



An Encouragingly Strong Start to the WSNZ Year

As was already the case last year (once our meetings started up again following the initial Covid lockdown last autumn), it appears that some of our initial meetings this year have been especially well attended and received. In Auckland, for example, the event with Simon O'Neill in April showed Simon to be in great form – a 'brilliant evening' was the

general sentiment expressed. Auckland members also loved the February recital of piano works by Liszt, Wagner and others given by Terence Dennis and Abhinath Berry, visiting from Dunedin; this event will have been given in all the main centres by the end of June. Meanwhile, Christchurch members enjoyed Michael Sinclair's February talk on *Cities that Championed Wagner*, one that he, too, has given in other centres.

In Wellington, on 23 May, Terence Dennis and Abhinath Berry repeated their fine recital, attracting an audience of more than 60. Meanwhile, Margaret

Wagner Society AGM — Sunday 13 June

THE SOCIETY'S AGM IS TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY 13 JUNE IN ST HELIERS COMMUNITY CENTRE, 100 ST HELIERS BAY ROAD, AUCKLAND, AT 7:00 P.M.

Nominations for committee as received:

President.....Terence Dennis
Vice-President.....Ken Tomkins
Secretary.....Peter Rowe
Treasurer.....Jeanette Miller

Other members:

John Davidson, Ashley Day, Juliet Rowe, Cynthia Hawes, Adrian Simcock

The President's Report will be available at the meeting, and is also printed in this newsletter, on page 3.

Please also see the notice at left confirming the upcoming AGM in mid-June, as previously advised. This will include the proposal of a resolution to adopt a new Constitution to replace the existing Rules, against the background of the replacement of the outdated Incorporated Societies Act 1908 with new legislation, a move that the committee has

been considering for the last 12 months. As advised to all members by the Secretary on 29 March 2021, the form of the proposed new Constitution is available for viewing on the Society's website at <http://wagnersociety.org.nz>. Note that the proposed new Constitution makes the changes that will be required by the new Act when it is passed, but otherwise the objective, activities and governance structure are substantially the same as contained in the present Rules.

Medlyn's and Richard Greager's February presentation on *Smoothing the Rhine: Only Love Can Overcome the Lust for Power* had already drawn an attendance of 50, as did Michael Vinten's excellent talk on *Rienzi: Wagner's Problem Child* in March. Michael will be giving this talk again in Christchurch and Dunedin later in the year. The topic of Wagner's early opera *Rienzi* might lead one to think that the talk is of 'secondary interest' only, but Michael has applied his considerable musical expertise to this transitional piece very thoroughly indeed, and so we recommend his talk without reservation!

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News from Tribschen

The Richard Wagner Museum occupying Wagner's former residence at Tribschen, Lucerne (Switzerland), has a new General Director, Monika Sigrist, replacing Katja Fleischer, who had been the museum's Director for the past 17 years. (Katja Fleischer and Tribschen featured prominently in Heath Lees' 2013 DVD documentary series, *The Ring: A Tale Told in Music* – they can be seen in the *Siegfried* instalment.) A musicologist is also set to take up a position at Tribschen, leaving Ms Sigrist free to concentrate on the museum's strategic orientation. In addition to Wagner's

work and life, this will also encompass Wagner as a 'phenomenon', a controversial figure whose influence has extended far beyond his own time. The longstanding permanent exhibition is to be upgraded, and Ms Sigrist also hopes to attract many more local visitors in future, in addition to those from abroad.

To gain a good impression of the present-day Tribschen museum and its surroundings, click on www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZIAL-O1_vE for a brand-new, professionally made video clip posted by the Swiss pianist Tsovinar Suflyan, playing Liszt's piano transcription of the aria *O Du, mein holder Abendstern*, from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* – a warm performance

in a truly gorgeous setting. Our grateful thanks to Ms Suflyan for alerting us to this lovely clip, and our best wishes.



Tsovinar Suflyan at Wagner's original 1858 Erard grand piano at Tribschen (photo: T. Suflyan)

WSNZ – 2021 Programme

May to December

Auckland

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

Sunday, 13 June at 7:00 p.m.

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

Sunday, 11 July at 7:00 p.m.

John Pattinson talk: *Travelling Hopefully: A Journey Through Siegfried*.

Sunday, 19 September at 2:30 p.m. (note afternoon time)

A full screening of *Siegfried* and optional catered dinner.

Sunday, 5 December at 7:00 p.m.

The celebratory end to the year: a Wagner 'potpourri', cake and wine.

Wellington

Venue: St Andrews Hall, 30 The Terrace (except where otherwise indicated)

Sunday, 13 June at 11:00 a.m. (note early start)

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

Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: a screening of the 2002 Mariinsky Theatre production of Borodin's *Prince Igor*.

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

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

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

September/October

Date, event and venue TBA.

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

Venue: Paul and Carol Stigley's home in Khandallah

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

Christchurch

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

Friday, 23 July, time TBA

Talk by **Michael Vinten**: *Rienzi: Wagner's Problem Child*.

October or November, date and time TBA

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

Sunday, 28 November

Christmas function – further details TBA.

Dunedin

All venues will be publicised locally.

Sunday, 27 June at 1:00 p.m.

Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room

Das Liebesverbot on film: Wagner's second opera. A lively, colourful production from Madrid's Teatro Real.

Sunday, 8 August at 2:00 p.m.

Venue: School of Performing Arts First Floor Seminar Room

Talk by **Michael Vinten**: *Rienzi: Wagner's Problem Child*.

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

Venue: School of Performing Arts First Floor Seminar Room

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

Sunday, 28 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: Carrington Hall, Linten Lounge and Dining Room

Christmas luncheon and concert, with **Terence Dennis** and guests.

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

• Opera Australia has announced the casts for this year's Brisbane *Ring*, including Daniel Sumegi as Wotan, Lise Lindstrom (first and second cycles) and Anna-Louise Cole (third cycle) as Brünnhilde, and Stefan Vinke as Siegfried. At this point, with quarantine-free trans-Tasman travel now up and running, it is also reasonable to feel some confidence that the Brisbane *Ring* will still go ahead as planned, and that members will be able to attend from New Zealand.

• English National Opera have announced that they are embarking on a new *Ring* cycle, commencing this year with *Die Walküre* and culminating in 2025. Richard Jones will direct, and the production will be co-produced with the Metropolitan Opera.

• Melbourne Opera began a new *Ring* cycle in February this year with *Das Rheingold*; the cycle will culminate in 2023.



Final scene of *Das Rheingold* at Melbourne (photo: Melbourne Opera)

• In November 2021 and January 2022 (Covid permitting), the Deutsche Oper Berlin will present three cycles of its new *Ring* directed by Stefan Herheim, including Nina Stemme as Brünnhilde and Simon O'Neill as Siegfried.

New Members

We are delighted to report that an unusually large number of new members have joined the Society in recent months. Accordingly, a very warm Wagnerian welcome to you all – herzlich willkommen, seid Euch gegrüsst!!

Nicholas Forbes.....Auckland
Anne MacMillan.....Auckland
Jim Sheffield and Anne Lee.....Auckland
Anthony Grigg and Paul Williamson.....Wellington
Dick Werry.....Wellington (Lower Hutt)
Roger Ascroft and Sue Kennedy.....Dunedin
Rosalind and Ian Gibson.....Dunedin
John Troop.....Dunedin

President's Report 2020/21

My report as the new Wagner Society of New Zealand President embraces an unparalleled period in the history of our Society, falling within the severe strictures imposed by the world Covid-19 pandemic.

In this respect, with so many uncertainties dependent on our national lockdown levels, I would wish to heartily commend the forbearance and optimism of our various centres in equal measure. Each centre was able to hold its sessions scheduled for the latter part of 2020 either wholly or in part, and fortune has shone upon the scheduled sessions to date across our national societies this far in 2021. Our new committee members in national centres have seamlessly assumed their roles, and I would wish to thank them and their respective committees for efficiency and ease of transition. I would again wish to recognise the long-sustained contributions given the WSNZ committees by those who had vacated these positions, even though they were formally thanked in the previous President's Report.

Our committee meetings over this period have been conducted effectively via Zoom.

We have seen a modest but much appreciated increase in new memberships to the Society, and it is my hope that the WSNZ continues to attract membership through our visibility, viability and relevance. The National Committee recognises the challenges of our time, and the considerations with which to meet them need to be a prime focus.

I have been keen that the WSNZ is featured as part of the international Wagner Society community, and have personally been in contact with the Wagner Society in London, who have

featured us in their listings of events around the world, and by Zoom with the Australian Wagner Society representatives, as we fall neatly into the latter orbit by proximity and, most recently, by the current easing of travel restrictions.

I wish to thank Peter Rowe for keeping our New Zealand members abreast of the wealth of online Wagner events that readily allow us to be part of the greater Wagner world, in terms of both performances and lectures. To a degree, the pandemic has arguably made our own Wagnerian presence more connected.

Peter Rowe, in his other capacity as WSNZ Honorary Solicitor, has also revised the Society Rules to bring them into line with new legislation. These have been made available to members and will be voted on at this year's Annual General Meeting.

The new online newsletter is a handsome, crucial development, and here particular plaudits replete with Wagnerian fanfares must go to Heath and Liz Lees, and to the

production team of Michael Ashdown and John Davidson. Provision has been made for our members who are not online to still receive their newsletter in hard copy.

By way of conclusion, I wish to thank all our National Committee and Branch Committee members for their individual contributions through this time, and to you, our members, for your continued support and understanding, especially when adverse circumstances prevailed. The year 2021 has nevertheless commenced strongly, and it is my responsibility and pleasure to lead us into the times ahead with, I hope, pragmatic and innovative vision.

Terence Dennis



Terence Dennis
– WSNZ President

Two Notable Productions

A Dark New *Parsifal* in Vienna

At a difficult time when more Wagner productions have had to be cancelled – *Das Rheingold* in Nice and the *Ring* in Budapest, for example – Vienna State Opera has mounted a major, bold and daring new *Parsifal* premiere with a star cast (but with no audience), including Jonas Kaufmann (returning to one of his signature Wagner roles) as Parsifal, Georg Zeppenfeld as Gurnemanz, Elina Garanča as Kundry and Ludovic Tézier as Amfortas. The conductor is Philippe Jordan. The director, Kirill Zerebrennikov, is currently under house arrest in Russia, and has had to direct the entire production remotely. His approach is very Russian and Dostoyevskian, and, although it is especially brutal and violent, reactions have been highly positive. It may ultimately prove

too strong for some to stomach, while others will be enthralled. A nine-minute featurette about the production (from Austrian TV, with English subtitles) is available to view at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WttHWYf-akQ; meanwhile, at the time of going to press, the entire opera (in HD) can still be enjoyed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z52t1ZJlbkc.

Tristan Revival at Glyndebourne



Tristan, 2007 (photo: Glyndebourne Productions)

Nikolaus Lehnhoff's highly atmospheric and intimate, abstract production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Glyndebourne in the 2000s is fondly remembered, and is being revived there in July, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Robin Ticciati, and with New Zealand's Simon O'Neill in the titular heldentenor role and the Finnish soprano Miina-Liisa Värëla as Isolde. Various social distancing measures will apply, including a half-full auditorium only, and with orchestral players hidden in the dark on stage, but the aim is still to give a genuinely full-scale performance. Our best wishes to Simon in tackling this particular Everest of the Wagner canon in one of its most striking recent incarnations, also given that – again, owing to Covid – he was unable to perform it in Brisbane late last year. To see a fascinating eleven-minute featurette about the revival, click on www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvLeAD_ShkE.

Controversy over Historic Leipzig Wagner Monument

A controversy has arisen concerning the purchase of elements of a historic monument in the city of Wagner's birth, Leipzig, in Germany. A major monument to Wagner had long been planned there since the turn of last century and so, in 1931, following the death of the initially commissioned sculptor, Max Klinger, a competition was announced to design a monument to be located in a park-like setting (the 'Richard-Wagner-Hain') by Leipzig's Elster River flood basin. The winner

was announced two years later, namely the Stuttgart sculptor Emil Hipp (1893–1965), who had completed a draft for a monolithic block structure comprising individual natural stone elements. There were to be reliefs on the sides of the blocks, symbolising the themes of Wagner's works and featuring athletically built, naked male and female figures, all in a stylised contemporary Classical style (Hipp's own description), as also typical of the Nazi period. A later draft and landscape design with Adolf Hitler's personal involvement



The present-day Balkenhol statue of Wagner in Leipzig (photo: Wikimedia Commons)

had what was now to be a 'national monument of the German people' set in the middle of a large square paved with flagstones, enclosed by a wall over 400 metres long with more Wagnerian reliefs. A bombastic foundation stone laying ceremony was held in March 1934, with Hitler's participation, together with other Nazi party representatives and an audience of thousands and a 1,600-strong choir. This all meant that the monument was now tainted by its intimate association with the Nazis' ideology and leader, and had become a realisation of Nazi propaganda, although some continue to hold that Hipp was still not really a 'Nazi artist' per se.

Further progress on the monument was in any case slow. Hipp completed the individual natural stone elements in 1944, but these were no longer delivered to the site following the end of World War II. Eventually, the Leipzig City Administration annulled the residual contracts, and sold off the individual elements into scattered private ownership.

Years later, there were renewed calls for a significant monument to be finally erected in time to commemorate Wagner's bicentenary in 2013. However, owing to the

crucial participation of an independent association that wished to see a more critical, contemporary stand taken on Wagner and his legacy, a new statue designed by Stephan Balkenhol was erected on a five-metre-high marble pedestal that had originally been designed and completed by the aforementioned Max Klinger prior to his death in 1920. A 'symbolically laden' shadow looms large behind the new life-size Wagner statue. The new work was highly controversial and opposed by the Leipzig *Richard-Wagner-Verband*, or Richard Wagner Association.

Now, however, the Richard Wagner Association and the Leipzig Municipal History Museum have purchased two of Hipp's original stone elements for the surrounding wall with the intention of exhibiting them, together with explanations of their historic context. One element showing the figure of Hans Sachs (*Die Meistersinger*) is to be a controversial central focus of an upcoming exhibition

on Leipzig as a musical city in the National Socialist era. According to the Municipal History Museum, no attempt will be made to rehabilitate Hipp as an artist (in view of his cooperation with the Nazis, which also involved several other projects); instead, his work will be placed in its historical context.

Meanwhile, the Richard-Wagner-Hain grounds in Leipzig, which was in fact completed in the 1930s, is being upgraded. The Richard Wagner Association had offered the City of Leipzig a second stone element depicting scenes from *Die Walküre*; however, a resolution from the City Administration would be required to erect this element in the park as Hipp had originally envisaged. Without such a resolution, the second element may remain where it is now, at the Erlmlitz estate outside of Leipzig.

It will be evident that this is a complex, admittedly fascinating situation that also goes a lot deeper and further than what can be included in the above summary, involving issues of Germany's ongoing confrontation with its past, Wagner's multi-layered present-day reception and Hipp's own status as an artist in the Nazi era.

In Memoriam

Christa Ludwig

16 March 1928 – 24 April 2021



(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

An indelible 'A-lister' of the opera world, Christa Ludwig was a venerated German mezzo-soprano/dramatic soprano from the 1940s to the 1990s, excelling in operatic roles such as Leonora (Beethoven's *Fidelio*) and Octavian and the Marschallin (R. Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*), along with Wagner roles, masses, oratorios and much more besides. She also made peerless contributions to many of the seminal Wagner recordings of the 1960s/70s, such as Rudolf Kempe's *Lohengrin* (1963, as Ortrud); Karl Böhm's *Tristan und Isolde* (live at Bayreuth, 1966, as Brangäne); Georg Solti's *Götterdämmerung* (1964, as Waltraute), *Die Walküre* (1965, as Fricka), *Tannhäuser* (1971, as Venus) and *Parsifal* (1972, as Kundry); Herbert von Karajan's *Tristan* (1972, again as Brangäne); and Eugen Jochum's *Die Meistersinger* (1976, as Magdalena). Leb' wohl, liebe Frau Ludwig!

Stefan Mickisch

5 July 1962 – 17 February 2021



(Photo: Stefan Mickisch)

Stefan Mickisch was a German pianist and Wagner specialist, greatly admired for his highly informative introductory matinees at the piano for Bayreuth Festival attendees. He was also an expert on many other composers, founding the Robert Schumann Society of Bavaria in 1993. Sadly, Mickisch attracted bizarre controversy in later years: he was accused of awkwardly downplaying Wagner's anti-Semitism and, last year, sharply criticised for his vicious attacks on the German federal Covid-19 strategy, in which he equated strategy opponents with resistance fighters during the Nazi era. He was then declared an 'unwelcome person' at Villa Wahnfried – although he was not 'banned' from there or from the Green Hill, as was widely reported. The exact nature of his death remains unclear. He may well be best remembered by many Wagnerians for his lively discussion with Stephen Fry on the 'Tristan chord', a firm highlight of Fry's 2010 film, *Wagner and Me*.