

# WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre



## NEWSLETTER

### A City of Two Tales



*'Children, do something new.'* - Richard Wagner

Wolfgang Wagner's daughters, Eva (left) & Katharina (right) face the press.

*This edition of the newsletter concentrates on two reports from Bayreuth: on this page the news of Wolfgang Wagner's successors and on the inside pages a report on the 2008 Bayreuth Festival from Heath Lees.*

At the end of August, after the last performance of the 2008 Bayreuth Festival, Wolfgang Wagner, grandson of Richard, stood down as director of the Festival after 57 years at the helm.

The following day, 1 September, the Bayreuth Festival Board met to decide on a successor. They had before them two applications one from each side of the Wagner family. From the Wieland branch was a proposal from Wolfgang's niece, Nike Wagner who had joined forces with the renowned Belgian director Gerald Mortier. Mortier has had a distinguished career which has included breathing life back into the Salzburg Festival in Austria. From Wolfgang's side was a joint proposal from his daughters, the half sisters Katharina Wagner (30) and Eva Wagner-

Pasquier (63). With Wolfgang only agreeing to stand down from his lifetime appointment in favour of his daughters the end result was a forgone conclusion with Katharina and Eva duly appointed. Unlike their father, they will not be given life-time appointments and are more likely to receive contracts of five or seven years. In the Gramophone, Mike Ashman wrote that the "succession of the Eva/Katharina team was greeted initially with almost universal favour in German artistic and political circles. Their mix of old and new qualifications are indeed strong. Katharina has worked in Bayreuth rehearsals since she was a child: her own stagecraft and tastes should keep alive the proud, radical traditions of 'workshop Bayreuth' established by her Uncle Wieland. She obviously had much say in the offering of new Bayreuth shows to innovative directors like Christoph Schlingensiefel and Stefan Herheim, (and) will continue to work as a freelance director outside Bayreuth....Eva's lengthy casting experience in Europe and America can be expected to bring the Bayreuth singer roster - currently at a low ebb and becoming very German-biased and

influenced by who gets the roles in Berlin - back to the leading international standard it once had."

At the press conference after the announcement the new co-directors announced plans for the coming festivals.

In 2009 there will be no new production, with the same seven operas that were staged this year - *Tristan & Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal* and the *Ring* all repeated.

2010 will see a new production of *Lohengrin* by German director Hans Neuenfels and conducted by Andris Nelsons.

The new production in 2011 will be *Tannhauser* directed by Germany's Sebastian Baumgarten. In 2012 a director has yet to be named for a new *Flying Dutchman* to be conducted by Christian Thielemann.

For the Wagner bicentenary in 2013, the *Ring* is to be staged anew, but neither the director nor the conductor have yet been chosen although there are rumours that it will be staged by Katharina. While her involvement in the 2013 *Ring* has still to be confirmed Katharina is scheduled to direct a new *Tristan & Isolde* in 2015.

# Bayreuth 2008

## Some Reactions

Collected and edited by  
**Heath Lees**

Some of the more unkind critics declared that the real show at Bayreuth this year was not upon the Wagner stage, but within the Wagner family. Katharina Wagner, they said, had received the lion's share of the limelight with her production of *Die Meistersinger*, now in its second riotous year. True, it had been toned down here and sharpened up there, but it remained very much the attention-seeking vehicle through which Katharina's succession to her father's throne might be assured, thus leaving the Bayreuth Festival in Wagnerian hands. As is now widely known, this was indeed the final decision, announced as soon as the Festival had finished.

To help stave off more criticism of *Die Meistersinger's* more outrageous moments, a costly DVD of "The Making Of . . ." her production had been widely distributed just in time for the festival, and Katharina's style and ideas were exposed at length.

In the event though, her production wasn't so upsetting. Our own Group of Ten from New Zealand had been prepared "on the day" by a showing of the DVD in the hotel lobby so any Kiwi fundamentalists amongst us were at least prepared for the worst. Certainly, there were boos and catcalls, usually reserved for the ends of acts, but also clearly heard during some of the send-ups of "Holy German Art". But once you knew in advance that Walther had become a talented performance artist rather than just a strolling musician with good connections and a crush on Eva, you could really enjoy the first act, and some of its longeurs (sorry, Richard) such as David's comprehensive list of the various "tones" passed by in a flash.



*Eva-Maria Westbroek with Simon O'Neill in Die Walküre at Covent Garden*



*Klaus Florian Vogt & Michael Volle – Die Meistersinger*

Wonderfully helpful all through was the effortlessly clear, silver-edged singing of Klaus Florian Vogt as Walther. Michael Volle's Beckmesser was also a treat to hear, but he struggled to make the role plausible within the production. Franz Hawiata's Hans Sachs was disappointing, but Michaela Kaune as Eva had many luminous moments and nicely sculpted lines. As is typical of Bayreuth, the chorus and orchestra were never less than excellent.

Views on *The Ring* were canvassed from our own NZ party, and the agreement was



*Christian Thielemann*



*Stephen Gould – Siegfried*

that it was a good one. Undoubtedly the most brilliant emerging star was to be found in the role of Sieglinde, sung by Eva-Maria Westbroek, whose voice soared thrillingly into the auditorium during the emotional peaks, and glowed warmly through her softly reflective pianissimo notes. We will hear more of her, and that will be wonderful. As Brünnhilde, Linda Watson struggled not to be put in the shade by such a stunning Sieglinde. Her extra ounces of effort paid off, especially in the famous exchange between the two women where



*Parsifal, Christopher Ventris, is entertained by the Flower-maidens – Bayreuth 2008*



Robert Dean Smith & Irène Theorin – Tristan & Isolde



Professor Hans Veget

Brünnhilde foretells the birth of Siegfried, and Sieglinde replies in blissful revelation.

Perhaps the greatest and most pleasant surprise was that the role of Siegfried was so gloriously handled by Stephen Gould, who did not merely survive the role, as others do, but triumphed over it. One of our members e-mailed the following:

*In Gould's hands, Siegfried was not so much a simple buffoon as an innocent victim of the evils visited on him by Hagen, Mime, Albrecht and even a deluded Brünnhilde. Because, like humankind, he is inherently vulnerable, he is doomed. His death is the death of innocence, and Gould brought this out as never before. A superlative performance. . .*

Very much another hero, (as one of the Wellington members described him) Christian Thielemann's shaping and directing of the music of *The Ring* must be mentioned. The orchestral sense of dramatic pace was never lost, its ebb and flow was brilliantly conceived, and the climaxes were so sonorously approached and arrived at that you would swear the whole auditorium had become one vast, Wagnerian tympanum.

All the NZ folks seemed to agree happily on the highs and lows of the rest of the cast: Endrik Wotrich surprisingly poor as Siegmund, Albert Dohmen's Wotan showing intelligence and deep sympathy,

Michelle Breedt an effective Fricka, the Walküre maidens singing with hair-raising brilliance and unanimity. . . and so on. Overall, Tankred Dorst's production was at least acceptable and at best commanding, but there was full agreement that the occasional appearance of 21<sup>st</sup>-century people wandering in and out of the production was not an update but a distraction.

Only *Tristan* and *Parsifal* remain to be mentioned. Another paragraph from one of the group perfectly summarises the reaction to the first of those:

*Most of us seemed to find "Tristan und Isolde disappointing. As one who appreciates, and even prefers, concert performances of Wagner, I thoroughly enjoyed the sparse simplicity of the production. I thought King Marke (Robert Holl) and Tristan (Robert Dean Smith) were excellent, and if one couples them with a sometimes shrill Isolde, (Irène Theorin) then two out of three is not bad. Tristan was rather wooden in the love scene in Act 2 but most dramatic in the death scene in Act 3. Paradoxically, he "came alive when dying".*

As for *Parsifal* (director: Stefan Herheim) it's worth adding a thought or two from Hans Veget, one of the world's most famous Wagner scholars today. Professor Veget has come to New Zealand in the past and spoken to some of our WSNZ centres. The New York Wagner Society had arranged for him to give the performance-day lectures, and his scholarship and opinions provided a lively background during the ten days there. The NZ party went to the first and last of his lectures, and Professor Veget included us when he later circulated a personal view of the Bayreuth productions, some complimentary, some concerned. On *Parsifal*, he had this to say:-

*Herheim's talent for creating exciting theatre is beyond question. He nonetheless needs reminding of the simple truth that less is often more. Much in this production is over the top; its constant directorial italicizing becomes tiresome. . . . Herheim has placed at the centre of the action*

## 2008/09 PROGRAMME

### Auckland

**Sunday, 7 December 7.30pm**

*Venue: School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St.*  
Wagner and Christmas: A Wagnerian pot-pourri – requests and round-ups, selections and surprises

**\*Sunday, 22 February 7.30pm**

Programme to be announced

### Wellington

**Sunday, 9 November 4.00pm**

*Venue: National Library Auditorium, Molesworth/Aitken Streets, Thorndon*  
Elric Hooper presents 'From Maestro to Myth' – the evolution of Wagnerian production

### Christchurch

**Sunday, 7 December 6.00pm**

*At the home of Noelle & Bert Brownlee, 66 Clyde Road, Ilam, Ph. 348 7629*  
Christmas Function

**\*Friday, 20 February 7.30pm**

Heath Lees presents 'Wagner in New Zealand – 15 years on'

### Dunedin

**Sunday, 7 December 12.30pm**

*Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum*  
Catered luncheon and Christmas Wagner Celebration followed by *Tannhäuser* in DVD performance

**\*Sunday, 22 February 2.00pm**

Heath Lees presents 'Exploring Wagner's Music and Theatre'

\* Full details in next newsletter

*an all-devouring and regurgitating white bed in which every conceivable form of mating is performed. Next to the eagle wings, the bed is the most over-worked device of the production. This lack of taste and intellectual discipline also mars the production's elaborate historical discourse which, I am afraid, does not really stand up to critical scrutiny.*

Professor Veget's concern was shared by us all : at what stage does a director's "interpretation" become merely propaganda, or personal viewpoint, or self-indulgent message-giving (in Veget's words "directorial italicizing")? In short, over a period of ten days, we had to ask ourselves how successfully Wagner's work survived the continuous stream of directors who seemed intent, at all costs, to update, upgrade, and whenever possible, upset.

The final consensus was that yes, the work survived everything; the music is superb no matter what. But the evidence of Bayreuth 2008 suggests that nowadays you have to struggle more and more to keep that truth in front of you.

## Shorts

### Flying Dutchman

Rumour has it that State Opera South Australia will present a production of the *Der fliegende Holländer* in Adelaide next year. The cast, again unconfirmed, is John Wegner as the Dutchman, Stuart Skelton as Erik and Margaret Medlyn as Senta. Watch this space!!

Staying with the *Der fliegende Holländer* but moving to Leipzig: A new production of the opera that opened on 11 October, has been withdrawn after one performance when James Johnson refused to sing the title role as he was uncomfortable with director Michael von zur Mühlen's concept. He particularly objected to the introduction of a stripper and several violent video sequences that were added to the production *after* the dress rehearsal!

### Tristan & Isolde Reminder

At the end of this month with two elections receding into the past we have an opportunity to see the Metropolitan Opera production of *Tristan & Isolde* at our local cinemas.

The schedule for *most, but not all* centres is the same:-

Saturday 22 November at 6pm

Sunday 23 November at 1pm

Wednesday 26 November 10am

Please check your local paper, or go to:-  
<http://www.nzmetopera.com/>



*The Metropolitan Opera's 2008 production of Tristan & Isolde*

### New Members

A very Warm Wagnerian Welcome to:-  
Patricia Kershaw ..... *Auckland*  
Martin Algie ..... *Australia*  
Sam and Rosalie Sneyd ..... *Dunedin*

### Twins for Simon O'Neill

At the end of October renowned New Zealand tenor Simon O'Neill and his wife Carmel became proud parents for the first time with the birth of twins. With a boy and a girl there was much speculation as to whether they would name them Siegmund and Sieglinde, but Simon and Carmel have decided on Grace Gabrielle Bridget and Thomas Patrick Jeremiah as names for the twins. We wish them well.



*Auckland members Margaret and Ted Thomas meet up with an old friend on a recent visit to Wagner's villa at Tribschen, on Lake Lucerne, Switzerland (below).*



### Wagner in the Desert

The Bayreuth Festival Orchestra made its debut in the Middle East recently, as part of the Abu Dhabi Classics season. According to The National newspaper, the concert which took place in the opulent 7 star Emirates Palace Hotel (above) had been hugely anticipated in the United Arab Emirates and "women wearing long evening gowns and embellished abayas (over garments) gathered in the palm-lined atrium. As the orchestra assembled to tune up, they were greeted by a long round of applause." The programme, which was conducted by Christian Theilemann and featured some of Wagner's most popular works, including Act 1 of *Die Walküre*, received a standing ovation.

### New Bayreuth Web Site

Along with innovations such as streaming *Die Meistersinger* over the web and showing live performances on a big screen, the Bayreuth Festival has recently up-dated its web site. As well as information about the programme, tickets and artists there is also a very interesting back-stage video. Go to <http://www.bayreuther-festspiele.de>

## Treasurer

We received sad news in late August that, for health reasons, John Hambling, was standing down from the position of Treasurer, with immediate effect.

We are now on the hunt to find a replacement. If anyone is able to devote some time to keeping the accounts in order we'd love to hear from them. It is not an onerous task but it is an important position in the Society so it is vital that we have someone in the role. Anyone who is interested in helping out can either contact the Secretary, Michael Sinclair ([msinclair@xtra.co.nz](mailto:msinclair@xtra.co.nz) or ph. (09)528 0776) or the President, Chris Brodrick ([cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz) or ph. (03)3430353).

In the meantime we all send our very best wishes to John and Iris and our hope for a full recovery.



### The Seattle Ring 2009

After an intense amount of interest 26 people are confirmed to travel to Seattle next August as part of the Wagner Society of New Zealand's organised trip to see Seattle Opera's *Ring Cycle*. This includes one person from The Richard Wagner Society of Western Australia, travelling from Perth.

Those attending can look forward to seeing Stephen Wadsworth's acclaimed production of *The Ring* being presented in 2009 for the third time. Wadsworth and his design team take the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest as inspiration for their production, offering scene after scene of spectacular beauty. In addition, as a centre of Wagner excellence, Seattle always excels in its casting and those attending can expect a musically exciting experience as well as the magnificence of the production.

With final single tickets going on sale this month, it is likely that this will be a sell out event. Unfortunately, that means that we will be unable to accept any further bookings. However, for those lucky people who are confirmed, there is much to look forward to!

### A Very Happy Christmas

On behalf of the WSNZ committee I'd like to wish all of you a very Happy Christmas. We look forward to meeting up in 2009 with another year of thought provoking events.

**Chris Brodrick - President**