

The Wagner Society of New Zealand – 30th Anniversary

Yes, 2024 marks the thirtieth anniversary of our Society – after all the ups and downs of the last few years, it seems like only very recently that we were already celebrating our first quarter century! See also Terence Dennis's President's Report on page 3, which is included in this issue in support of the upcoming AGM – details in the box on the right.

The Wagnerian year in New Zealand has got off to a cracking start: APO Music Director Giordano Bellincampi's presentation in Auckland on conducting Wagner's operas was very well attended, boding well for New Zealand's premier Wagner event this year, the APO's concertante performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in August. Heath Lees's presentation in Wellington last month on Wagner's early operas, *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot*, similarly drew a good audience, as have Terence Dennis's screenings in the South Island of Luchino Visconti's monumental (three-hour) 1972 *Ludwig* film, with a legendary cast and partially filmed at some of the original locations in Bavaria. Further treats are in store later in the year, as listed on page 2, and so it seems that we are now properly back on track following the challenges of the pandemic years.

Abroad, too, there has been plenty of activity over recent months, with no less than three centres in Switzerland alone having staged *Ring* productions, namely Basel, Bern and Zurich – note that Camilla Nylund and Klaus Florian Vogt can be seen as Brünnhilde and Siegfried, respectively, in the Zurich *Ring*, to be streamed live in

Notice of Wagner Society AGM – Sunday 19 May

THE SOCIETY'S AGM IS TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY 19 MAY IN ST HELIERS COMMUNITY CENTRE, 100 ST HELIERS BAY ROAD, AUCKLAND, AT 2:00 P.M.

The business of the meeting shall include the election of the committee, consideration of the President's Report (printed in this newsletter), and consideration and approval of the Annual Financial Statements presented by the Treasurer.

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

its entirety to medici.tv subscribers over four nights from 18–26 May, CET.

Meanwhile, the upcoming Bayreuth Festival in the northern summer will feature returning productions of the *Ring* (dir. Valentin Schwarz), *Tannhäuser* (dir. Tobias Kratzer), *Der fliegende Holländer* (dir. Dmitri Tcherniakov) and *Parsifal* (dir. Jay Scheib, and still with only 330 pairs of augmented reality (AR) glasses available for each performance). These will be joined by this year's premiere production of *Tristan und Isolde* (dir. Thorleifur Örn Arnarsson), featuring Andreas Schager and Camilla Nylund in the principal roles. (Nylund has already been singing *Isolde* this year in what appears to have been a very fine production of *Tristan* in Dresden, again singing opposite Klaus Florian Vogt – see www.operaonvideo.com/tristan-und-isolde-dresden-2024-christian-thielemann-klaus-florian-vogt-camilla-nylund/ – admittedly, this is just a quiet excerpt, but here both singers seem to be coping well with the heavy Wagner roles, with Christian Thielemann conducting.)

Additionally, just three years ago, Oksana Lyniv became the first woman to

conduct at the Bayreuth Festival in its nearly 150-year history. This year, she returns to conduct the *Holländer* once more, joined by Nathalie Stutzmann, who will be conducting *Tannhäuser* again, and Simone Young, making her long-awaited debut on the Green Hill to conduct the *Ring* (as the first woman ever to do so at Bayreuth). That just leaves two men, Pablo Heras-Casado and Semyon Bychkov, to

conduct *Parsifal* and the new *Tristan*, respectively, all of which means, as far as women conductors are concerned, that any 'glass ceiling' at Bayreuth has now been well and truly broken – and all in the space of just a few short years.

Katharina Wagner remains at the helm as Festival Director, a position she has held alone since 2015, although her contract will be coming up for renewal (or otherwise) next year; observers will be most curious to see what this will bring. It has also just emerged that Katharina has moved out of the villa on the Green Hill that her family (with father Wolfgang) had occupied ever since 'New Bayreuth' in the early 1950s, although she has simply moved to another part of town, and the villa's buyer was also a Bayreuth citizen.

Finally, new recordings include a 2021 *Parsifal* from the Vienna State Opera on four CDs, conducted by Philippe Jordan and featuring Jonas Kaufmann and Georg Zeppenfeld, although an amazing recent restoration of the classic 1951 Bayreuth *Parsifal* (Knappertsbusch) is unbeatable – www.pristineclassical.com/products/pac0190 – just try the audio sample (22 min.)!

WSNZ – 2024 Programme

May to December

Auckland

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

Sunday, 19 May at 2:00 p.m.

The Wagner Society's AGM, to be followed by a full-length presentation as below:

Richard Wagner and The Spirit of Ancient Greek Tragedy: **Scott Bezett**, Masters in both Classical Music (Voice) and Classics, presents *in conversazione* with **Terence Dennis** the origins of Greek classical drama and its influence on the development of opera, and upon Richard Wagner in his writings on Music Drama, and especially in the dramatic concept of the tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

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

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

Sunday, 20 October at 1:30 p.m.

A full screening of *Parsifal*.

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

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

Wellington

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

Sunday, 30 June at 3:00 p.m. (note earlier start)

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

A screening of two contrasting one-hour documentaries to tie in with the APO's upcoming concertante performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in August: *Do I Hear the Light?* (2007), a film about Nikolaus Lehnhoff's celebrated production of *Tristan* at Glyndebourne, England (also featuring the Swedish mezzo, Katarina Karnéus, the upcoming APO concert's Brangäne); and *Carlos Kleiber – I am Lost to the World* (2011), an ambitious German-made film about the enigmatic conductor, with his special take on *Tristan* running through the film like a leitmotif. (Kleiber's 1980–82 studio *Tristan* counts among the top recordings of the opera and is regarded by many as his single greatest achievement.)

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

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

Sunday, 6 October at 10:30 a.m. (note early start)

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

Joint meeting with the **Opera Society**: a full screening of the 2020 production of *Parsifal* from the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, one of the last productions to be staged by the late English director, Graham Vick, here conducted by Omer Meir Wellber with Julian Hubbard as Parsifal, Catherine Hunold as Kundry, John Relyea as Gurnemanz, Tómas Tómasson as Amfortas and Thomas Gazheli as Klingsor.

November/December

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

Christchurch

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

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

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

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

Venue: 74 Hackthorne Road

A full screening of *Parsifal*.

November/December – date, time and venue TBC

Christmas function.

Dunedin

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

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room

Deep in the Forest – **Terence Dennis** discusses *Siegfried*: exploring the opera in context, before our winter film presentation:

Sunday, 7 July, 11:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (luncheon provided)

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room

2024 Winter Viewing – *Siegfried*: we continue our annual winter viewing series with *Siegfried*, in the 1976 Bayreuth Centennial Ring production of Patrice Chéreau.

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

Venue: School of Performing Arts T101 Lecture Room, University of Otago

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

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

Venue: School of Performing Arts T101 Lecture Room, University of Otago

Historical Perspectives – Great Singers of the Cosima Era: **Terence Dennis** continues our fascinating series of historic Wagner performers, heard in some of the rarest recordings from the earliest days of gramophone recording: the era of Cosima Wagner.

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

2024 Christmas Luncheon & Wagneriana.

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- For artistic reasons, Romeo Castellucci will not complete the *Ring* at La Monnaie/De Munt. The final two operas, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, will now be directed by Pierre Audi.
- Having been cancelled owing to Covid-19, Calixto Bieito's production of the *Ring* will finally be staged at the Paris Opera, beginning with *Das Rheingold* in January 2025, and continuing over three seasons.
- The Bavarian State Opera will begin a new *Ring* cycle to be directed by Tobias Kratzer, with *Das Rheingold* premiering in October 2024.
- Owing to the current difficult financial situation, the Theater Erfurt (in Germany) will no longer be pursuing its *Ring* cycle.

New Members

A very warm Wagnerian welcome to several new members – wie immer, herzlich willkommen und seid gegrüsst!

Vivianne Child.....Auckland
Rodger John Finlay.....Christchurch
Robin Flynn.....Auckland
Alison Priaulx.....Auckland

President's Report 2023/24

This year 2024 celebrates the 30th year of the founding of the New Zealand Wagner Society, three decades dedicated to furthering the understanding of Wagner's music and aesthetic achievement within both a national and international context.

The first Wagner Society was formed in Mannheim in 1871, shortly after the première performance of *Die Walküre*, and, although our own society may have been a latecomer into the wider Wagnerian fold, we can look back with gratitude and a certain pride in the ongoing fulfilment of our designated aims.

Given the dictates of circumstance, we have been able to provide not only thirty years of stimulating sessions on Wagner – his music from *pre-Feen* to *Parsifal*, his influences on others, and their influences upon him – but also opportunities to regularly participate in the international Wagnerian world.

It is therefore especially fitting in this anniversary year to thank and acknowledge my own predecessors as presidents of our society: Professor Heath Lees, the NZ Wagner's Society's first and longstanding president, for his vision to found the society thirty years ago, the fostering of its development across the four national centres, and for his continued expert contributions; then my thanks to Chris Brodrick for successfully continuing in this capacity, during a period of both vitality and change.

Looking back at 2023, the programmes went to plan in all centres, a welcome relief after the chequered pandemic years with their national restrictions, as even some of the 2022 sessions had required some rescheduling.

Once again, 2023 offered a fine array of stimulating and varied sessions that embraced concerts, lectures and opera viewings.

I wish to extend a hearty thankyou to our 2023 presenters, in alphabetical order: Abhinath Berry, Scott Bezett, John Drummond, Syd Kennedy, Ken Tomkins and Michael Vinten, apart from my own contributions to the four national centres.

Our sessions last year ranged from such memorable live performances as Abhinath's rendition of the stupendous Wagner-Liszt *Tannhäuser-Overture* piano transcription, to lectures on *Tannhäuser* and *Wagner as Conductor*, the relevance of the *Ring*, the character of Brünnhilde, Meyerbeer

and Wagner's anti-Semitism, and *Wagner and the Ancient Greeks*. Along the way, we heard the earliest set of recordings to capture much of the *Ring* on record, and experienced in live concert such an unexpected rarity as Wagner's four-hand piano version of the overture to Halévy's *Le Guitarrero*; all in all, a fine testament to the wide spectrum of Wagnerian offerings for our national members.

Our 2024 season is successfully under way in each of the four national centres, and will be accounted for in my subsequent report.

In terms of financial sponsorship, I need to confirm that the bequest particularly designated for one of the concerts of the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra featuring the music of Wagner did take place in 2023, after the pandemic restrictions prevented the concert from going ahead in the orchestra's previous concert season.



Terence Dennis
– WSNZ President

The NZ Wagner Society is also affording financial support to the performance of *Tristan und Isolde* with the APO in August this year.

As the world opened up, it was pleasing to see NZ Wagner Society members attending the complete *Ring* performances as far afield as Budapest, and as close by as Bendigo and Brisbane. The Australian performances also afforded good opportunities for rapport between our mutual Australian and New Zealand Wagner Societies.

In conclusion, my special appreciation to our committee members:

Firstly, to Michael Ashdown and John Davidson for their assiduous work on the newsletters; these keep our members connected with events both national and international, are always finely produced, and full of interest.

A big Wagnerian thankyou to all our National Committee members in the respective roles they provide to the society, as always with acumen and enthusiasm.

Finally, to you, our members of the NZ Wagner Society, my thanks for your continuing support and interest.

And to the New Zealand Wagner Society, a 'Happy Thirtieth Birthday' and 'the best of wishes for our further ventures ahead'.

Terence Dennis
April 2024

In Memoriam

Christopher Gambrill

19 June 1933 – 4 December 2023

It is with regret that we must report on the passing of Auckland member, Chris Gambrill, who originally hailed from Gisborne. Liz Lees remembers Chris as 'a loyal and longstanding member who never missed an Auckland meeting; a lovely man with a good sense of humour who was always eager to talk about

new productions and all things Wagnerian'. For my part, I first met Chris on the Wagner Society's 2009 tour to see the *Ring* in Seattle. Along with his Wagnerian interests, Chris was also an especially keen (Richard) Straussian, and he strongly encouraged me to expand my knowledge and horizons in that direction as well, which I duly did. Chris had also been keen to attend the much-delayed Brisbane *Ring*, but he didn't renew his tour booking last year, and sadly passed away just days before the start. Leb' wohl, Chris. – Michael Ashdown

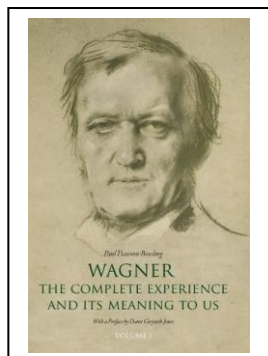


Chris Gambrill atop Seattle's Space Needle on the WSNZ *Ring* tour, August 2009 (photo: M. Ashdown).

Paul Dawson-Bowling, *Wagner: The Complete Experience and Its Meaning to Us*

– a book review by Heath Lees

3 vols., xxxix + 339 + 307 + 522 = 1207 pp.
NZ\$133.70. de la Porte Publishing.
ISBN: 978-1-8383269-0-6



This book comes with a chequered history. First published in a two-volume version in 2013, it was obviously intended as a significant contribution to the Wagner

bicentenary year. Alas, in what one assumes was a rush to meet the deadline, the book appeared ‘warts and all’, with a fair measure of unpolished argument and unwary speculation, to say nothing of the many editorial errors throughout the text.

In addition, during the years of the book’s gestation, Wagner studies had advanced from the long-held view (proffered by Wagner and confirmed by Cosima) that the ‘official’ operas were only ten in number, from *Der fliegende Holländer* to *Parsifal*. Nowadays, though, the youthful works, *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*, have attracted much of value in the way of research and performance activity. In 2022, in a groundbreaking *tour de force*, Wagner’s native city of Leipzig mounted a spectacular performance season of all his completed stage works, which bumped up the official score from ten to thirteen. Other markers included the progressive availability of commercial DVDs of *Rienzi* and *Das Liebesverbot*, which have helped to make these operas more mainstream.

With all this in the wind, the title of Paul Dawson-Bowling’s book proclaiming a ‘complete’ Wagner experience based on ten out of thirteen operas would have seemed not just wrong, but foolish. Accordingly, this current three-volume version cleans up the early blemishes (or most of them) and includes welcome coverage of the three, still relatively unexplored, pre-*Holländer* operas.

Two questions jump out from the title page: 1) Who is Paul Dawson-Bowling, and 2) who is meant by the ‘Us’ he addresses in the title? Well-known Wagnerians? Ordinary Wagner Society members? People with some interest in the composer who can also back it up with a book costing NZ\$133? Opera buffs and classical music listeners everywhere? The whole human race, perhaps?

This last question is not so silly, since the *Introduction* actually opens with a statement that the book ‘is addressed to everyone with an interest or a potential interest in Richard

Wagner’ (I/xxi, my italics). And then, 50 pages on, following a tricky negotiation around the gravitational pull of religious belief, there comes the breathtaking claim that ‘everyone, in a sense, needs Wagner’ (I/49) – a contention that returns some 900 pages later, following a visionary, even mystical discussion of *Parsifal*, ‘which’, he says, ‘conveys a connection with the divine, the metaphysical. It also puts forward ideas – largely distilled from Christianity – for creating a better world . . . [It] can even empower us to inaugurate an age of heaven upon earth.’ (III/458).

Despite his brimming enthusiasm, this author is no crank, religious or otherwise. On the contrary, he comes replete with a lifetime of Wagner study and a vast and varied horizon of reference sources. He has a long record of lecturing on Wagner themes and is the author of a number of publications in secondary Wagner journals. He is obviously formed and fleshed in the robust tradition of English Wagnerism, which quickly outgrew its initial veneer of religious sentimentality (cf. the early pages of the London Wagner Society’s newsletter, *The Meister*) and fostered instead the best kind of devoted amateurism that bred doughty, self-reliant pioneers who would move mountains to get to Bayreuth under their own steam and then spread the Wagner word on their return. With some pride, Dawson-Bowling gives the example of his own father’s visits to Germany, Wagner-smitten in the 1920s and Hitler-dodging in the 1930s, but overwhelmed for all time by the ‘instant life-changing impact’ (I/22) of a Bayreuth *Ring*. Dawson-Bowling’s own boyhood boasts a cycle trip to Bayreuth in 1958, the final year of the first eye-opening wave of Wieland Wagner’s remarkable *Ring* productions.

A unique aspect that this author brings is his lifetime service as a family doctor with a special interest in psychiatry. This, he says, gives him new insights into Wagner’s life and personality, as well as providing a theoretical ground for the psychology of the Wagner Experience that so often bursts into bloom from a life-changing encounter with the music and drama together.

Leaning heavily on Jung, his favourite psychologist, he immediately turns his searchlight on Wagner’s childhood and, by the end of three chapters, has painted a very different picture from the usual rose-coloured version that stems from the composer’s own selective account of his earliest years in *My Life*. Wagner’s childhood and youth, we now find, were not – emphatically not – happy, and their dislocations, discords and deprivations led to his volatile character and egotistical behaviour.

Following an excellent summary-biography, Dawson-Bowling determinedly fixes his gaze on the young composer’s life and work. In the early chapters, having shot down the ‘happy childhood’ myth, he turns his attention to Wagner’s first wife Minna, who has certainly not deserved the bad press that she usually gets, but nor does she merit the exaggerated hymn of praise that Dawson-Bowling showers upon her. Another victim of bad-press syndrome is Ferdinand Praeger, whose Wagner-fabrications were exposed long ago, but are awkwardly excused here in the midst of a series of assertions about Cosima’s motives for badmouthing him. ‘Notwithstanding Praeger’s embroideries, many of the scenes described in his book leap to life in a way that is wholly consistent with other sources.’ (I/166). It will be noted that none of the scenes is clarified, nor is the way they ‘leap into life’, while the ‘other sources’ are not even named.

This kind of loose scholarship recurs quite frequently and mars the book’s reliability. Name-dropping also puts one on guard. It begins early, e.g., when discussing the high status of the German *Volk* in Weimar, a model town which, we are told, ‘was even compared with Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ . . .’ (I/35). A little digging reveals that the person who grouped Weimar and Bethlehem together was actually one of Goethe’s close neighbours, who was fed up with the stream of cultural tourists next door and mocked their pretensions through this comparison.

Volume Two begins an examination of all thirteen of Wagner’s stage works, a *Pilgrim’s Progress* that continues through the 500-odd pages of Volume Three (from *The Ring* to *Parsifal*). The pattern for each opera is broadly the same: a short contextual introduction leads to a detailed narration of the plot accompanied by musical observations and editorial asides. Readers who have only a sketchy knowledge of the operas will be grateful for this highly approachable storytelling. The musical commentary includes some manuscript examples but relies more on the author’s obvious gift for making sounds come to life in words. Less welcome are the editorial asides which are sometimes heavy-handed and often designed simply to excuse and/or justify Wagner.

All in all, this is a book that will require a considerable investment of time and effort, but its heart-warming commitment and comprehensive coverage will delight Wagnerians everywhere – even those who don’t agree with all the claims made between its covers. Dawson-Bowling has also included a fine list of recordings and performances in this revised, three-volume edition. – HL