

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

NEWSLETTER

An end to the feud at Bayreuth?



Who's Who!

Eva Wagner-Pasquier (*above*)

(b. 1945) is the daughter of Wolfgang Wagner and his first wife Ellen Drexel. Eva is a consultant to the Aix-en-Provence Arts Festival having previously been a director at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden and at the Bastille Opera in Paris. She has also worked for the Teatro Real in Madrid and The Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Katharina Wagner (*2nd left*)

(b. 1978) is the daughter of Wolfgang and Gudrun Wagner. She notably staged *Der Fliegende Holländer* in Würzburg and *Lohengrin* in Budapest. Her debut production at the Bayreuth Festival, *Die Meistersinger*, in July 2007, received a mixed reception.

Wolfgang Wagner (*2nd right*)

(b. 1919) has run the Bayreuth Festival since 1951, at first in conjunction with his brother but, after Wieland's death in 1966, as sole director.

Nike Wagner (*right*) (b. 1945) is a daughter of Wieland Wagner and Gertrud Reissiger. She studied musicology, theatre and literature in Berlin, Chicago, Paris and Vienna and currently directs the annual Weimar arts festival. Nike has been openly critical of Wolfgang Wagner and the current administration of the Bayreuth Festival.

Michael Sinclair brings us up to date with new developments surrounding the Bayreuth Festival.

Reports coming out of Bayreuth indicate that there could soon be an end to the bitter feud over the succession issue that has dogged the festival for many years. In a letter to the festival's board Wolfgang Wagner has indicated that he is prepared to relinquish his near 60 year directorship in favour of his two daughters, Eva and Katharina. After fading hopes that Katharina might lead the festival on her own, a reconciliation between Wolfgang and Eva led to the current

proposal of a joint directorship, which now appears favourable to the festival board.

But the champagne corks are not quite popping yet. Nike, the daughter of Wolfgang's brother Wieland, has expressed her unhappiness at the way this decision has been reached, feeling that she has been unfairly excluded. Nike has long held succession ambitions herself and had worked closely with Eva to further her claim. Nike has indicated that she will not be part of a threesome, but it would seem that there could be a few more twists before this saga is finally resolved.



Tannhäuser at the office in Cologne

Christchurch member Gloria Street reports of a recent production of *Tannhäuser* in Cologne.

Wagner is alive and very well in the most populous area of Germany, Nordrhein-Westfalen. On a recent visit to our family in Wuppertal four Wagner operas were on offer in the region. Only a short train journey away we could see *Götterdämmerung* in Dortmund, *Parsifal* in Duisberg, *Meistersingers* in Dusseldorf and *Tannhäuser* in Cologne. Our family are newcomers to Wagner's oeuvre, so we decided to try them out on *Tannhäuser*, with its well known arias and big choruses.

As the lights dimmed and the sonorous brass overture opening filled the theatre, the curtain opened showing an austere office building set which served the three acts. Tannhäuser was an office worker and Venus was his 'little bit on the side'. Before they began singing they were clinched under a red blanket on the office sofa. Elisabeth was the spoilt boss's daughter, who flitted in and out in a type of short, bottom-hugging beach robe which displayed her bare legs and feet to advantage. Not a good look for a pure and virtuous maiden! The men and women of the chorus were accountant, computer, receptionist types and, as contrast, quick-changed within view into pilgrim mode. Basically the opera was set in our time, but you can't escape the anomaly of the historical story including pilgrims to Rome versus a modern office setting. I guess it's very rarely that all the loose ends are neatly tied up in a Wagner opera!

The singing throughout of soloists and chorus was simply superb and highlighted by the very fine acoustics of the smallish, post-war Cologne Opera House. Amidst the overall high quality, the singing of Miljenko Turk as Wolfram von Eschenbach stood out. Markus Stenz was the Musical Director, leading the very fine Gurzenich-Orchester Koln.

We all left the theatre 'on a high' with Wagner's wonderful choruses ringing in our ears. Next time *Lohengrin*!

Hopes Fade for a Revival of the Adelaide Ring

A recent report by the ABC in Australia claimed that the South Australian Government did not push hard enough to win funding to revive *The Ring* cycle in Adelaide. It had been hoped that *The Ring* would be revived in 2011 but this will not happen now because of a lack of Federal funding. This must leave serious doubts as to whether this landmark production will now ever be revived.



Camilla Nylund as Elisabeth the spoilt boss's daughter
(photo: Klaus Lafbare)

Subscription renewals flood in

Wellington based Membership secretary, George Risk has been busy processing the waves of membership renewals that have been choking his letterbox during the last month. George writes "It is wonderful to see such an enthusiastic response from our members and a big thank you to all of you. At 31 March 2008 the number of WSNZ members (with paid subscriptions) was just over 400. Shortly after the membership renewal forms went out, we suddenly received a flood of renewal forms with cheques, up to 20 letters per day. Quite amazing!! By 30 April just over 300 had renewed, including 17 new members, most from Dunedin. We also received a number of generous donations to the Wagner-NZ Foundation." — A big thank you to everyone.



Seattle Ring 2009

Included with this newsletter is a flyer giving preliminary information on the Society's proposed trip to Seattle in August 2009 to see Seattle Opera's outstanding production of *The Ring*. With high interest in this trip we hope to have a significant Kiwi presence in Seattle next year! If you have not already registered your interest in this trip, or have any questions about it, then please contact Michael Sinclair by email at msinclair@xtra.co.nz or by phone on 021 444 673.

AGM - 25 May

The Wagner Society AGM is to be held on Sunday 25 May 2008, at the School of Music, 6 Symonds Street, Auckland at 7.30pm

So far, Committee and Office-Bearer nominations have been received as follows:
President..... Chris Brodrick
Vice President Ken Tomkins
Secretary Michael Sinclair
Treasurer John Hambling
Membership/Liaison George Risk
Committee Pam Hall
..... Bob O'Hara
..... Juliet Rowe
..... Sidney Smith

If you wish to make a nomination, phone Liz at 09-528-1184 and she will send you a form, or email handelees@xtra.co.nz. Nominations can also be made from the floor of the meeting.

Simon O'Neill

continues to impress

After his critically acclaimed performances of Siegmund at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera, Simon O'Neill is now singing the same role for Opéra national du Rhin, and is continuing to receive ecstatic reviews. Francis Carlin writing in the Financial Times felt that, "the main reason to catch this *Walküre*, apart from Letonja (the conductor), is Simon O'Neill's thrillingly sung Siegmund," while Pierre-Emmanuel Lephay in Forum Opéra found O'Neill's performance so convincing that he could become "The Wagnerian tenor of his generation."

After his performances with Opéra national du Rhin, Simon will return to New Zealand briefly where he will sing in gala concerts with Angela Brown at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Auckland. On returning to Europe he will again sing Siegmund in concert performances of Act I of *Die Walküre* with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra conducted by Daniel Barenboim, singing alongside Waltraud Meier and René Pape.

Met Wagner Fans Furious

Wagner fans in New York, including those from the Wagner Society of New York, are furious at the way the Met plans to allocate tickets for next year's cycles of *The Ring*. Hitherto the Met has had an informal policy of giving priority to patrons who had purchased tickets for previous cycles, but in future this will no longer be the case, with priority now being given to regular Met subscribers and patrons. Fans are up in arms given the investment in purchasing *Ring* tickets, but it seems unlikely the Met will change its mind.

2008 PROGRAMME

Auckland

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street

Sunday, 25 May 7.30pm

AGM, followed by a nostalgic Valkyrie-Ride through 15 years of the WSNZ

Sunday, 20 July 7.30pm

The Flying Dutchman (a complete viewing)

Sunday, 14 September 7.30pm

A Wagnerian Pot-Pourri: Requests and Round-ups, Selections and Surprises

Sunday, 7 December 7.30pm

Star-studded debate on the motion "That *Götterdämmerung* is the weakest *Ring* opera"

Wellington

Venue: Massey University Theatre, Buckle St

Sunday, 15 June 4.00pm

Heath Lees presents: *Wagner and the Sea* - a wide-angled view of *Tristan* and *The Flying Dutchman*

Sunday, 31 August 4.00pm

Chris Brodrick presents: *Wagner at the Movies*

Dunedin

Sunday, 18 May 3.00pm

Venue: Marama Hall, University of Otago

Terence Dennis and Judy Bellingham present *Wesendonck-Lieder* and *Wagner in Zürich*

Sunday 7 September 3.00pm

Venue: To be confirmed

Terence Dennis presents *A Return from Riga - Wagner, Weber and The Flying Dutchman*

Sunday, 7 December

Venue and time to be confirmed

Catered lunch followed by *Tannhäuser* DVD

Christchurch

Friday, 23 May 7.30pm

Gloria & Garth Street's home, 20 Pentre Terrace, Cashmere

Pot Luck meal for Richard Wagner's birthday

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Friday, 27 June 7.30pm

Michael Sinclair will talk about his web site, *theoperacritic.com*, the leading internet site dedicated to opera and give a presentation of Wagner productions in the last year

Friday, 26 September 7.30pm

Please note change of date

John Pattinson presents: *Drink, Drugs & the Rest: Wagner's History of Substance Abuse*

Friday, 24 October 7.30pm

Elric Hooper presents *From Maestro to Myth' - the evolution of Wagnerian production*

Sunday, 7 December

Venue and time to be confirmed

Christmas BBQ

New Members

A very Warm Wagnerian Welcome to:-

Mrs Judy Wilson..... Dunedin
Miss Ann Wylie..... Dunedin
Mrs Barbara Mathewson..... Dunedin
Prof Chris Ackerley..... Dunedin
Dr Elizabeth Gordon-Werner..... Dunedin
Prof Jim & Revd Helene Mann.. Dunedin
Mr & Mrs Ian & Maureen Partridge.....
.....Kapiti Coast
Mrs Huberta Hellendoorn..... Dunedin
Dame Norma Restieaux..... Dunedin
Ms Patricia Graham..... Dunedin
Mrs Louise Kilby..... Dunedin
Lady Audrey Mowbray..... Wellington
Ms Carol Potts..... Auckland

He's our No. 1

Terence Dennis' recording of *Liszt and Wagner Piano Works* went straight to No 1 on the Concert FM Classical Chart for the week 26 April. Many congratulations to Terence and Roger Marbeck of Ode Records for an outstanding success.

NZ Opera Society

DVD Showings (Auckland)

11 June Live concert

16 July *La Traviata* (Verdi)

Raye Freedman Theatre, Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Silver Road, Epsom at 7.30pm

DVD Showings (Wellington)

22 May at 6.30pm *Così Fan Tutte* (Mozart)

25 June at 7.30pm *Lucretia Borgia* (Donizetti)

20 July at 3pm *Les Troyens* (Berlioz)

In National Library Auditorium
Aitken St, Thorndon

The Met's Mad March

Chris Brodrick reports on the Metropolitan Opera's toublesome *Tristan*

In the late seventies, Hugh Vickers wrote a very amusing book called *Great Operatic Disasters* in which he compiled a catalogue of operatic mishaps. Included are stories such as the 'Prima Donna' Tosca who jumped off the battlements to land, not on a mattress, but on a trampoline that had been substituted by stage-hands determined on revenge. With her 'ample' body mass she apparently reappeared fifteen times before they managed to get the curtain down! Also included is the Brünnhilde at La Fenice, Venice, who suffered temporary blindness when she put her helmet on back to front and the great Lauritz Melchior singing Lohengrin at the Metropolitan Opera in 1936 "the swan-boat arrived - amid that exquisite orchestral radiance - exactly on time, but alas took off again before the tenor had a chance to get into it....Melchior looked up at the audience and asked 'Wenn geht der nächste Schwann?' - When does the next swan go?"

The complexity of an opera production inevitably leads to things going wrong but one's heart has to go out to the Metropolitan Opera and its recent 'season' of *Tristan and Isolde* which was plagued by a series of problems.

But to begin at the beginning... when planning the 2007/2008 season the Met decided to revive their 1999 production of *Tristan* to showcase Ben Heppner and Deborah Voigt in the title roles. Both artists



The Dream team - and it almost was just that!
Ben Heppner - *Tristan* & Deborah Voigt - *Isolde*
photos: Ken Howard - Metropolitan Opera

had sung the roles to great acclaim but never together. A strong cast was assembled around Voigt and Heppner including the great bass Matti Salminen as King Mark, Mary Jane Wray as Brangäne and conductor James Levine. With six performances, one of which was broadcast in high definition to cinemas around the world, this production was to be one of the season's highlights.

So what happened? Well a few days before opening night (10 March) Ben Heppner, who had been feeling unwell throughout the rehearsal period, cancelled. The initial diagnosis was a simple virus but it turned out to be something more serious - a blood-borne infection that abscessed in his pelvic region. Heppner was replaced by his understudy, John MacMaster, who struggled with the role and was consequently greeted by a chorus of disapproval at the end of opening night.

At the second performance, on 14 March, MacMaster was replaced by American tenor Gary Lehman. Lehman had never performed *Tristan* before but had successfully replaced Placido Domingo in a 2005

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production of *Parsifal* in Los Angeles. In the middle of the Act 2 love duet, Deborah Voigt suddenly doubled up and rushed off stage suffering from a stomach ailment. The curtain came down to rise 15 minutes later with a new Isolde in the form of Janice Baird who, incidentally, has been engaged to sing Brinnhilde in the Seattle *Ring*.

Voigt returned for the third performance on 18 March and all was going well until the opening of Act 3. James C. Taylor, writing in the Los Angeles Times, described what happened “.. with Tristan lying on the raked stage with his head downstage the set malfunctioned, sending the tenor singing Tristan, Gary Lehman, careering headfirst into the prompter’s box -- which had an open flame on top -- the audience gasped as Lehman remained motionless for almost a minute after his crash. Stagehands rushed out to help him, and conductor James Levine abruptly halted the music.

Apparently, the fire did not burn Lehman, nor was he seriously hurt by the impact. Eventually, he walked offstage without assistance, earning applause from the crowd. The curtain quickly came down.

A spokesman for the Met appeared shortly afterward and announced that Lehman was not injured and would continue “after a glass of water.”

After an eight-minute pause, the curtain opened and Levine and the orchestra began playing, having backed up a few bars in the score. Lehman looked a little rattled – which gave Tristan’s next lines, “Where have I been? Where am I,” an eerie believability.

Traditionally, Isolde takes the final bow, but at the first curtain call, Voigt allowed Lehman to receive the last ovation. The audience showered him with cheers.”

At this point the entire Metropolitan Opera management must have broken out into a collective cold sweat. The next performance on Saturday 22 March would not only be seen by 3,800 in the theatre but the performance was to be broadcast to a world-wide audience of 60,000 watching in cinemas and a further 7 million on radio. By the following afternoon they announced that another American, Robert Dean Smith, would sing in the televised performance with Lehman and MacMaster as covers. Smith flew in from Berlin on Thursday, had a few piano rehearsals on the Friday, performed on Saturday and headed back to Europe on Sunday. In the end the fourth performance went well, despite the fact that the ‘new’ Tristan had had no stage rehearsal.

All looked good for the fifth performance on 25 March. Heppner was back but the problems continued when Voigt cancelled. As Mike Silverman of the Associated Press put it *‘It’s been more soap opera than grand opera at the Metropolitan Opera these days where Wagner’s ‘Tristan und Isolde’ is concerned. Since the revival opened its six-performance run on March 10, every performance has been marked by one casting crisis or another, and no single pair of singers has made it through the entire opera more than once.’*



Voigt & MacMaster
photo: Ken Howard / Metropolitan Opera



Baird and Lehman
photo: Ken Howard / Metropolitan Opera



Robert Dean Smith Tristan number 3



Fifth performance – Heppner & Baird



Finally – Heppner & Voigt

28 March. The final performance and the last chance for the dream team of Heppner and Voigt to appear together. Writing in the New York Times Anthony Tommasini described the anticipation. *‘All day on Friday the word from the Metropolitan Opera was good. The tenor Ben Heppner and the soprano Deborah Voigt were feeling fine and ready to go.*

As lucky ticket holders entered the lobby on Friday night, there was no official sign board announcing a cast change. Nor were there any of those ominous inserts in the program book.

Then, as everyone awaited the arrival of James Levine in the orchestra pit, came the most dreaded sight in an opera house: a man in a suit taking the stage with a microphone to make an announcement. The audience erupted with groans, hisses and cries of “No!”

“I have only good news,” said the announcer, Thomas Connell, the Met’s stage manager. Both Mr. Heppner and Ms. Voigt were in fine form, he stated. But Margaret Jane Wray, the soprano scheduled to sing the role of Brangäne, was ill. Her replacement would be the mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung. Expressing enormous collective relief many in the audience broke into cheers and applause. And what about the performance?

On Friday, these acclaimed Wagnerians seemed to feed on each other’s intensity and determination.

Mr. Heppner again gave an impassioned, courageous and vocally thrilling performance. During the inhumanly demanding first half of Act III, when the delirious and dying Tristan goes through spasms of anguish and fury as he awaits the arrival of Isolde, most tenors consider it a triumph just to get through the scene. Mr. Heppner seemed to relish it. His singing was at once risky and commanding. Courting danger, he lunged at top notes, cut no corners, sang every phrase with maximum expressivity, utter honesty and visceral power.

And Ms. Voigt sounded liberated. With a Tristan who could match her in sheer power and vocal charisma, she, too, took risks as she sent gleaming phrases soaring over the orchestra. But what may especially linger in the memory were the moments of tender lyricism and the aching exchanges of desire during their Act II love duet.

Many longtime opera buffs in the audience must have been thinking about Jan. 30, 1974: the only time the great Tristan and Isolde of an earlier era, Jon Vickers and Birgit Nilsson, sang the opera together at the Met. Opera lovers can only hope that Friday night will not enter the annals as another one-time wonder.

So maybe it was *All’s Well That Ends Well* but I’m sure that during the nightmare three weeks of March the Metropolitan Opera were thinking about another play by Shakespeare: the one regarded, in the theatre, as such bad luck that it is called the ‘Scottish Play.’ With General Manager Peter Gelb joking that the revival of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* was ‘cursed’, the Met may well in future refer to Wagner’s masterpiece as ‘the Cornish opera.’