

Certainties and Uncertainties, 'Old Songs, New Songs'

A common saying (either a blessing or a curse, depending on how you look at it) is 'may you live in interesting times', and it would be fair to say that the uncertain age in which we live certainly meets the relevant criteria for 'interesting'. When it comes to Wagner, things have also been getting more interesting again of late, both in New Zealand and abroad, as life continues to get back to some kind of tentative normality. Meetings have been held successfully in all the main centres in recent months, while members are increasingly looking forward to attending Wagner performances abroad again, with three *Ring* cycles gearing up next year across the Tasman alone – in Brisbane (after having been delayed for more than two years), Bendigo and now also in Sydney (see 'Wagner Murmurs' on p. 2).

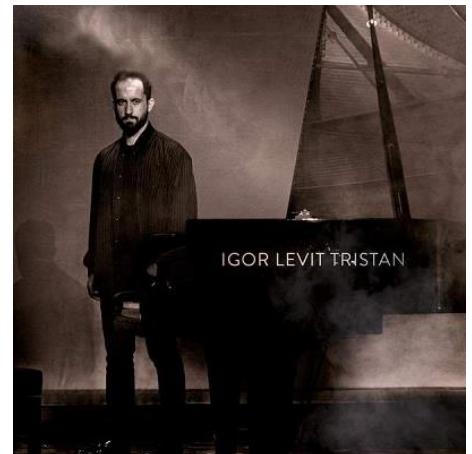
Time has nevertheless been marching on, and some people's priorities have changed. Peter Bassett, for example, who has been so well known to Wagnerians in both Australia and New Zealand over the last few decades, reports that he is feeling the need to scale back his activities now, and so it is fairly certain that, in future, he will no longer be leading tours in the way that he used to, although he will still be hosting the Brisbane *Ring* events next year, with a focus on symposia and talks. These days, he is concentrating more than ever on writing – his Wagner-themed publications are well known and highly respected worldwide – and, as part of this new focus, he also offered to contribute an initial article for publication in our newsletter. Accordingly, it is with great pleasure that we have included Peter's article, 'Wagner's Heroes and the Triumph of Humanity', on the back page of this issue, and we are most grateful to Peter for his generosity in sending us an essay of this calibre. Those members who are already familiar with his writings will surely be delighted with the result.

On a different note, as it were, we also learn that the legendary Decca/Solti studio *Ring* (recorded 1958–65) is due for an imminent re-release in what will evidently be significantly further improved sonics. These recordings have had a somewhat curious history since they were first issued on CD in 1984, in an early digital transfer (48 kHz/16 bit) made from the original analogue tapes. A completely new transfer from these original tapes (at 48 kHz/24 bit – basically, the higher the numbers, the better the audio resolution) was then prepared in 1997 by James Lock, former assistant to the original producer, John Culshaw, for which Lock employed the new CEDAR (Computer Enhanced Digital Audio Restoration system) de-hissing technology. This was the basis for the complete CD set issued in 1997, which also featured the attractive cover art from the original 1950s/60s vinyl issues.

Aside from a one-off, very limited-release Japanese remastering by TEAC's Esoteric company in 2009, the recordings were then issued once again in 2012, in time for Wagner's bicentenary (and later re-released as a budget-priced set in 2015), although, after some confusion, it transpired that these were reprocessed versions of the 1997 48-kHz/24-bit remastering, and not brand-new, state-of-the-art 96-kHz/24-bit remasters, as some people had initially thought. At the time, Decca claimed that the original analogue tapes had deteriorated too much in the interim to be digitally remastered again at a higher resolution; but now, a brand-new remastering of the original tapes has indeed been carried out, for the 'next generation' of listeners, and at an even higher resolution of 192 kHz/24 bit. For this, the tapes were suitably pre-treated (e.g., baked in an oven at 55°C for ten hours!) so that they could still be utilised. These new transfers will be available in 180-g vinyl, hybrid SACD, HD and SD

formats, and also spatial audio. For more details, see <https://www.soltiring.com>; it is expected that the individual instalments will be released between now and May next year.

Finally, from a completely different angle again comes pianist Igor Levit's new, highly ambitious, conceptual 2-CD set, *Tristan*, featuring a piano transcription of the *Prelude* to Wagner's opera along with four related pieces, namely Liszt's famous *Liebesträume No. 3* and his *Harmonies du soir*, Hans Werner Henze's own homage to *Tristan* – a 1973 hybrid work of the same name for 'piano, electronic tapes and orchestra' – and, finally, the complete *Adagio* from Mahler's *Tenth Symphony* in a piano transcription by the late Scottish composer, Ronald Stevenson.



From the product description: 'Only in *Harmonies du soir*, the eleventh of Liszt's twelve *Études d'exécution transcendante*, is there any sense of reconciliation, a peaceful counterweight to the ecstasies and nightmares experienced by those Wagnerian and Mahlerian figures who in Wagner's own words are "devoted to the night".' All very intriguing for Wagnerians, and the reviews have been great. See also www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNwjiffTrZzphirceSqySIAbFCBkw0-yO for a range of promotional video materials from Levit.

WSNZ – 2022 Programme October to December

NB: All events may still be subject to change at short notice, depending on the (otherwise much improved!) prevailing Covid-19 situation

Auckland

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

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

A full screening of *Rienzi* (Toulouse, 2013), featuring Torsten Kerl. (Please note that the planned catered dinner has had to be cancelled, but there will be tea and biscuits at the interval. The screening will now conclude at 6:30 p.m.)

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, 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?*

Sunday, 6 November at 11:00 a.m. – postponed from last year

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

(NB: Opera Society regular programme event, included here for information) A screening of the controversial 2013 production of *Der fliegende Holländer* from Zurich Opera, with Bryn Terfel as the Dutchman.

November/December

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

Christchurch

Venue: St Mary's pro-Cathedral music room

Friday, 28 October at 7:30 p.m.

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, 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, 13 November at 1:30 p.m. – postponed from July

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College Viewing Room, Castle St

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, 27 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: Carrington College Dining Room and Linten Lounge, Heriot Row

Our traditional end-of-year Christmas Luncheon – includes our customary Wagnerian Christmas Concert, arranged by **Terence Dennis**.

Wagner Murmurs

– additional news from Michael Sinclair:

- Daniele Gatti and Semyon Bychkov are both returning to conduct at Bayreuth. Gatti will conduct a new production of *Die Meistersinger* in 2025, while Bychkov will conduct a new production of *Tristan und Isolde* in 2024.
- Jay Scheib's new production of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth in 2023 will use augmented reality to create a new perspective on the work, with audience members offered special glasses to experience the production.
- Simone Young will conduct the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in concert performances of *Das Rheingold* in November 2023, part one of a multi-year project to perform the full *Ring* cycle.

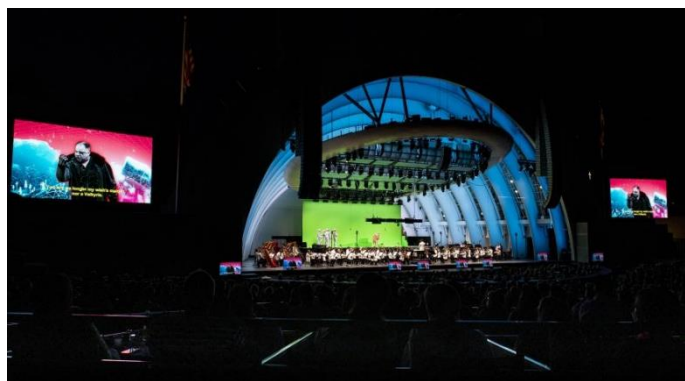
New Members

We are delighted to extend a warm Wagnerian welcome to:

Andrea Gray & Richard Braae.....Wellington

Wagner – Live at the Hollywood Bowl!

The full third act of *Die Walküre* has demonstrated its unusually high potential for open-air performances for a broader public, and so, on 17 July, it was given at the famous Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. The wild (!) concept was the brainchild of Yuval Sharon (who directed the 2018 *Lohengrin* at Bayreuth), in a co-production with his Detroit Opera and the L.A. Philharmonic, featuring star conductor Gustavo Dudamel and notable singers such as Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde, Amber Wagner as Sieglinde (admittedly only very briefly in Act 3) and Matthias Goerne as Wotan. The orchestra and singers were all onstage, the latter filmed against a 'green screen' background, with 'video game' backdrops inserted digitally and projected onto screens flanking the stage. The result was very Hollywood, and



(Photo credit: L.A. Philharmonic/Timothy Norris)

even included a beautifully poised spoken video introduction from the veteran screen actress, Sigourney Weaver, legendary for her work in the *Alien* and *Avatar* film franchises. Meanwhile, like the digital backdrops, the camp costumes, too, were all very *Flash Gordon*, but the musical performance values appear to have been high – amusing amateur video footage here (NB: the brief performance excerpts kick in only after nearly 3 min. – patience!!): www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A_lqVN4CXA

The 2022 Bayreuth Festival – A Brief Roundup

Another Bayreuth Festival has come to an end, held once again in the shadow of Covid and subject to some disruptions as a result, with the main new production subject to the greatest disruption and controversy, despite some clever stagecraft and ideas.

After the difficult 2021 Festival, which had involved strict health protection measures, including the audience in the auditorium limited to only 900 persons, this year the Festival was back with a vengeance. In addition to two concerts conducted by Andris Nelsons, several productions returned from previous years, including *Lohengrin* (from 2018, five performances), *Tannhäuser* (from 2019, five performances) and *Der fliegende Holländer* (from 2021, four performances). These were joined by not just one but two new productions: *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Roland Schwab, and the *Ring*, directed by the young Austrian, Valentin Schwarz. The *Ring* was beset by late cast changes, one of them affecting the *Holländer* production as well: the Swedish baritone, John Lundgren, ultimately pulled out of both productions, to be replaced in the *Holländer* by Thomas J. Mayer, in the titular role, and in the *Ring* by Egils Silins as Wotan in *Das Rheingold* and Thomasz Konieczny as Wotan/Wanderer in *Walküre/Siegfried*, with Konieczny also replaced by Michael Kupfer-Radecky at one point. (On another night, Clay Hilley then substituted for Stephen Gould as Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung*.) Meanwhile, former NZSO Music Director, Pietari Inkinen, was to have finally conducted the new *Ring*, after waiting out two long pandemic years, but then fell seriously ill with Covid himself, just weeks before the premiere, whereupon he too withdrew and announced he would be taking the entire summer to recover. He will hopefully be able to finally conduct the *Ring* next year. Accordingly, Cornelius Meister, who was to have conducted the new *Tristan*, took Inkinen's place, while Markus Poschner was engaged to conduct the *Tristan*, leaving Meister free to concentrate fully on the *Ring*.

The new *Tristan* had been added to the schedule at short notice, as a backup in the event of Covid outbreaks affecting the other productions, and was generally well received. Roland Schwab's aesthetically sensitive production eschewed any major revisionist *Regietheater* traits; instead, audiences were treated to a clean, modern production which was both faithful to the music and libretto, and also readily comprehensible. (Schwab, meanwhile, has described *Tristan* as 'the highest form of psychedelic art'.) One notable feature of the staging was a central oval

section, open at the ceiling and with a central oval on the floor. Weather changes, etc., were visible through the ceiling oval, while metaphorical images were projected onto the floor, depending on the dramatic action and emotions involved in the scene. Only Tristan and Isolde themselves were able to



The set for Act 2 of *Tristan* (photo: Bayreuther Festspiele/Enrico Nawrath)

remain in the central oval for any length of time – this puts one in mind of the celebrated 1990s Heiner Müller *Tristan* at Bayreuth, in which the characters' movements were similarly limited to certain areas of the stage.

The vocally powerful principals were the physically rather large Stephen Gould as Tristan (as in Katharina Wagner's 2015–19 production), and Catherine Foster as Isolde, who had earlier impressed as Brünnhilde in the Frank Castorf *Ring* (2013–17), although in *Tristan* she had a marked, but stable, vibrato, along with a few slight pitch issues. They were supported by Georg Zeppenfeld as Marke, again as in Katharina's production, Ekaterina Gubanova, excellent as Brangäne, and Bayreuth veteran Markus Eiche as Kurwenal. Poschner's passionate, propulsive conducting was especially praised, and all those involved were applauded at the end – really something of a rarity at Bayreuth these days. Click on www.youtube.com/watch?v=epZU-ui42gl for an audio-only link of a full performance.

Meanwhile, Valentin Schwarz's staging of the *Ring* drew a very mixed reception, with very loud booing at the curtain calls. Unlike Schwab's *Tristan*, Schwarz's *Konzept* was full-bore *Regietheater* interventionism; he had partly conceived the tetralogy as a kind of Lynchian Netflix series, depicting the intricate intrigues of a modern, extended family clan. In it, a video screened during the *Rheingold* Prelude indicates that Wotan and Alberich are diametrically opposed biological twins (not unlike Wagner's own *metaphorical* idea), whose rivalry fires the drama, but there is no gold as such. Instead, Alberich abducts a boy (as the ring/'treasure') from the Rhinemaiden child carers beside the family swimming pool, setting the drama in motion, while Nibelheim is a childcare centre in which he traumatises

eight young girls who may also be growing up to become the Valkyrie sisters. Wotan is a major entrepreneur who trades in his sister-in-law (Freia) as payment for Valhalla, Loge is the family lawyer, the 'giants' construction magnates, etc. However, Wotan has no spear, and there are guns (including Nothing) instead of swords. Later on, in *Siegfried*, the Woodbird is depicted as human (as is quite common these days), and even Grane, Brünnhilde's horse, is human too – as her retainer. As is often the case with *Regietheater*, for many observers there was too much of a disconnect between the music/words and stage action, with too many introduced dramaturgical inconsistencies and twists. In *Die Walküre*, for example, Sieglinde is already pregnant before Siegmund arrives, but it is not clear to whom; an actual physical ring is finally introduced only in *Siegfried*, in the form of a jewel-encrusted knuckleduster; and, not least, the action involves no fantasy or mystical elements at all prior to the Norns in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, who appear as bizarre sprites (as if in a dream?), one emerging creepily from the bedclothes of a young blonde girl (who is the 'ring' again!).



Götterdämmerung, Prologue: the Norns (Photo: Bayreuther Festspiele/Enrico Nawrath)

The conscious realism of the earlier operas is then dispensed with further in Act 2, which is set on a smoke-filled, white-walled bare stage, with a cloaked, masked chorus. In the decidedly dismal Act 3 finale, after the poor (abducted) ring-girl finally drops dead in front of the Rhinemaidens, Brünnhilde cavorts with Grane's (human) head, à la *Salome*, with her Siegfried lying dead beside her at the bottom of a drained swimming pool! *Götterdämmerung* can be viewed here, absolutely complete (German subtitles only): www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3wng50kNEw

Cornelius Meister was generally praised for his strong if sometimes wilful and uneven conducting; some of the more notable soloists included Lise Davidsen as Sieglinde, Georg Zeppenfeld as Hunding, Okka von der Damerau as Erda, Andreas Schager (and also Clay Hilley) as Siegfried, and, unusually, Albert Dohmen as both Wotan and Hagen.

‘Wagner’s Heroes and the Triumph of Humanity’ – by Peter Bassett

Modern opinion tends to be cynical of legendary heroes, at least when they are depicted in ways that border on caricature or carry objectionable connotations. Too often, such images have been associated with assertive nationalistic, racial or gender stereotypes. They are to be found in most cultures on nearly all continents. The superheroes of twentieth-century comic books and films are contemporary re-imaginings of such figures, based not on legend, but popular (largely juvenile) taste. Yet, they too appeal to a sense of national identity by claiming certain qualities and values for a particular society. In short, the whole notion of the hero is problematic, as stage directors have found when preparing post-World War II productions of Richard Wagner’s *Siegfried*. The solution adopted by many interpreters has been to turn the character into an ‘anti-hero’, which is not difficult given that Siegfried is a naïve boy (and, later, naïve man), raised in ignorance of other human beings. He has no interest in the cursed ring other than as a love token, and he is deceived, drugged, betrayed, and eventually murdered. His most heroic act is to kill the dragon, but since he has no sense of fear when confronting the beast, can even this be regarded as heroic?

Wagner’s concept of heroes derived from two sources – ancient Greek myths, and the sagas and poetry of northern Europe. In the old myths, gods and heroes shared attributes which set them apart from non-heroic mortals. A miraculous birth was one such attribute. In Greek mythology, a child born to the god Zeus and the mortal Semele was saved at the moment of his mother’s death and sewn inside Zeus’s thigh, to be ‘twice born’ as Dionysus. The Scandinavian hero Volsung, great-grandson of the god Odin, was carried in his mother’s womb for six years before her death in childbirth. In the narrative of Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the birth of the hero Siegfried, Wotan’s grandson, is also accompanied by the death of his mother Sieglinde. These and similarly linked stories of gods and heroes served to reinforce the centuries-held view that heroes were, essentially, superhuman.

However, in the *Ring*, by the time Siegfried reaches manhood, he is no longer all-powerful and godlike. The mature Siegfried represents the triumph of humanity over the gods. For ‘hero’, we must now read ‘human’. This major shift in the way a hero was to be regarded reflected Wagner’s attachment to the ideas of the contemporary philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who maintained that the gods were the creations of men, not the other way around. “Man is god perfected”, wrote Wagner in 1849 while working on an unfinished opera, *Achilles*. That is why we witness Wotan (Wanderer)

giving way to Siegfried in the drama *Siegfried*, and why, in *Götterdämmerung*, the gods have no role to play at all, being merely figments of memory and imagination. Their authoritarian place has been taken by human beings exercising free will and passionate love. Wagner was convinced that the German myths were in advance of the Greek because, in them, heroes (whom he described as “fully developed human beings”) were increasingly displacing the gods. If gods counted for nothing, then neither did the god-like attributes of heroes. In a new humanistic world, the quality that would render figures ‘heroic’ was their humanity. Siegfried is a fearless human being, not because he doesn’t fear dragons, but because he doesn’t fear the gods. His behaviour towards the Wanderer in Act Three of *Siegfried* illustrates this precisely. For this man of the future, the god Wotan simply does not exist.



Star tenor Jean de Reszke as Siegfried (c. 1896)
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

In *Die Walküre*, the first step towards the humanisation of heroes is taken by Siegmund, son of Wotan and (according to the old view of things) an instrument of the god’s will. Fleeing from his enemies, Siegmund is reunited with his long-lost twin, Sieglinde, and, with the coming of spring and love, the seed of a new order is sown. Siegmund’s refusal to accept immortality in Valhalla and separation from Sieglinde inspires the Valkyrie Brünnhilde to defy Wotan. Consequently, it is Brünnhilde who initiates the events leading to the downfall of the gods and the rise of a new order based on humanity and love.

In a letter to August Röckel of 1854, Wagner described Siegfried as “a fearless human being, one who never ceases to love”. This was not how heroes were supposed to

be seen, and the description is a long way from the manipulated image of Siegfried as a symbol of national and racial superiority. Nevertheless, Wagner’s Siegfried is a personification of the reforming power of love. The hero himself gives us a clue as to his type of heroism when he admits that, having just been taught fear, he’s foolishly forgotten it again. Brünnhilde calls him a childlike hero and a foolish guardian of glorious deeds! “I have to laugh because I love you”, she says. They are truly as one, because she sees him as he sees himself. The challenge for any stage director is to represent both the hero as others perceive him, and the naïve boy – the Parsifal-like innocent – as he sees himself.

And speaking of Parsifal, Wagner’s interpretation of this character drew the ire of his former acolyte, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche, who was much influenced by Darwin, insisted that life itself is the supreme and, ultimately, the only value, and that if life exists in biological terms – that is, natural selection – then one must embrace those terms. For Nietzsche, there was no other world, no ideal realm, no God, no autonomous domain of values or morals. His mission was to replace morality with the values of nature and ‘life-assertion’. This would become the new morality, and compassion would have no place in it. Compassion and pity merely got in the way of natural development. These views were the opposite of Wagner’s – the *exact* opposite.

The attainment of wisdom and leadership by the innocent fool Parsifal was anathema to Nietzsche and, to rub it in, over and over again we are told that wisdom and leadership are the fruits of compassion. This was the message to Amfortas from the Grail itself: *Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool – wait for him, the chosen one*. In this respect, Siegfried, “one who never ceases to love”, anticipates Parsifal.

A hero of a very different stripe is the Franconian knight Walther von Stolzing, who comes to sixteenth-century Nuremberg, falls in love with Eva, daughter of the goldsmith Pogner, and finds himself drawn into the artistic concerns of the Mastersingers, guardians of the singing traditions of the old city. Walther’s Prize Song reflects his free, romantically inspired approach which, though unsettling to more hidebound Masters, is recognised by the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs as reflecting true inspiration. With Sachs’s guidance, Walther learns the importance of respecting the old while embracing the new, which is the lesson that Wagner himself was giving with this glorious and optimistic work. Political fortunes may wax and wane, but art lives on. This, too, reflects notions of the ultimate triumph of humanity, which is a recurring theme in many of Wagner’s greatest works.