

BAYREUTH – MELBOURNE – SYDNEY

At the August meeting of the Richard Wagner Verband International (RWVI) the Wagner Society of New Zealand's application to rejoin was accepted and we are now back in the family of worldwide International Wagner Societies. The concerns that we expressed, when we let our membership lapse, have now been addressed. We now have a direct link to the governing committee of the RWVI and feel a sense of inclusion.

Almost immediately, we received notice of our ticket allocation for the 2017 Bayreuth Festival. Unlike the past, the allocation was based on the number of WSNZ members and saw us receive a significant increase in the number of tickets. Another positive move was receiving the allocation in September rather than just before Christmas and this was immediately reflected in the strong uptake of tickets.

The good news is that the WSNZ will now have ten members attending the Festival towards the end of August 2017. Over the next two issues of the newsletter we are running John Davidson's account of his visit to this year's festival and, judging by his thoughts, the lucky members with tickets for 2017 have a tremendous week to look forward to.

With more tickets being allocated and high demand it is time for those wishing to attend the Bayreuth festival in the future to register their interest with our secretary Peter Rowe. The Bayreuth list records, in priority order, the names of those members who will get first option to accept or decline the ticket offer before tickets are opened up to the general membership, on a first come first serve basis. Being on the Bayreuth list doesn't require you to take up a ticket offer and your priority rank will not alter if you do decline. Those on the list who take up an offer can re-register if they wish but will be placed, in priority, behind members who haven't yet been.

Please register or reconfirm your interest by emailing the WSNZ secretary: Peter.Rowe@minterellison.co.nz

While some members will be thinking ahead to August 2017, many of you will be looking to the end of this month and the Melbourne *Ring*.

For those going we have some updates:

- James Johnson has replaced Greer Grimsley as Wotan after he withdrew due to a serious health issue. Speaking to *Limelight*, OA Artistic Director Lyndon Terracini is quoted as saying "James is great. He's a bit like Terje Stensvold [who played Wotan for OA in 2013]. In fact, I flew to Los Angeles for the day just to make sure he was in really good shape and he was terrific, he's the right age, he's a big guy, a very good actor and a fantastic singer."

- Christopher Lincoln has replaced Andreas Conrad in the role of Loge.

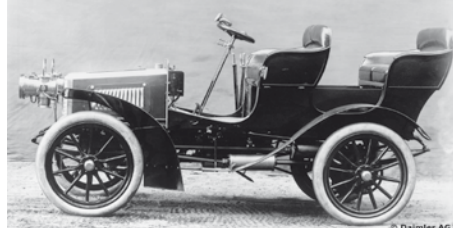
- Pre-opera Presentations: *Exploring the Ring Cycle with Heath Lees* at the Melbourne Recital Centre presented by The Richard Wagner Society Inc. On-line bookings at: <http://www.melbournerecital.com.au/events/series/exploring-the-ring-cycle-talks/>

Lastly for those who can't be in Europe in August 2017 how about Sydney? Parsifal? Kaufmann?

Renaissance Tours are offering you the opportunity to treat yourself to a star-studded weekend of opera and music at the Sydney Opera House with two great masterpieces by Giuseppe Verdi (*Requiem*) and Richard Wagner (*Parsifal*)

Full information:
<http://renaissancetours.com.au/tours/short-breaks/verdis-requiem-and-wagners-parsifal/>

HAPPY CHRISTMAS



Here is a Christmas present for the most discerning WSNZ members – a 1902-05 Mercedes Benz *Parsifal*.

Happy Christmas and a wonderful Wagner-filled 2017

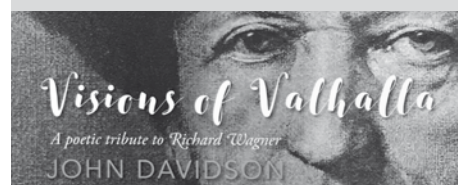


JOHAN BOTHA
1965–2016

In September *Opera News* reported that "South African tenor Johan Botha, who began his career as chorister at the Bayreuth Festival before taking on some of the repertoire's most taxing roles on the world's biggest stages, has died. Botha, who was 51, had reportedly been suffering from cancer."

Botha was born in Rustenburg, South Africa, and began studying as a bass-baritone but, with a heldentenor quality to his voice, he debuted in 1989 as a tenor as Max in *Der Freischütz*. His Wagnerian roles began with Lohengrin followed by *Meistersinger's* Walther, Parsifal and Siegmund.

The obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* ends: "Botha was a deeply religious man who sought out a church wherever he was singing. He once listed the major milestones in his career as being Bayreuth, the Bastille, the Met and Covent Garden, but added: "The biggest milestone for me is to make people happy and smile.""



Wellington member, John Davidson has recently published a collection of poems under the title *Visions of Valhalla*. The works reflect John's study of Wagner over the years and recount some of his experiences of Wagnerian performances.

For those who would like to obtain a copy of this very smart looking book (\$25) please email: John.Davidson@vuw.ac.nz with your contact details.

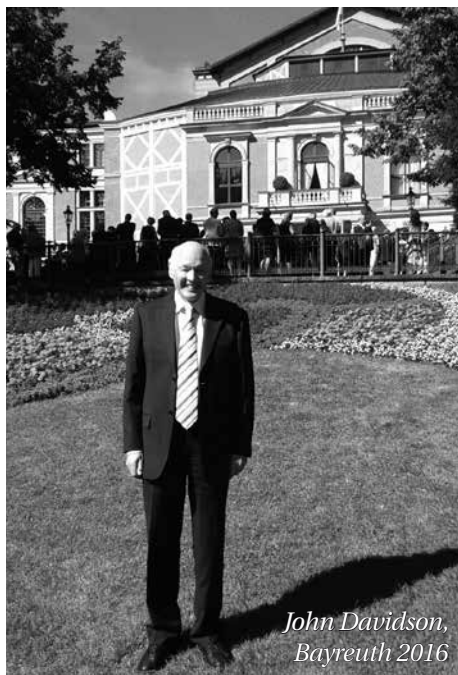
“IF THIS IS TUESDAY IT MUST BE *Siegfried*”

In the first of two articles, John Davidson reviews the 2016 Bayreuth Festival.

This title for my report was suggested by Michael Ashdown, with whom I attended the 2016 Festspiele in Bayreuth, the reason being the whistle stop nature of the programme. A rest day came after the initial *Holländer* performance, but then the other six operas followed on consecutive days, with *Tristan* slotted in between *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, and the new *Parsifal* between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. A real test of stamina, especially as the temperature soared into the 30s for the last three days. But it was worth every Euro cent! Indeed, the singing and orchestral accompaniment throughout the seven performance days was of a standard not matched by that of any of my previous experiences at Bayreuth.

As a preface to my review of the new *Parsifal*, here are some thoughts about the other operas. I found Jan Philipp Gloger's *Holländer* production generally undistinguished, despite some nice details, with a tendency to introduce unnecessarily exaggerated comic touches. But the music was another matter. Axel Kober offered a finely balanced account of the score, and the cast responded accordingly. The Festspiele chorus, as usual, was outstanding here, as also later in *Parsifal* and *Götterdämmerung*. Peter Rose was a firmly voiced Daland. Thomas J. Mayer was a splendid *Holländer*, and his voice perfectly matched that of his Senta, Ricarda Merbeth. The outstanding singing per se came from Andreas Schager as Erik. There was a problem, however. Schager is a superb *Siegfried*, but the role of Erik doesn't really suit him, and Merbeth could not match the power and intensity of his voice. Overall, however, an excellent beginning.

Frank Castorf's controversial *Ring* was interesting (to say the least!) and I'm glad to have seen it, even if it riled me at times. Perhaps most problematic was the seedy *Rheingold*, set at a motel and petrol station on Route 66, complete with Rhine Sluts (oops, Maidens!). The setting for *Die Walküre*, an oil well in the post-WW1 Soviet Union, worked much better, especially in Act 1. *Siegfried*, with the two main backdrops of the revolving stage featuring Mount Rushmore (communist hero heads replacing the American ones) and Alexanderplatz in Berlin, was clever in itself, and more effective than the ever-shifting variety of backdrops in *Götterdämmerung* (given that one of these was a doner kebab booth, one German critic has even renamed the opera *Dönerdämmerung!*). The nasty and



brutal actions were well done, *Siegfried*, for example, using a Kalashnikov to good effect on Fafner. The main problem for me, apart from oil barrels of gratuitous sleaze, was the constant use of obtrusive video projections, and busy onstage and video-projected extras. This often resulted in a jarring disjunction between the ravishing music and what the eyes were compelled to watch. Precious moments, such as the Wälsung twins' love music, Wotan's farewell, and the lovers' ecstasy in Act 3 of *Siegfried* were compromised by the belittling and deconstructing 'off the ball' carry-on. The crocodiles that swarmed into Alexanderplatz at the end of *Siegfried* to join the lovers provoked most audience annoyance, the opera ending with *Siegfried* dragging the inquisitive Wood Bird by the hem of her dress out of the mouth of one of these creatures. I heard at least 10 theories as to why the crocodiles were there, but none of them convinced me that they were necessary! Castorf seemed to be giving the audience the finger throughout, while making what appeared to be banal points about greed, oil production, and conflicting communist and capitalist values.

The music, however, was simply superb, in conflict though it constantly was with directorial idiocy. Conductor Marek Janowski offered us waves of both thrilling and poignant moments. In a situation where I could eulogize all the singers, I must be selective. Scot Iain Paterson was in fine voice as Wotan in *Rheingold* (and later as Kurwenal in *Tristan*) while Sarah Connolly sang commandingly in her two outings as Fricka. Swede John Lundgren made a powerful impression as Wotan in *Die Walküre* and then as Wanderer. The

veteran Albert Dohmen was on top form as Alberich. Austrian Günther Groissböck was superb as Fasolt, and his compatriot Karl-Heinz Lehner really came into his own as Fafner in *Siegfried* (before being gunned down after a shopping spree for his floozies at the Intershop for foreigners in communist East Berlin!). Christopher Ventriss and Heidi Melton sang rapturously as Siegmund and Sieglinde, while the German bass Georg Zeppenfeld was one of the standout performers of the whole week, here as Hunding (later as King Marke and lastly a phenomenal Gurnemanz).

As Brünnhilde, Catherine Foster rose to the occasion in *Siegfried* where Stefan Vinke's brilliant performance alongside her made for some of the best singing of all. Both, however, seemed to take a little time to warm up in *Götterdämmerung*, and Foster was from time to time here slightly under her top notes and showed hints of a Gwyneth Jones wobble, though that didn't feature in moments that really mattered, such as in her denunciation of *Siegfried* and in a most moving immolation sequence. In both cases she was dressed in a stunning gown of glittering gold, which heightened the impact. Stephen Milling was outstanding both histrionically and vocally as Hagen. Finally, the often unrewarding roles of Gunther and Gutrune were especially well taken by Markus Eiche (earlier Donner) and Allison Oakes respectively. (Some readers will see how appropriate this matching was!) Their task was made easier, though, I have to say, since both were given spades of character, Eiche as a total grease ball and Oakes as an energetic trollop.

WAGNER MURMURS

- Anna Netrebko, having just sung Elsa in *Lohengrin* in Dresden, says that she will not sing the role at Bayreuth.
- Opera Australia's co-production of *Lohengrin* with La Monnaie, Brussels is rumoured to be performed in Melbourne in 2018.
- Jonas Kaufmann will sing the title role in *Parsifal* in concert performances in Sydney in August 2017.
- The West Australian Symphony Orchestra will perform *Tristan und Isolde* in 2018 with Stuart Skelton and Eva-Maria Westbroek in the title roles.
- Katharina Wagner says that she will not direct the next new *Ring* at Bayreuth.
- San Francisco Opera will revive their Francesca Zambello production of the *Ring* in June 2018.

- Michael Sinclair



WSNZ 2016 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday 11 December at 7.30pm

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

Christmas Function: Featuring a Pot-pourri of Wagneriana plus our famous cake and wine

Wellington

Sunday 20 November at 6.00pm

Venue: Tibby & Adrian Simcock's

2 Rankin Street, Wadestown

Christmas Function: For catering purposes, please ring Tibby (472 7029) to let her know you'll be coming.

There will be a charge of \$10 per head.

Christchurch

Sunday, 4 December at 6.00pm

PLEASE NOTE DATE CHANGE

Venue: Jenny Lee's 6 Scarlet Lane, Redwood

Christmas Social Function

Enquiries, phone Gloria at 332 3242.

Dunedin

Sunday, 27 November at 12.00pm

Venue: Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row (Turn right off Pitt Street)

Wagner: The Dresden Years

Wagner's early *Faust Overture*, and the overtures to *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* plus Jonas Kaufmann sings from *Rienzi*, *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, with the Staatskapelle Dresden under Christian Thielemann.

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Roger Cruickshank Waverley

Irene Buxton Wellington



(L to R) Jeni Bern as Woglinde, Madeleine Shaw as Wellgunde and Sarah Castle as Flosshilde

The biggest cheers at the end were reserved for Richard Farnes and the orchestra.

So, going back to my question at the beginning, does less mean more and did this performance fulfil Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* criteria? Most likely not, but for me, less definitely meant more.

It had been a marvellous journey. It was my 9th *Ring* and it turned out to be the most wholly satisfying on all counts for me.

Christchurch branch Chairperson, Gloria Streat reports her visit to Yorkshire.

The setting is the 1850's era Leeds Town Hall, grand in its day but fading now, with seats in the stalls stretching back and on the flat, not raked, into the huge rectangular space. Outside passages were just that, a few seats along the edges but no open areas for wandering and mingling between acts, the whole painted in regulation cream, but the music was what we came for.

This was a concert performance of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* or, as Richard Farnes the Music Director and conductor of Opera North said, 'an opera on a concert stage but with visual elements'.

Does this imply half measures? And is this what Wagner really envisaged with his *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to his operas back all those years ago?

Five years ago Opera North embarked on this *Ring* journey, performing all four parts of the *Ring Cycle* in successive years between 2011 and 2014 and now, this year, bringing it all together, performing it twice in their home town Leeds and taking it to Nottingham, Salford, Gateshead and to the South Bank in London.

I attended the second Leeds Cycle over six days in May and what a treat it was.

Did I feel let down by a concert performance rather than a staged production? Not at all, in fact I was extremely moved by the simplicity and power of this performance. For me the absence of a staged performance, with its probable director's liberties, enhanced the whole experience. It meant for me, and other listeners I spoke to, an absolute, wholehearted experience of the 'giving' of oneself to the music.

In this performance the large orchestra was the 'main character'. It took up most of the stage. With microphones suspended overhead, the music stands illuminated, and the whole

suffused in discreet metallic blue, it was visually highlighted and a dramatic, expectant atmosphere was created when the hall lights were dimmed.

The singers came on and off as required and performed, facing the audience, from the metre or so space between the orchestra and the edge of the stage. It was refreshingly direct.

Any acting was minimal at best, and costumes were simple with just enough variation to delineate the characters. The only props as such, were three large screens, suspended behind the orchestra and in front of the pipes of the big organ, which depicted elemental images (misty peaks, flowing water, flames etc), and the sung text, interspersed with descriptions of the development of the story between scenes.

Although this *Ring Cycle* didn't feature any of the 'big' name singers, the singing was of a uniformly high standard. The only singer who was familiar to me was the Kiwi mezzo Sarah Castle, who sang the parts of Flosshilde and Siegrune. Her singing and acting, within the confines of the edge of the stage, were first rate. (Sarah sang the role of Cinderella in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* to critical acclaim, for NZ Opera in 2015).

Other singers who shone (for me) were the German born Jo Pohlheim as Alberich; Lee Bisset, a Scottish singer who looked and sounded ravishing as Sieglinde and the Third Norn, and Michael Weinius, a Swedish singer as her impassioned Siegmund; an Austrian Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacker as a flexible-voiced Loge, flickering his fingers like flames; Matts Almgren, another Swedish singer with his marvellously cavernous bass as Fafner and Hagen; American singer Kelly Cae Hogan as a very believable Brünnhilde; an Estonian Mati Turi, and Lars Cleveman from Sweden as the two Siegfrieds; and Michael Druett (English) and Bela Perencz (Hungarian) as the two Wotans.

THE RING, THE RHINE, AND THE REALITY

Heath Lees Takes a Pre-Melbourne Look at Wagner's Own Setting

Over the last hundred years, productions of Wagner's *Ring* have been dug out of the German hills, forests and rivers that Wagner had in mind, and transplanted into any old milieu that might raise an eyebrow or two. Always aware of image and local tourism, the region that puts up the courage and dollars required for the mega-spend of a *Ring* feels gratified — even justified — if it sees itself reflected in the setting that it eventually appears on stage.

As early as the 1940s, the New York Met Opera was ridiculed for suggesting a Manhattan backdrop for its *Ring*, which the critics called “the *Hudson Valley Ring*”. More recently, the *Seattle Ring* straggled its way through the forest tracks of the Pacific Northwest, while Francesca Zambello's 2011 *San Francisco Ring* took the Californian Gold Rush as its cue. On a more folksy level, Elke Neidhardt's *Adelaide Ring* put an Aussie barbie at the entrance to Mime's cave — not meaty but matey. Even futuristic and extra-terrestrial settings have been used, with Valencia's *Ring* taking the flashy, computerised backgrounds of video games as a major inspiration.

All of this is a far cry from Wagner's German grounds and alpine atmospheres. At first sight you might say that we have been doing Wagner a good turn by liberating him from his time-bound vision of horns, helmets, and animal skins in favour of more resonant symbolism, contemporary messages, universal interpretations . . . and so on.

But recently I found myself wondering just how much we lose by erasing Wagner's specific locality — the Rhine valley with its Lorelei legends, its medieval fortresses, its soaring cliffs and forested hillsides. My wonder increased as I read more and more deeply into a book that was written ten years ago

by David Blackburn and entitled *The Conquest of Nature**. It's an enthralling history of the so-called 'mastery' of Germany's rivers, marshes and plains. As you would expect, most of the story concerns the iconic, thousand-kilometre Rhine, which for Germany was not just a waterway but a symbol of national identity.

For Wagner fans, the book breathes new life into Wagner's world at the time. The fact is that, throughout the nineteenth century, the Rhine was the subject of an enormous project in hydraulic engineering. Its marshes were drained, its surrounding land reclaimed, and its serpentine curves were straightened. By the year of Wagner's birth, 1813, the project had begun in earnest, and it lasted throughout the composer's lifetime.

In *Götterdämmerung*, as he admires the distant Siegfried plying the course of his skiff on his famous Rhine Journey, Hagen sings of the “powerful stroke yet leisurely ease” with which he “propels the boat, braving the stream.” Wagner wrote the music in the early 1870s which is exactly the time when this vast engineering project was coming to its end. By the mid-1870s, most of the Rhine had been rectified and the water was flowing freer and faster. Siegfried's “leisurely ease” was indeed possible.

More interesting still is the news that there really was gold in the Rhine. Lots of it. The Celts in the 3rd century BC spent much time panning and sifting the gravelly water for gold and later, the Romans transported so much Rhinegold back to Italy that they devalued the price. The lust for gold became strongest in Wagner's youthful years, because decades of river-straightening had churned up many previously unknown deposits, and there were hundreds of

stories of cheating, stealing, even full-scale fights over disputed claims. Wagner didn't have to make up his tale about the lust for Rheingold, he simply had to listen to what was happening around him.

In the end, Fate took over. With a faster-flowing river, the gold deposits no longer built up. Hundreds of 'gold-washers' living on the banks of the Rhine began to lose their livelihood and, by the moment of the first performance of Wagner's *Rheingold* in Munich, in 1869, the gold finally disappeared. Blackburn also documents the destruction of other communities and local economies from the Rhine wetlands, and he looks forward to an age of enormous dams that brought plentiful hydro-electric power for humanity's use, but also led to 'drowned valleys' and similar ecological disasters.

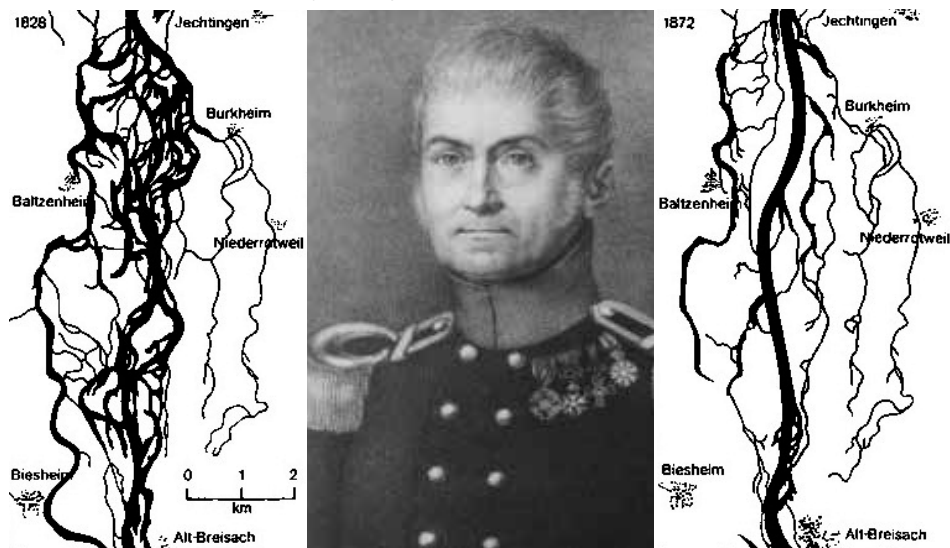
Many of us are going (back) to the *Melbourne Ring* as this newsletter appears. We will be facing this perplexing subject over and over again, since Neil Armfield's direction has its beginning and end in the vexing problem of what he describes as humanity's rape of Nature. For him, the bottom line is that “The species are disappearing. The biosphere is in collapse.” His *Ring* stage-settings repeatedly shout out this message.

For Wagner, the 'taming' of the Rhine had provided the actual example of humanity's rape of Nature going on during his daily life and often before his very eyes. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, he gives it the mightiest final word of all — an overflowing apocalypse and a redemptive flood, with only a faint hope of renewal.

We may ignore the Rhine in our present-day productions, but we are by-passing what for Wagner was a real river, a sorry example of real, ongoing exploitation and, in the end, a frightening symbol of real catastrophe. No amount of touristy settings and video images can make up for the harsh consequences that Wagner foresaw, and bound up into the central message of his work.

Neil Armfield's Melbourne production doesn't ignore the actuality of the river; on the contrary, it tells us that we need to re-learn Wagner's lesson of the Rhine, before it's too late.

**The Conquest of Nature – Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany*. David Blackburn (pub. Jonathan Cape, 2006)



Captions; a stretch of the Rhine 1828 (left) and 1872 (right); Johann Gottfried Tulla, (1770 - 1828), the first engineer who 'tamed the wild Rhine' (centre)