



Sir Donald McIntyre: 22 October 1934 – 13 November 2025

As most (if not all) of you will know by now, Sir Donald McIntyre – one of the world's leading bass-baritones for decades, and our Society's Patron – died last November, aged 91. Accordingly, much of this expanded newsletter issue is dedicated to his memory, with heartfelt tributes from our President Emeritus, Heath Lees, Current President, Terence Dennis, and NZ heldentenor, Simon O'Neill, himself a former protégé of Sir Donald.

At the time, the news of Sir Donald's passing elicited only a rather muted response from the New Zealand media, which a number of our members found regretful – although it was still stirring to suddenly hear him singing Wotan's concluding 'Loge, hör! Lausche hierher!' monologue from Act 3 of *Die Walküre* in a special item on RNZ National's late news, for example. And on 20 November, there was also Bryan Crump's half-hour interview with Simon O'Neill on RNZ Concert's 'From Three to Seven' programme; just a few days earlier, Simon had been singing the titular role of Wagner's *Siegfried* in Sydney, under the baton of conductor Simone Young, for which, right before the performance on the 16th, Simon spoke some very moving words to honour his former teacher and mentor. The full text of Simon's tribute is given on page 3, while Bryan Crump's interview with him can be heard on the RNZ Concert website*.



From the memorial service for Sir Donald at the Künstlerhaus München (Munich), on 8 December 2025, featuring the central floral bouquet donated by the WSNZ. (Photo credit: Bettina McIntyre)

Meanwhile, the Bayreuth Festival, and both General Manager Peter Gelb and conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin on behalf of The Metropolitan Opera (for *The New York Times*), issued online obituaries; in the UK, Barry Millington, editor of *The Wagner Journal*, wrote a highly detailed obituary** for *The Guardian*.

Later, on 8 December, a two-hour memorial service for Sir Donald was held at the Künstlerhaus München in central Munich. The WSNZ donated a floral

bouquet for this service, as shown in the adjacent photo. (Most of the recorded musical items played during the service were taken from major Wagner works: *Lohengrin*, *Die Walküre* and *Parsifal*.)

Sir Donald is survived by his second wife, Bettina, and his three daughters from his first marriage: Ruth, Lynn and Jenny. Bettina has since flown to New Zealand to return her husband to his native land.

In other items, there are the usual regional programmes, along with Michael Sinclair's 'Wagner Murmurs', on page 4; at the time of going to press, guest speaker Antony Ernst has already given his presentations on *Die Meistersinger* in all four regional centres, so these have not been listed in the programmes. As ever, Antony's presentations were highly informative and entertaining – a great start to the year. Finally,

on pages 5/6, we are most pleased to be able to include a detailed review by John Davidson of the Staatsoper Berlin *Ring*, conducted by Christian Thielemann, in September/October last year.

We hope, then, that you will enjoy the selection of items, and we wish all our members the very best for a prosperous and successful year. A replacement for Sir Donald as the Society's Patron will now also be under consideration, and so we will be updating you on this in due course.

* - www.rnz.co.nz/concert/programmes/three-to-seven/audio/2019013594/remembering-sir-donald ** - www.theguardian.com/music/2025/nov/29/sir-donald-mcintyre-obituary

Sir Donald McIntyre – A Personal Appreciation

– by Heath Lees

*In place of a formal obituary, Heath Lees, President Emeritus of the WSNZ, contributes an edited version of his foreword to Sir Donald's autobiographical book, **The Only Way is Up: Reflections on a Life in Opera.***

In my radio days, I had the pleasure of taking part in several interviews with Sir Donald McIntyre. One memorable moment happened when I prefaced a question with the remark that, in his mid-twenties, he had left New Zealand and travelled to the UK 'to learn singing'. Politely but firmly, he interrupted: 'No, I didn't go to learn singing; I could sing before I left New Zealand. I went to learn roles and to discover the instinct of the language I was singing in.'

The instinct of the language. Wagner would have applauded this heartily, since he often insisted that language came with its own music, and composers had simply to tease out and put together (*com-pose*) the sounds of that music.

Even then, Sir Don's top priority wasn't so much concerned with the musical sound and flow of language, but with its *instinct* – the way it spins out connections through its word-roots, the way its consonants and vowels often sound like the meanings of the words, the way it links drama with emotion – all the things that Wagner himself anguished over in his 1850 book, *Opera and Drama*. Sir Don was coming to Wagner in his own way by going in search of the networks of sound that spread themselves through language, eventually culminating in the magic of opera. During that interview, I felt that Wagner and Sir Don must surely have been made for each other. Sir Don, it seemed, was taking to Wagner's music naturally, like a Dutchman, as it were, to water.

Some years later, Sir Don became a visiting lecturer at the University of Auckland's School of Music and coached a number of students in the Vocal Studies department. There, he *always* started with the words. What was the character saying or feeling, and why? If students didn't know the story or the dramatic situation, Sir Don sent them away until they did. Only then would he start to teach singing.

And he could certainly teach it. As well as imparting what he knew, he radiated the *mana* of his professional reputation. Just by being with him, students grew in stature. After all, Sir Don was the leading Wagnerian bass-baritone of his generation. Two of his stage roles had risen up out of all the rest to become permanently fixed upon the musical world's living memory. The first was that of the Flying Dutchman – a role that he sang frequently over nearly fifty years in just about every major opera house in the world. The second was that of Wotan in the world-famous 1976 Bayreuth Centennial *Ring*,

which became a must-watch TV serial in the West, a sell-out DVD in the early 2000s, and a showpiece Blu-Ray disc set just a few years ago. What a dazzling reputation for the university's opera students! They loved the thrill from being exposed to the electrical field of Sir Don's personal presence. It was something that emanated from his experience, his imposing size, and his amazingly expressive face and gestures. Although he tried to tame the effect, and to whittle it down by calling it just 'deportment', he couldn't hide it. Audiences constantly found their gaze drifting back to him, even if he wasn't centre stage. The German director, Götz Friedrich, once ordered him off the edge of the stage for the duration of a scene so that he wouldn't distract the audience – just by being there!

A few years ago, when Sir Don told friends that he had begun to write his memoirs, he said with a grin that he already had the title: *The Only Way is Up*. All it needed now, he said, was the book. At the time, I assumed that the title referred to the accident of birth that had rooted him in New Zealand. For an opera singer from New Zealand, yes, the only way is up – up to the northern hemisphere, to the much-vaunted lands of opportunity with their established musical culture, prestigious training courses, famous opera houses, star performers, and large, knowledgeable audiences.

And then I thought no, the title surely refers to ambition. If you want to get to the top of the tree, then certainly the only way is up. Sir Don's example was all the more exciting, since he dared to turn his back on what was then the traditional way up. Impulsively walking out of one of the premier London colleges of music after a single year, Sir Don came to the conclusion that, for him, the only way up would be by following his own individual curriculum – observing, questioning, and above all singing. Learning by doing. Growing through experience. It was an upward path through the world of opera that took him into Sadler's Wells, Covent Garden, Bayreuth, The New York Met . . . for him, the way up stopped only when he realised he had actually got there.

Yet there is another side. In terms of voice production, the phrase *The Only Way is Up* was also Sir Don's mantra for decades, his one single motto. He would repeat it frequently in his teaching – the key to successful singing: never push the breath *DOWN*; always lift the voice *UP*. This, he would say, is what's really meant by 'portamento' or 'carrying' – bearing the voice smoothly and vitally from note to note, like an expert waiter carrying a full tray of drinks by means of the upward pressure of his hands and arms, yet still moving easily through crowded tables without spilling a drop.

Opera roles, like art itself, have a habit of not just imitating life, but of shaping it. Those who regularly sing certain parts can sometimes find that their lives are being moulded by them. In Sir Don's case, the roles he played on stage were not only Wagnerian ones (he often had to remind interviewers of his 'other' roles such as Scarpia in *Tosca*, Pizarro in *Fidelio*, Prospero in *Un re in ascolto*, etc.). But it was the Wagner roles that were the life-shaping ones for him, for example the Flying Dutchman, whose seven-yearly surges ashore seemed to become the navigational chart for his own life.



Parsifal principals at the Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, March 2006: Sir Don (as Gurnemanz), Margaret Medlyn (Kundry), Martin Snell (Klingsor).

His favourite Wagner role was that of Gurnemanz, the aged knight who saw and understood everything, but could not himself fulfil the community's needs except by recognising and encouraging a successor in Parsifal. Of course, Sir Don could never actually *be* Parsifal, because Wagner wrote it for a tenor voice, but then Simon O'Neill came along in real life, and, as his teacher, Sir Don helped to mould him into a globally successful operatic Parsifal.

Looking back, Sir Don would think of Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger* as his most human role. Latterly, he wished he had taken it on at least ten years earlier than he did (at the age of fifty). But in those days, *gravitas* was automatically equated with age. Certainly, when he did eventually study the role and grew right into it, he made you feel that by looking at his face you could see the wisdom and sympathy of age shining through him. And the characters of Hans Sachs and Sir Don seemed to match each other perfectly, especially in their shared gift of combining dignity and sympathy with a zest for life and a love of good humour.

For me personally, the Wagner role that would have fitted Sir Don like a glove is one

that he could never perform on stage, because, like Parsifal, it is written for a tenor voice. It comes from *Die Meistersinger* and is the role of Walther von Stolzing. Walther has to bring himself up and fashion his own education. He does this by immersing himself in the words he finds from the songs of an ancient mastersinger, Walther von der Vogelweide. For his music, he studies the sounds of nature and learns to tease out the musical *instincts* of the language. Then he leaves his native patch and travels to Nürnberg, to learn from the established musical world. Alas, this world rejects him because he comes from foreign parts, and doesn't fit their requirements, just like the youthful Sir Don's reception in London. But there's an exquisite moment in the opera's Act 1, while the other mastersingers are heartily scoffing at the newcomer's first attempts, when the shy Kunz Vogelgesang, who has listened carefully, says in wonder, 'Zwei art'ge Stollen fasst' er da ein' – 'He's just put together two fine stanzas' – in other words, this raw newcomer is already, by natural *instinct* (there it is again) and by sheer talent, a Mastersinger.

To these two birth-given qualities of instinct and talent, Sir Don added the continuous development of his heavenly voice, a lifetime of hard work, an endlessly enquiring mind, and a rigorously critical self-examination. Believing that *The Only Way is Up*, he reached the top of his career, becoming at the end, like Hans Sachs, the crowned Master of the Mastersingers of the day.

– Heath Lees



Sir Don as Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in the production by Michael Hampe (Sydney Opera House, 1988 – photo from the DVD issue based on the officially filmed performances).

A Short Tribute from Professor Terence Dennis, Current President of the Wagner Society of NZ:

'Apart from witnessing Sir Donald in various roles on the opera and concert stage, I have two cherished personal memories that I would like to share:

As pianist, I played for a very special recital that Donald McIntyre gave in the New Zealand Parliament, arranged by Christopher Doig, the renowned NZ tenor, who had long been active in Vienna and at that time was Director of the NZ International Festival of the Arts. Chris had been the David in the *Meistersinger* performances of the Australian Opera, alongside Donald McIntyre's Hans Sachs, and he brought the production to Wellington for the 1990 Festival to present Donald McIntyre in a major Wagner role to the NZ public. The recital in Parliament was planned as part of the process that resulted in Sir Donald's Knighthood two years later.

And, also at my fingertips, I recall playing a long session with Simon O'Neill at Sir Donald's farm in Surrey, when he coached Simon for his first performances as Parsifal: Sir Don provided many contributions from his own three Parsifal roles along the way, Gurnemanz, Amfortas and Klingsor! . . . precious insights indeed.'

Below: Sir Donald McIntyre in a selection of roles at Bayreuth. Simpson, Adrienne Marie, 1943-2010: Photographs relating to early music and opera singers. Ref: 1/2-180285-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22675800

SIR DONALD McINTYRE, d. 13/11/2025 – A TRIBUTE by SIMON O'NEILL

(Spoken before the Sydney Siegfried performance, 16/11/2025)

'Today we remember one of the true giants of our art – my mentor, teacher, and dear friend, Sir Donald McIntyre, who has passed away at 91.

It is impossible to overstate what Sir Don meant to me. I was privileged to begin at his side as his pianist, playing for his coaching sessions and absorbing every ounce of his wisdom, generosity, and fierce artistry. Later, he guided me through the immense Wagnerian worlds of Lohengrin, Parsifal, and Siegmund – roles that shaped my career and my life.

To follow in his footsteps on the stages of the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, and the Bayreuth Festival was an honour I could never have imagined when I first sat at the piano for him. Every time I walked onto those stages, I carried his voice, his insight, and his belief in me.

Sir Don was not only one of the greatest bass-baritones New Zealand – indeed, the world – has ever produced; he was a man of immense kindness, humour, and spirit. He demanded excellence but gave nothing less himself. He changed the trajectory of my life, and I will remain forever grateful.

Rest in peace, Sir Don. Thank you for everything. Your legacy lives in all of us who were fortunate enough to learn from you, and in every note we continue to sing.'



WOTAN



HOLLÄNDER



AMFORTAS



KURWENAL



KLINGSOR



TELRAMUND

WSNZ – 2026 Programme

March to December

Auckland

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

Sunday, 12 April at 1:00 p.m.

Full DVD showing of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Sunday, 24 May at 2:00 p.m.

The Wagner Society's AGM, to be followed by a presentation given by **Terence Dennis**.

Sunday, 23 August at 2:00 p.m.

An afternoon with New Zealand heldentenor, **Simon O'Neill**.

Sunday, 18 October at 2:00 p.m.

TBC.

Sunday, 6 December at 1:00 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)

NB: Additional event(s) may yet be announced in due course!

Sunday, 16 August at 4:00 p.m.

An afternoon with New Zealand heldentenor, **Simon O'Neill**, together with **Terence Dennis**.

Sunday, 4 October (start time 10:00 a.m., with lunch break)

Venue: Penthouse Cinema, Brooklyn (note venue)

Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: A full screening of Patrice Chéreau's famous production of *Die Walküre*, from the seminal Bayreuth Centenary *Ring*, filmed in 1980. The cast includes Peter Hofmann (Siegfried), Jeannine Altmeyer (Sieglinde), Dame Gwyneth Jones (Brünnhilde), Sir Donald McIntyre (Wotan) and Ruth Hesse (Fricka), with Pierre Boulez conducting.

November/December – date, time and venue TBC

End-of-year party.

Christchurch

Sunday, 10 May – time and venue TBC

Full DVD showing of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

August – date, time and venue TBC

An afternoon with New Zealand heldentenor, **Simon O'Neill**.

Sunday, 29 November – time and venue TBC

Christmas function.

Dunedin

Sunday, 26 April at 2:00 p.m.

192 Castle St Hall of Residence Viewing Lounge

Donald McIntyre Retrospective: **Terence Dennis** presents an overview of Sir Donald's career, including film footage from *Die Meistersinger*, *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*. The session includes personal reminiscences performing with him in recital and also his coaching of *Parsifal*.

Sunday, 28 June at 11:00 a.m. (luncheon provided)

192 Castle St Hall of Residence Viewing Lounge

Winter Viewing of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg: The beautiful 1984 Bayreuth Festival production, directed by Wolfgang Wagner and conducted by Horst Stein. The cast includes Siegfried Jerusalem, Bernd Weikl, Hermann Prey and Mari-Ann Häggender.

Sunday, 4 October at 2:00 p.m.

192 Castle St Hall of Residence Viewing Lounge

The Road to Rienzi: Following his presentation on Gaspare Spontini at the 2025 Christmas Session, **Terence Dennis** presents full acts of two French grand operas that were influential in Wagner's development as an opera composer: Spontini's *Fernand Cortez* (Act III), the opera specially commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte, and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (Act IV), considered the greatest act in French Grand Opera until the fourth act of Verdi's *Don Carlos*.

Sunday, 29 November at 12:00 noon

192 Castle St Hall of Residence Dining Room & Seminar Room

2026 Christmas Luncheon and Wagneriana: Join us for our annual end-of-year luncheon and special contributions from the world of Wagner.

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- Kent Nagano with the Dresdner Festspielorchester and Concerto Köln will complete its historically informed *Ring* cycle with *Götterdämmerung*, with six performances across six locations in Europe in 2026.
- Korean National Opera will perform *Das Rheingold* in October/November 2026, directed by Lorenzo Fioroni. We believe this may be the first part of a future complete KNO *Ring* cycle.
- The 2026 Bayreuth Festival is now officially sold out after all remaining tickets were sold via online ticket sales within 90 minutes.
- The San Francisco Opera will revive its *Ring* cycle, directed by Francesca Zambello, presenting three cycles in June/July 2028. Eun Sun Kim will conduct.
- Daniel Harding opened the 2025–26 season of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia with *Die Walküre*, marking the start of a new multi-season *Ring* cycle in Rome.
- The Bayreuth Festival Orchestra will perform at various venues in Spain in 2026, coinciding with the closing ceremony of the Perelada Festival celebrating its 40th anniversary.
- The Paris Opera has confirmed that it will present two full cycles of the *Ring* in November 2026. The production is to be directed by Calixto Bieito and conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado.
- The Zurich Opera will present a concert version of the *Ring* at Carnegie Hall, New York, in March 2027, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda.

New Members

A very warm Wagnerian welcome to two new members:

Dr Lynne Gray.....Auckland
Joy Gray.....Wellington

Upcoming Wagner Cinema Screenings

Public screenings of both *Siegfried* and *Tristan und Isolde* are set to take place in select theatres in NZ as part of the 2026 Met Opera and Covent Garden (RBO) programmes, respectively:

Siegfried (RBO, dir. Barrie Kosky, conductor Antonino Pappano): Andreas Schager (Siegfried), Christopher Maltman (Wanderer), Elisabet Strid (Brünnhilde), Christopher Purves (Alberich) and others.

Tristan und Isolde (Met, dir. Yuval Sharon, conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin): Michael Spyres (Tristan), Lise Davidsen (Isolde) and others.

(Provisional screening dates listed thus far include late April/early May for *Siegfried* and late June for *Tristan*, but these, and venues, may well be subject to change – check with your local cinemas accordingly.)

Dmitri Tcherniakov's *Ring* Cycle Production in Berlin, September/October 2025



Götterdämmerung – curtain call with the Staatskapelle Berlin orchestra and conductor, Christian Thielemann, at centre right. (Photo credit: John Davidson)

John Davidson reports on his experience of Wagner's *Ring* cycle at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin.

During a six-week stay in Berlin in September/October last year, I was able to join a Renaissance Tours *Ring* cycle group for nine days. This was my third *Ring* tour with Renaissance, the first having been in 2008 (or perhaps 2009) in Hamburg when Simone Young was Music Director there. The second was in Berlin in 2013; it was a Staatsoper Unter den Linden production, with performances in the Schillertheater in western Berlin, because, at the time, the Staatsoper itself was in the middle of a very drawn-out renovation. On that occasion, Daniel Barenboim was the conductor.



Outside the Staatsoper in Berlin: Australian music teacher, Andy Patrick, and our Renaissance tour leader, Scott Curry. (Photo credit: John Davidson)

What I now attended at the finally renovated Staatsoper was a revival of the Dmitri Tcherniakov production that was first

mounted in 2022. Barenboim had been scheduled to conduct this as well, but poor health meant that he had to hand the baton over to Christian Thielemann, who had also conducted the first revival in 2023 – what I saw being the second revival and the first of two cycles in 2025.

The hotel we stayed in was a five- to ten-minute walk from the opera house, which made life very easy. The tour group consisted of only ten members, including myself. This was a surprise to me, but it meant that we got to know one another very quickly, and we all got on very well together. Apart from me, there were two New Zealanders (from Auckland), four Australians (all from Western Australia), two Canadians, two Americans, and one person of Spanish/Mexican extraction living in Milan. The tour leader was the Australian, Scott Curry, who has lived in Berlin for more than 30 years. Scott has led multiple Renaissance tours all over the world and is a highly accomplished musician and répétiteur with a vast knowledge of Wagner and other operatic and symphonic/chamber music composers.

This *Ring* was a triumph. Musically, there wasn't a weak link anywhere, with superlative orchestral playing under Thielemann's dynamic yet nuanced conducting. Taken together, the singers made up an exceptional cast: Michael Volle must be the leading Wotan/Wanderer today, while Anja Kampe remains a formidable Brünnhilde. Surprises to me were the superb Finnish bass Mika Kares (Fasolt, Hunding and Hagen), who was one of the male singer

finalists in the 2025 International Opera Awards, along with the startlingly brilliant, young, Lithuanian-born Vida Miknevičute (Sieglinde) – I can't do justice to the spelling of her name. To see why, google her! [I.e., it should be 'Miknevičiūtė'! – Ed.]

Other standouts were the German, Jochen Schmeckenbecher (Alberich), the young Hungarian mezzo, Anna Kissjudit (Erda) and Clara Nadeshdin (Gutrune). Stephan Rügamer (Mime) came into his own in *Siegfried*, as did Claudia Mahnke (Fricka) in *Die Walküre*. All the other solo singers were very good or better. The Rhinemaidens, Valkyries and Norns were outstanding, as was the chorus in *Götterdämmerung*. It was good, too, to see all the orchestra on the stage for a curtain call on the final night.



Anja Kampe (Brünnhilde) and Andreas Schager (Siegfried) at the *Götterdämmerung* curtain call. (Photo credit: John Davidson)

We come now to the 'controversial' modernist/minimalist production by Russian designer and producer, Dmitri Tcherniakov. I personally found it most compelling, though I had a few reservations. Some others in our tour group were extremely critical at first, but

had been won over by the end. Those who had seen only one or two *Rings* previously (for one person, it was even a first) were mystified every night.

The basic concept was a scientific research centre specialising in the human brain. There was a revolving stage with a range of sets and also several levels. Screens could come down to cover the sets for rearrangement, while scenes could be played out in the front on the actual stage.

The basic laboratory set consisted of criss-crossing aisles with doors through which characters could walk or chase one another. There was a rather narrow open door where two characters often seemed to end up at some point, which meant that they were rather cramped.

At the start of *Das Rheingold*, Alberich was sitting in a chair with restraints and drip tubes, having his brain examined. The Rhinemaidens were laboratory assistants in white coats, who teased Alberich until he was finally able to break free, to their terror, and grab the gold. In *Siegfried*, Fafner was in a straitjacket with an ugly mask on, apparently now in a mental asylum. When he broke free and all the attendants scattered, his dragon-like qualities were shown as he threw coloured streamers indicating his fiery breath. And so on.

There was a lift at the side of one of the sets; Wotan and Loge took this lift down to Nibelheim. When the door opened to let them in, three very old women, one smoking, another with a bad limp and another with a handbag, stepped out. These women kept appearing at crucial times throughout the whole *Ring*. In the final opera, they turned out to be the Norns, which meant that fate had been following the action all along.

There were other masterstrokes. In *Die Walküre*, Hunding's house was the laboratory set, with no sign of a tree or sword. At one point, the stage revolved to show a set dominated by a magnificent tree, but no sign of a sword. This was ideal for the beautiful singing of the siblings. However, when the time came for Siegmund to pull out the sword, the stage revolved back to the 'laboratory'. Were we to imagine the sword? No! A sword had been concealed on a beam. Siegmund reached out and plucked the sword out of thin air, as it seemed.

When Wotan said farewell to his daughter, she got up from the 'bed' she was in and stood on the stage with her back to the audience. Wotan was standing on the set, which was slowly drawn backwards as they waved to each other in a slow farewell. This was extremely moving, and great applause followed the blackout.

In *Siegfried*, the hero was lying in a bed in a sleep laboratory for the Forest Murmurs. In the final opera, when he encounters the Rhinemaidens, they were giving him a

massage in a stress laboratory. The stage then revolved to show a set that was an American basketball court where the members of the hunt were resting after their exertions. Siegfried walked in there to meet them and threw a few hoops before being stabbed in the back with the pole of the banner of one of the teams.

He was then carried to the stress bed of the previous set, and, during the so-called Funeral March, he lay there while characters singly or in pairs or groups gathered round looking at him in death. Gunther was there, but Hagen had walked off. Wotan came. Brünnhilde came. The Rhinemaidens came. The Valkyries came. The Norns came. Erda came. It was again tremendously moving.

The end of *Götterdämmerung*, too, was special. Brünnhilde sang the whole Immolation Scene alone on the stage beside the dead body in his bed. There was no attempt to show the destruction of Valhalla or the overflowing Rhine. At the very end, Brünnhilde picked up his travel bag, the head of the toy Grane poking out, and waved to Erda, who slowly disappeared. On a screen above there appeared the words of the Schopenhauerian ending that Wagner wrote but never set to music. He had his heroine saying finally, 'I saw the world end'.

I won't dwell on other places where things didn't quite work, because they were few, if a bit irritating at the time.



Farewell dinner for the tour group in the Westin Grand Hotel Berlin, following *Götterdämmerung*: John Davidson at front right, with Andy Patrick behind him. (Photo credit: John Davidson)

During the non-performance days of the tour, we enjoyed a range of experiences. The highlight was a piano recital by the Turkish virtuoso, Fazıl Say. This took place one evening in the Kammermusiksaal hall of the Philharmonie, at what is now called the 'Kulturforum'. Fazıl Say is now in his fifties but burst onto the musical scene as a child prodigy. He has very strange mannerisms, such as talking to himself while playing, making extraordinary gestures, and so on.

He's clearly an introvert and on the spectrum. He reminds one a bit of David Helfgott but, unlike the well-known Australian pianist, he is simply brilliant in his playing.

In the first half of the concert, he played J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. I'm no expert in judging this piece. It was the first time I'd heard it performed live, though I'd heard recordings of Glenn Gould and others playing it. I don't know how many of the variations Fazıl Say played. I can tell you, however, that the performance took almost exactly one hour. He was both sparkling and swift where appropriate, and unbelievably tender at other times. I was totally in awe during the whole hour, which seemed to flash by.

In the second half of the programme, Fazıl played some of his own compositions, many of which were incredible jazzed-up variations on popular tunes from musicals and other contexts. 'Summertime', for example, and 'Maria' from *West Side Story*, were featured. He even played his own virtuosic variation on the *Goldberg Variations* theme. Some audience members in the packed hall preferred the second half to the first. I was divided in my loyalty! While returning to the hotel in the coach, everyone was singing his or her own variations.

Fazıl Say features very much on YouTube, and so you can look at him playing there and judge for yourselves.

To finish up with, I can also report on our visits to the Mendelssohn Remise, where Scott Curry previewed each opera, playing and sometimes singing, also explaining, all the key motifs that we were going to encounter in the evening performances. He was assisted by two local singers, one a tenor and the other a mezzo/contralto, both with fabulous voices.

The Remise was originally the stables for the horses and carriages of the wealthy Mendelssohn bankers. It's now a large music educational centre. Part of the ground floor contains a museum full of Mendelssohn memorabilia – paintings and photographs, jewellery, ceramics and glassware. There are two grand pianos, one of which Scott was able to play. There are regular Chamber Music concerts held there. We were welcomed by volunteer women with Mendelssohn connections and knowledge of the place, who offered coffee/tea and homemade baking, both as we entered and during a break in Scott's presentations. The museum is only a fifteen-minute walk from our hotel, just a little bit further than the walk to the Staatsoper. If you go to Berlin, you should definitely visit the museum, although you'll need to make a booking in advance.

– John Davidson

[For a brief featurette with Tcherniakov, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=CO_uqZVwNul on the technology used for this *Ring* (3 min., with full integral English subtitles!) – Ed.]