praise for the opening night of *Die Walküre*: "This is, without reservation, the most astounding night of theatre the Festival Centre has ever witnessed. It is probably without parallel in Australian opera history for its courage and audacity. Each act was greeted with tumultuous applause, and the final scene with a ten-minute standing ovation." The interstate media was just as enthusiastic. The *Sydney Morning Herald* critic described the whole *Ring* as "one of the finest occasions in the history of Australian music, opera and theatre". Overseas, London's *Sunday Times* lauded it as "one of the most visually resplendent *Rings* of recent times", and *Opera Now* magazine said: "The results were so dazzling that the sets often won loud applause on their own." Hugh Canning in *Opera* magazine (UK) wrote: "Elke Neidhardt, with her team . . . [has] come up with one of the most beautiful, thoughtful and spectacular stagings of recent times. . . . It is unthinkable that it should not be seen again in Australia. Indeed, this *Ring* could well establish Adelaide, like Seattle, as one of the world's Wagner Meccas."

Peter Bassett

To download the complete text of Peter Bassett's PhD thesis on the Adelaide Wagner Decade, including the 2004 *Ring*, click here:

<https://wagnerqld.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/peter-bassett-phd-thesis-final-compressed.pdf> (file: 4.5 MB)

Adelaide *Ring* 2004 Production Team

Conductor:	Asher Fisch
Director:	Elke Neidhardt
Set Designer:	Michael Scott-Mitchell
Lighting Designer/Associate Set Designer:	Nick Schlieper
Costume Designer:	Stephen Curtis
Dramaturg/Artistic Administrator:	Peter Bassett.



Götterdämmerung, Act III. Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde. Photo: Sue Adler.