

Wagnerians Picking up the Pieces (Again), Worldwide

Once again, after months of relative inactivity for much of last year due to Covid-19, all our regional branches have been picking themselves up, dusting themselves off and trying to get back to something like normal operations. In Auckland, both Michael Sinclair and Michael Vinten recently gave talks that they had also given elsewhere; in

Wellington, meanwhile, Heath Lees' talk on 'Wagnerism after Alex Ross' was very well attended, despite the venue's Covid-related restrictions; Christchurch had a DVD showing (*Der fliegende Holländer*); and in Dunedin, Terence Dennis gave a presentation, 'Wagner and Meyerbeer', which he, too, will repeat in Auckland following the Society's AGM (see above).

Further afield, there are some major Wagner happenings on the horizon this year. Chief among them is the 'Leipzig 22' event in Germany, in June and July, in which all 13 of Wagner's operatic works will be given in chronological order

Wagner Society AGM — Sunday 22 May

THE SOCIETY'S AGM IS TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY 22 MAY 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, Michael Ashdown

The President's Report will be available at the meeting, and is also printed in this newsletter, on page 2.

(beginning with *Die Feen*), held under the formidable motto, 'Three Weeks of Infinity'. Professor Ulf Schirmer and others will conduct Leipzig's celebrated Gewandhaus Orchestra, and key soloists include Evelyn Herlitzius, Lise Lindstrom, Michael Volle and René Pape. (In August, Heath Lees will also be giving a round-up of this event at a meeting in Auckland.)

Meanwhile, this year's Bayreuth Festival is set to go ahead in July and August, with tickets having gone on sale last month, although at the time it was still a little unclear whether the authorities will permit 100% occupancy

of the Festival Theatre, or only 75%. The upcoming performances include the new *Ring* (with former NZSO Music Director, Pietari Inkinen, able to make his debut on the Green Hill at long last), also a new *Tristan und Isolde* (directed by Roland Schwab), and all three canon pre-*Ring* operas: *Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. There will also be two free

open-air events, plus two concerts of excerpts to be conducted by Andris Nelsons and featuring star tenor Klaus Florian Vogt. For other productions coming up later in the year and in 2023, see also Michael Sinclair's regular 'Wagner Murmurs' column on page 3.

Last, but certainly not least, Jonas Kaufmann will be singing the title role of *Lohengrin* in Opera Australia's (rat-free??*) production in Melbourne this month – we know of WSNZ members heading over there for that, so we hope you will all enjoy it! (* – Cf. page 4.)

Grammy for Recording with Simon O'Neill

As many readers may have already heard, a classical album featuring New Zealand's Simon O'Neill won the Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance early last month – a complete recording, on Deutsche Grammophon, of Gustav Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* ('Symphony of a Thousand'), with Gustavo Dudamel conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic. It was also nominated in the category for Best Engineered Album, Classical. In what is another significant accomplishment

for Simon in his career as a world-leading tenor, he is spectacular here as Doctor Marianus in the second part of the work, the closing scene from Goethe's *Faust* (as he also once sang live in Wellington, at the 2010 Arts Festival). Heartiest congratulations, Simon!

On 4 April (ahead of ten performances in the titular role of two different *Parsifal* productions, in Munich and Paris), Simon was also interviewed by Radio NZ National's Jesse Mulligan – the link below has the full audio of this, with a fine sample of Simon's singing: www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/464599/album-featuring-new-zealand-tenor-simon-o-neill-wins-grammy-award-for-best-choral-performance



DG's Grammy Award-winning album of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel

President's Report 2022/23

As with the previous year, the endeavours of the Wagner Society of New Zealand were to a greater or lesser extent dependent on the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our four centres were able to hold events scheduled for the early part of 2021, but then the national red-light strictures imposed at certain times of the year caused certain disruptions to the centres' individual programmes. However, the national lockdown from mid-August, due to the Omicron variant, did result in a cessation of activities, with Auckland undergoing the longest period of duress in this respect.

On a positive note, all centres were able to hold their end-of-year events and, to date, their current 2022 sessions.

The palpable pleasure at reactivating these, in person, was conveyed by the representatives of each national centre at the WSNZ Zoom Committee Meetings.

The November concert of the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, to which we had contributed a significant grant from a bequest designated for Wagner performance, fell victim to this lockdown.

Nevertheless, events of the national centres were generally well attended, when possible, and offered members a fine spectrum of Wagner and Wagner-related sessions. For these, I wish to warmly commend our national presenters.

Peter Rowe, our National Secretary, forwarded many links over this period of Wagner events worldwide, which I am sure were much appreciated by many members.

International travel remained an isolating factor for most of this time, but from now on in 2022 there is a much greater flexibility for travel abroad: with various international Wagner events being rescheduled, some of our society members will welcome the opportunity to re-join the wider Wagner community. In this respect, I retained connections on our behalf with the Wagner Society in London, and with our Australian Wagner Society counterparts during the course of 2021.

The online newsletter, instigated in 2021, has been much appreciated, and once again we extend our thanks to the production team of Michael Ashdown and John Davidson. National members are therefore well connected, and, given the disruptions of the past two years, we have not seen any significant falling away of membership: indeed, we can rejoice in welcoming those new Wagner Society members who joined in 2022.

By way of conclusion, a hearty thanks to all our National Committee members and support teams in our four national centres for their resilient contributions and ongoing expertise over another vexed year, and to you, our members of the NZ Wagner Society across the country, for your support across this complex period.

In retrospect, the period 2021/22, given its very serious travails beyond our control, was still able to afford a fine range of stimulating and, at times, innovative Wagnerian sessions that reflect my vision for our New Zealand Society.

Terence Dennis



'Minna, Minna'

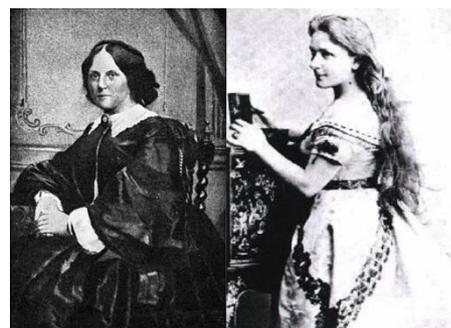
In an engagingly offbeat article by Chris Walton in the latest issue of *The Wagner Journal* (Vol. 16/1), we read that, in addition to Wagner's first wife, Christine Wilhemine, or 'Minna' (née Planer, 1809–66), there was also another, much younger 'Minna Wagner' (1840–1910), hereinafter 'Minna #2'. She was born in Nordhausen, Thuringia, and – like 'Minna #1' – she, too, died in Dresden, a city intimately associated with Wagner. Minna #2 was born into an acting family (her parents were Theodor, and Mathilde – as also in Wesendonck!), and she herself became an actress and singer, also marrying the actor, singer and writer, Karl Ueberhorst (1823–99). Not surprisingly, all this eventually led to some confusion, and it transpires that a few of the photographs that had once been attributed to Wagner's first wife were, in fact, of Minna #2 all along. This realisation has gradually dawned in view

of the women's distinct appearances, along with their style of dress, which can be useful in dating historical photographs.

It appears that Minna #2 never had anything to do with Wagner directly. She often sang in operettas, including those by Offenbach, although she did take on more dramatic roles later, and there is evidence that she even elected to sing the role of Elisabeth in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in Graz in 1879. There is another indirect connection to Wagner, however: in 1870, in Vienna's Carltheater, she also sang the role of 'Elsa, the Virgin of Dragnet' in Franz von Suppé's popular *Lohengeln, oder die Jungfrau von Dragnet* – a blatant parody of *Lohengrin*. The Jewish-sounding name 'Lohengeln' was probably a dig at Wagner's anti-Semitism; one of the other actors also wore a Richard Wagner mask onstage (!), and at one point they all danced the can-can. Meanwhile, Wagner himself had been writing the text for an infamously crude farce targeting the French, *Eine Kapitulation*. (He then asked his

conductor, Hans Richter, to set this text to music!) With all this in mind, Chris Walton hilariously concludes his article as follows:

While Wagner was busy creating his funniest flop, feebly mocking Jacques Offenbach and everything French and frothy, 'Richard Wagner', Minna Wagner and a Jewish Lohengrin were together dancing the can-can to enthusiastic applause on the Viennese stage. You couldn't make it up.



Minna Wagner (née Planer), l.; Minna Ueberhorst (née Wagner), r. (Images: Wikimedia/Wikipedia)

WSNZ – 2022 Programme May to December

NB: All events may be subject to change at short notice, in accordance with the prevailing Covid-19 situation

Auckland

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

Sunday, 22 May at 7:00 p.m.

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

Sunday, 14 August at 7:00 p.m.

Round-up of the Leipzig 'Wagner 22' event, plus a showing of *Die Feen* (abridged version) on DVD, introduced by **Heath Lees**.

Sunday, 16 October at 2:30 p.m. (note afternoon time)

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

Sunday, 4 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, 5 June at 11:00 a.m. (note early start)

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

Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: A screening of the 1989 production of *Tannhäuser* from the Bayreuth Festival, directed by Wolfgang Wagner, conducted by Giuseppe Sinopoli, and featuring Richard Versalle as Tannhäuser and Cheryl Studer as Elisabeth.

August/October, date and time TBA – postponed from last year

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

A special screening of two documentaries showcasing two leading Australasian performers with a strong Wagnerian connection: *Five Faces of McIntyre*, about Sir Donald McIntyre (film also with Dame Malvina Major, Timothy Hawley and more – historic TVNZ production from 1979), and *Simone Young: To Hamburg from Downunder* (film originally produced for North German television, from 2008).

Sunday, 18 September at 4:00 p.m.

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

Sunday, 23 October at 4:00 p.m.

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

November/December

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

(Potential programme addition or substitution – presentation by **John Davidson** and **Michael Ashdown: Wagner and Humour.**)

Christchurch

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

Friday, 29 July at 7:30 p.m.

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

September/October, further details TBA

Presentation by **Terence Dennis** on Wagner's early opera, *Das Liebesverbot*.

Sunday, 27 November at 4:30 p.m., venue TBA

Christmas function.

Dunedin

Venues TBA (except where otherwise indicated)

Sunday, 3 July at 1:30 p.m.

A screening of the complete *Das Rheingold* from the epochal 1976 Centenary Chéreau *Ring* production at Bayreuth, as filmed in 1980, with Sir Donald McIntyre as Wotan – introduced by **Terence Dennis**.

Sunday, 14 August at 2:00 p.m.

Talk by **John Drummond: Reforming the Reformer**. John discusses Wagner's extensive 1847 revision (with rescoring, a new ending and even some of his own music) of Gluck's first French opera, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, for a performance in German at the Dresden Court Opera.

Sunday, 30 October at 2:00 p.m.

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

Sunday, 27 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: Carrington College Dining Room and Linten Lounge, Heriot Row
Our traditional end-of-year Christmas event.

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair – *Ring* cycles aplenty!

- Barrie Kosky will direct a new production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden beginning in 2023.
- Bayreuth's new *Ring*, directed by Valentin Schwarz, has been devised along the lines of a Netflix series.
- The Semperoper Dresden will perform two cycles of its *Ring* cycle in January/February 2023. It is directed by Willy Decker and will be conducted by Christian Thielemann.
- Melbourne Opera will perform full cycles of its new *Ring* cycle in Bendigo in early 2023, as opposed to Melbourne itself.
- Berlin's Staatsoper Unter den Linden will mount a new cycle of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in its 2022/23 season. It will be directed by Dmitri Tcherniakov and conducted by Daniel Barenboim.

New Members

We are pleased to extend a warm Wagnerian welcome to:

Adam Kirby.....Auckland
Benedict Gordon.....North Canterbury

Waltraud Meier's La Scala Farewell, Patrice Chéreau's 'Jane Campion Moment' and Meier's Unexpected Ally

Yes, you read that second bit right!! On 9 January this year, the much-loved German mezzo-soprano, Waltraud Meier, took her final leave of Milan's La Scala opera house, in a well-received recital together with the bass Günther Groissböck and Joseph Breinl on piano, in which she sang Lieder by Hugo Wolf, and, with Groissböck, Mahler's inspired song cycle, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*.

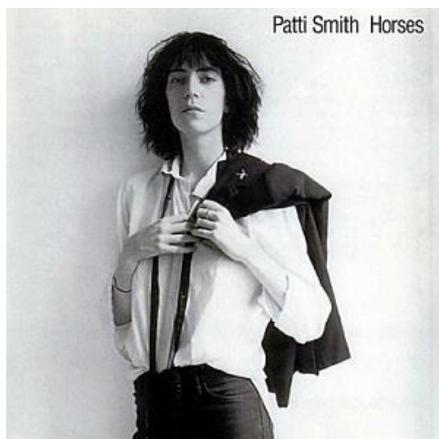


(Photo: Teatro alla Scala)

In an accompanying television interview, meanwhile, Meier also recounted a particularly unusual anecdote from La Scala's peerless 2007/08 production of Wagner's *Tristan*, conducted by Daniel Barenboim and directed by the late Patrice Chéreau. The actual premiere of the production was made available on video, but it seems that Chéreau already had some new, unusual ideas for the second performance. He asked Meier if she would come in early that day, so that he could surprise her with a video screening of Jane Campion's classic 1993 film, *The Piano* – specifically, the (horrific) scene in which Ada (played by Holly Hunter) has her forefinger cut off by her furious, cheated husband (Sam Neill), and then staggers away, stumbles and falls, picks herself up again and finally collapses in a heap a few steps later. Meier correctly surmised that Chéreau wanted her to fall and pick herself up, etc. in a similar way at the very end of the *Liebestod* for the remaining performances, instead of collapsing just once, as she did at the premiere. She was happy to comply, even though it meant crashing painfully with her knees onto the rock-hard La Scala floor each time . . . but for her, it was just a case of 'What wouldn't I do for the Scala and Patrice Chéreau?', she said.

Later in the interview, Meier added that she regarded the Scala *Tristan* premiere as the absolute pinnacle of her career – having told Chéreau that even if her entire singing life had only been meant to lead up to that one evening, it would all have been worth it.

As a related aside, there was a recent reminder that Meier and Wagner also have a seemingly highly unlikely ally: the legendary New York underground rock poet / singer-songwriter / author, Patti Smith, who blazed onto the international arts scene in 1975 with her seminal vinyl album debut, *Horses*:



(Source: Wikipedia)

In March of this year, Smith's always eloquent prose graced an article in *The New York Times* (alongside many other people's contributions, including those of Alex Ross and Katharina Wagner), on the topic 'Five Minutes That Will Make You Love Wagner':

I have chosen Waltraud Meier's exquisite performance of the "Liebestod" from "Tristan und Isolde." I was privileged to attend the premiere of the opera in December 2007 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. Conducted by Daniel Barenboim and directed by Patrice Chéreau, it was the most beautiful and moving production of Wagner's great romance I have experienced. Waltraud Meier is a fine actress as well as being one of our great singers. In this piece, she projects the full range of Isolde's devotion, desire, madness and loss. She brought to her performance humility and expertise, comprehending fully the meaning of transcendent love. Backstage, I saw her in the shadows. She was yet spattered with Tristan's blood and still contained in her countenance something of Isolde.

Smith has long been a Wagnerian, something that many of even her most ardent fans are probably quite unaware of – *Parsifal* and *Tristan* are her two favourite operas. In 2005, astonishingly, she was asked to review *Tannhäuser* and Christoph Schlingensiefel's provocative *Parsifal* production at Bayreuth, for the German newspaper, *Die Zeit*. (She and the late Schlingensiefel also became well acquainted.) What's more, Smith and Meier are also mutual admirers; in 2016, they even appeared together onstage for a New York talk show ('National Sawdust'). See also: www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2018/11/Departments/Liner_Notes_Patti_Smith.html

In Memoriam

Hans Neuenfels

31 May 1941 – 6 February 2022



(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Director Hans Neuenfels, one of the *enfants terribles* of contemporary opera's *Regie-theater* (or ('director's theatre')), has died in Berlin, allegedly from complications from Covid-19.

Born in Krefeld in the German state of North Rhine–Westphalia, he studied first in Essen and later in Vienna. He made his debut as a theatre director in Vienna in 1964 and quickly built up an impressive reputation, although he did not turn to opera until he directed Verdi's *Il Trovatore* in Nuremberg some ten years later. His approach, based on a genuine and well-founded interest in the music, and then open up entirely new, contemporary, and sometimes disturbingly ambivalent perspectives on the works. He also championed lesser-known operas.

After *Il Trovatore* came a series of often controversial productions, most notably his take on Mozart's *Idomeneo*, for the Deutsche Oper in Berlin in 2003. A planned revival in 2006 had to be temporarily withdrawn for fear of offence to Muslims. Neuenfels refused to cut the controversial elements, however, and, happily, the opera was performed twice more without incident.

In Wagner, meanwhile, he will forever be remembered for his bizarre, symbolically reimagined *Lohengrin* production, premiered at Bayreuth in 2010. Set in a modern, sterile laboratory, the subservient inhabitants of tenth-century Brabant were all costumed as rats, in thrall to their human warders. Henry, Lohengrin, Elsa, and the treacherous Ortrud and Telramund likewise stood out as human, while, at the end, young Gottfried emerged from a swan's egg as an oddly formed foetus. Not exactly for all tastes, to state the obvious, yet the weird allegory, crisp, clean staging, and some dazzling costumes and cute animations were intriguing, and so the production has its fans! For the uninitiated: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHJCSYScFOQ



The 'Rat *Lohengrin*', here with Jonas Kaufmann. (Photo from 2010: Bayreuther Festspiele)