



Giordano Bellincampi's Sleek, Dramatic *Tristan* with the APO



Curtain call, *Tristan und Isolde*, 10 August, in the Auckland Town Hall – l. to r. (foreground): Simon O'Neill (Tristan), Katarina Karnéus (Brangäne), Ricarda Merbeth (Isolde), Giordano Bellincampi (conductor), Johan Reuter (Kurwenal) and Albert Dohmen (King Marke). (Screen grabs taken from the live stream.)

For the most part, the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra's one-off concertante performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in the Auckland Town Hall on 10 August was a grand triumph that generally met and, in many ways, significantly exceeded expectations. To prepare such a long, demanding and complex work in a limited rehearsal time was clearly a great challenge, and there were perhaps a few minor aspects that didn't come off quite as well as they might have done, but the overall impression was overwhelmingly positive, and Music Director Giordano Bellincampi, the soloists, choir and the APO itself should all be justly proud of what they achieved. It would be no exaggeration to claim that this was easily the most noteworthy performance of a complete Wagner stage work in New Zealand since the NZSO *Parsifal* in Wellington in 2006. Many WSNZ members, including plenty of out-of-towners, were also in attendance and met up in the Balcony Room during the intervals.

Giordano Bellincampi's brief but lively pre-concert talk in the Town Hall provided an indication of what was to come, with the entire auditorium already bathed in a subdued, deep-blue light. By the time people began to file in for the performance, fog machines had added a hazy effect throughout the auditorium,

creating a mysterious atmosphere – all very effective, and stoking everyone's anticipation.

Bellincampi and the APO had already performed the *Tristan* Prelude and Liebestod as part of a concert showcasing Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* last November, and quite nicely too, but as soon as they opened with the Prelude in August it was clear that they were taking a far more focused approach, taken to a whole new level altogether, building the tension carefully and keeping the fairly swift tempo flowing but steady, with no *stringendo* quickening to the great climax... just as Wagner intended. Then, once the singers came in, it was clear that this was going to be a very dramatically attuned performance indeed, one that quickly eclipsed the APO's previous *Tristan* interpretation under Eckehard Stier in 2014, fine though that performance still was. Potentially, the new interpretation could still have been just a little more restrained at times, but the intensity generated meant that this was nearer to a 'full-throttle *Tristan*', such as the classic recordings conducted by Karl Böhm (Bayreuth, 1966) and Georg Solti (VPO, 1960), thus involving some genuine risk-taking on Bellincampi's part. As some observers have claimed, *Tristan* might well be the most extreme opera ever written, so playing it 'too safe' may be something best

avoided. Accordingly, Bellincampi's balanced approach was genuinely impressive: his interpretation was certainly driven, but never overdriven, and he also lent it a very warm, Italianate glow. (Admittedly, some felt that the singers were occasionally overwhelmed by the orchestra, although this may also have been dependent on where they were sitting; two Wellington members seated halfway back in the centre stalls had no issues, for example.)

The singers themselves were very fine, certainly by today's standards, when finding a suitably experienced and capable soprano and heldentenor for the principal roles surely hasn't become any easier over the years. The German soprano, Ricarda Merbeth, first took on the role of Isolde in 2016, after having sung other Wagner roles for many years beforehand (as long ago as 2008, she was the Eva in the acclaimed revival of the Otto Schenk production of *Die Meistersinger* in Vienna). Although she wasn't always ideally steady under pressure, her Isolde still had a great deal to offer in terms of timbre, power and sensitivity, and – especially at close range, such as during her chilling Act 1 curse at the climax of Isolde's Narrative – she also displayed a commanding (and formidable!) stage presence that was ideally suited to the role.

Of course, Simon O'Neill was the Tristan, a role that he, too, has been singing regularly for some years now. In particular, those who appreciate his clear diction, steady tone and thrilling, ringing top notes were likely not disappointed; indeed, he appeared to be in outstanding form. Admittedly, he had a few brief moments of hoarseness in Act 3, but that was surely still acceptable given Tristan's wretched physical state by that point, and in every other respect Simon's stamina during the act held up right to the (bitter) end. One could hardly have expected more from him.



Act 2 Love Duet: Ricarda Merbeth, Simon O'Neill

Meanwhile, the other singers were memorably consistent as well. The Swedish-English soprano, Katarina Karnéus, has long been well known for her fine assumption of the role of Brangäne at Glyndebourne nearly twenty years ago (as can be enjoyed on the much-praised 2007 video recording, which also featured Nina Stemme at her peak as Isolde), and she was similarly in good form in Auckland, her clear, clean timbre contrasting well with Merbeth's richer, fuller tone. She even sang Brangäne's Warning from the audience gallery, which was a bit of a surprise for those of us sitting just in front of her (her voice was most certainly not coming from a distance, 'as if heard in a dream', but no matter!). Meanwhile, the Danish baritone, Johan Reuter, was an admirably rugged Kurwenal. The German bass-baritone, Albert Dohmen, has enjoyed a long and particularly successful career at Bayreuth (most notably as Wotan and Alberich in the *Ring*) and elsewhere, and so his graceful and noble King Marke proved to be another casting highlight.

For the rest, tenor Jared Holt acquitted himself well as Melot, while Andrew Goodwin's clear tenor was well suited to the roles of the Sailor, Shepherd and Steersman, the first of which was again sung from the audience gallery, right at the back of the auditorium. Here too, the Sailor's ditty was louder in the overall balance than it could have been, but it was still good to be able to see the singer. (Also a little too loud were the offstage hunting horns immediately following the Act 2 Prelude, and there was also some on-togetherness in the ensemble. However, a pleasing surprise in Act 3 was the use of a real wooden trumpet to announce the arrival of Isolde's ship, the instrument having been provided especially for this performance.)

Frances Moore's role as stage director deserves a special mention. This APO *Tristan* had, of course, been billed as a concert-only

performance but, as on past occasions, Moore bravely sought to turn it into something a little more than that, employing basic props in the often awkwardly cramped spaces surrounding the orchestra (for example, a chaise longue and a chest of potions in the foreground, a lamp fixture and coiled ship's rope behind and above the orchestral players, etc.), along with detailed direction of the singer-actors. The one aspect of *Tristan* that really met Wagner's own aspirations for a 'simple, easy-to-perform' (!) opera is its basic, relatively static nature, as in Wagner's original stage directions, and so Moore's very stripped-back approach still proved very evocative, particularly given the hazy, bluish lighting scheme. Other than that, the singers were all still dressed in their best natty concert attire, but some of Moore's directing ideas were very effective, such as when Isolde strode down the central aisle of the stalls for her dramatic entrance in Act 3, as Tristan is about to die. Meanwhile, towards the end of Act 1, we heard the usual Sailors' offstage choir, but then the entire choir came onstage behind the orchestra for the big act finale, further ramping up the dramatic tension.

A few other moments, such as the extinguishing of the lamp just before the Act 2 Love Duet (which, unfortunately, also featured the 'traditional' ten-minute cut, as it did in 2014), were perhaps a little less convincingly executed. The lamp is normally extinguished immediately following the big climax at the end of Isolde's cry, '*Die Leuchte, und wär's meines Lebens Licht – lachend, sie zu löschen zag' ich nicht!*' ('This light, were it the light of my life, laughing, I do not hesitate to extinguish it!'), per Wagner's original stage directions. But after this cry, Katarina Karnéus (as Brangäne) simply ambled slowly up to the back of the stage, picked up the lamp prop and walked off with it, with no change to the lighting itself. Meanwhile, the cramped space for the singers at the front of the stage, with sometimes limited visibility for the audience, was particularly evident at the very end of the opera, with the hapless lovers lying sprawled on the narrow strip in front of the orchestra – but again, it was admirable that Moore had at all attempted to address these aspects.

In all, then, this was a most satisfying evening, and nearly everyone we spoke to afterwards seemed delighted; some of the Wagner 'neophytes' were really quite astounded. The entire performance is now also on the APO's YouTube channel, as below:

Act 1: www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgZp3gDsV7A

Act 2: www.youtube.com/watch?v=czgh_QGhvQ0

Act 3: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM6QMdc7Q8o

... so do try to catch it there, along with a twenty-minute roundtable discussion with Frances Moore, RNZ Concert presenter Clarissa Dunn and Heath Lees at www.youtube.com/watch?v=r17pxnpc-A – also well worth a look. Kudos to Bellincampi, Moore, the cast, and the APO and their new CEO, Diana Weir, for a wonderful evening.

Abhinath Berry in the UK

Great news for fans of the young Dunedin pianist, Abhinath Berry: last month, following months of concerted effort to secure support and a proper funding base for his future studies, he arrived in London to take up a two-year master of performance programme at the Guildhall School of Music, where he will be receiving a £10,000 scholarship (for which he had to apply 'only' twice, he says!), to be further augmented by savings and the proceeds of his fund-raising concerts and activities, together with private donations.

Initially self-taught, Abhinath took up formal piano lessons at Otago University with WSNZ president, Professor Terence Dennis, while also studying composition with Professors Anthony Ritchie and Peter Adams, and composer Ken Young. He graduated in 2022 with a BMus (Hons) in performance and composition. Members around the country will remember Abhinath's spectacular recital tours with Terence Dennis in 2021 and last year, amongst other things showcasing performances of Liszt's diverse Wagner transcriptions, most especially the monumentally challenging *Tannhäuser* Overture. On 1 September of this year, Abhinath gave a farewell recital on his own in Dunedin's First Church, this time with a characteristic selection of virtuoso Romantic works by Chopin, Schumann, Ravel and Liszt once more (the *Rhapsodie Espagnole* S.254), which he played while also happening to be bathed in the light of the setting sun. This recital, too, drew glowing reviews, such as the one in the *Otago Daily Times*.

Abhinath also won many prizes while studying at Otago and was runner-up in the first-ever Dunedin Concerto Competition in 2021. As such, he has been forging a highly original and individual career from the outset, and so it is with great pleasure that we wish him every success for his Guildhall studies.

WSNZ – 2024 Programme October to December

Auckland

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

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

Sunday, 1 December at 4:00 p.m.

Venue: private home in Wadestown

End-of-year party – full details to be given in the Wellington Branch local newsletter next month.

Christchurch

Sunday, 1 December at 4:30 p.m.

Venue: Jenny Lee's private home

Christmas function – further details to be advised.

Dunedin

Sunday, 24 November at 12:00 noon

Venue: 192 Castle College (College Dining Hall/Ground Floor Seminar Room)
Christmas Luncheon (Dining Hall) & Wagneriana (Seminar Room).

New Members

A very warm Wagnerian welcome to two new members:

Paul Little.....Auckland
Tim Workman.....Wellington

'Wagner Murmurs'

– additional news from Michael Sinclair (quite a lot this time!):

• Tendon surgery has forced Christian Thielemann to withdraw from conducting *Das Rheingold* at La Scala, where he will be replaced by Simone Young and Alexander Soddy. Since he is unable to conduct the prologue to the tetralogy, he has announced his intention to withdraw from the entire project.

• Longborough Festival Opera will present a revival of *Tristan und Isolde* in 2026, and a new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in 2027 to be conducted by Anthony Negus and directed by Polly Graham.

• Jonas Kaufmann will sing the title role in *Parsifal* at the Tiroler Festsspiele Erl (in Austria's Tyrol region) in April 2025.

• Yuval Sharon will direct a new production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle at the Metropolitan Opera beginning in 2028, culminating in the full four-opera cycle in 2030. Yannick Nézet-Séguin will conduct, and Lise Davidsen will sing Brünnhilde.

• Yuval Sharon will also direct a new production of *Tristan und Isolde* at the Met in 2026, to be conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin and with Lise Davidsen as Isolde.

• The 2025 Bayreuth Festival will include a new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (conducted by Daniele Gatti, directed by Matthias Davids), plus revivals of the *Ring* (for the final time in Valentin Schwarz's production), *Tristan und Isolde*, *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*.

• German Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Claudia Roth, has stated that she is in favour of composers other than Richard Wagner being heard at the Bayreuth Festival, with the intention of appealing more to a younger audience.

Latest News from Kirstin Sharpin



Kirstin Sharpin, soprano
(Photo: Kirstin Sharpin)

New Zealand's highly successful young dramatic soprano, Kirstin Sharpin, who began her tertiary music studies in Auckland and has also been the recipient of a WSNZ grant, has recently written in again to update us further on her activities abroad. This time, she was writing from Regensburg, north of Munich in Bavaria, Germany, where she is currently singing Isolde in her fourth full production of *Tristan*. As it turned out, she also ended up

spending much of her seven-week summer break in Lewes, England, where she was urgently on call to step in as a replacement for the cover Isolde there, in Glyndebourne's iconic *Tristan* production (Nikolaus Lehnhoff). She became very familiar with the production and team but, 'happily', the 'prime' Isolde never actually fell ill, and so Kirstin's cover services weren't required! Nevertheless, she made some important new contacts during her stay.

In her current role as Isolde in the Theater Regensburg – see www.theaterregensburg.de/produktionen/tristan-und-isolde.html (in German) or www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL9YteT0IA (brief trailer) – Kirstin is the most experienced *Tristan* singer in the cast. Her *Tristan* is an American, Corby Welch, and the (not very traditional) production's young director, Dennis Krauss, is also a former protégé of Katharina Wagner, all of which is keeping Kirstin very much on her toes, she says! The Theater Regensburg, meanwhile, has recently been designated a state theatre, raising its profile accordingly. (Regensburg itself, the capital of Bavaria's Upper Palatinate subregion, is a major provincial centre; it is especially well known for having suffered relatively little damage during World War II and is also renowned for its largely intact mediaeval inner city, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.)

Having just sung the last scene of *Die Walküre* with Matthew Rose (ENO's Wotan) on her way back to Germany, Kirstin now also has several possibilities to sing Brünnhilde on the horizon, which she will report on later. In the meantime, as ever, we wish her all the very best.

An Unlikely Mix of Wagner and AI Imagery



Bizarre, but true – enthusiasts are now using AI tools to generate fantastical imagery for online 'soundslide shows', with visual content triggered by Wagner's libretti! In fact, the results can be rather more arresting than one might imagine. See, e.g., the 'moltovivace' YouTube channel (cf. the above image), where Wagner videos and others have appeared for some years. But just what do you get when you marry AI images to 'Wotan's Farewell' (as above), with an outstanding soundtrack conducted by Hans Knappertsbusch in 1958, with George London as Wotan? – www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRnXc5afzag – or a truly cosmic Love Duet www.youtube.com/watch?v=orM906xWG-8 and Liebestod www.youtube.com/watch?v=v67I3Kw2NJ4 from *Tristan*, soundtrack by Daniel Barenboim with Siegfried Jerusalem and Waltraud Meier? The next step might be a fully AI-generated movie. . .

The 2024 Bayreuth Festival – A Brief Summary

Another year, another Bayreuth Festival – this year with things gradually getting more and more back to something resembling normal operations, as the pandemic years fade ever further into distant memory. Amongst other things, festival attendance was significantly up this year, with all the productions being sold out for the first time in this decade, although there were still a few tickets available for the ‘augmented reality’ (AR) *Parsifal* almost up until the last minute. In addition to the main festival programme, there were also two open-air concerts for the wider public, on 24 and 30 July (the ‘festival proper’ commenced on 25 July), which attracted more than 15,000 visitors. And, not for the first time, a contingent of discounted tickets was also offered to attendees up to the age of 25 (under the ‘Wagner for Starters’ programme) – encouragingly with the number of potential takers far exceeding the actual ticket supply. A further 2,000 younger visitors also attended a special, pared-back production of *Der fliegende Holländer* (ten performances) as part of the ‘Wagner for Children’ initiative, now in its fifteenth year.

Each new year at Bayreuth brings at least one premiere production, and 2024 was no exception, with an atmospheric new production of *Tristan und Isolde* from the Icelandic stage director, Thorleifur Örn Arnarsson. (Accordingly, this one already replaced Roland Schaub’s *Tristan* production from 2022, which had only ever been intended as a backup, in case any of the other productions ended up being impacted by Covid.) Arnarsson’s new *Tristan* staging seems to have been much better received than last year’s premiere production of *Parsifal*, and featured aesthetically appealing, evocative sets by Vytautas Narbutas. Like other directors before him, Arnarsson evidently appreciated the fact that *Tristan*, more than Wagner’s other stage works, tends to be comparatively ‘resistant’ to the more interventionist aspirations of *Regietheater* – Peter Konwitschny’s very popular, long-running 1990s production for Munich’s Nationaltheater and Dmitri Tcherniakov’s later production for the Staatsoper Berlin being two of the more notable exceptions – and so Arnarsson’s production tended rather more in the direction of minimalist stagings such as those by Heiner Müller (Bayreuth,

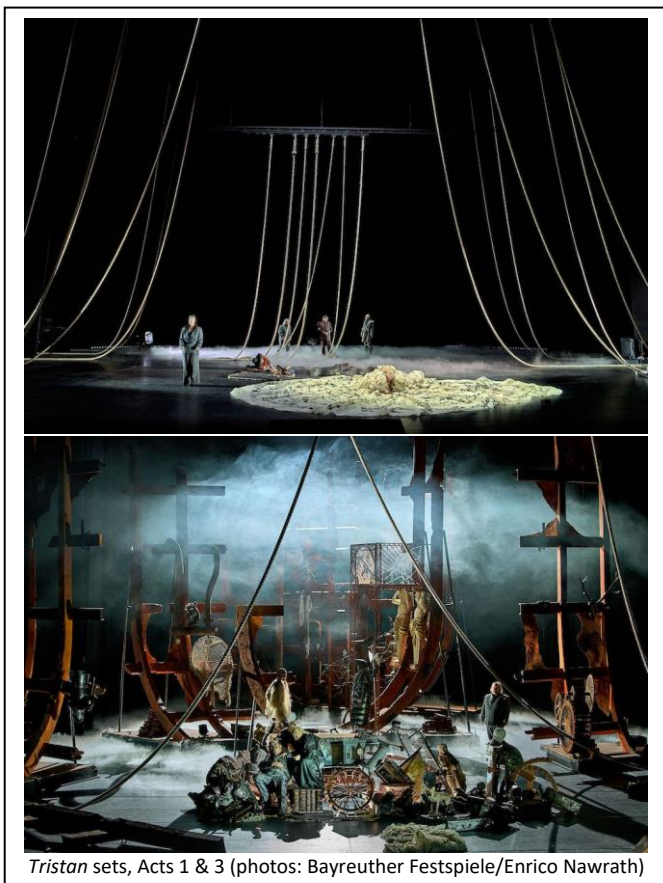
1993–1999) and even Wieland Wagner. Nevertheless, there were still some unusual departures from Wagner’s original stage directions, such as Isolde snatching the love potion from Tristan and hurling it across the stage in Act 1. Isolde herself (Camilla Nylund) was attired in an enormous, sprawling dress, reminiscent of the one worn by Johanna

Furtwängler, Karajan (at the time of his later studio recording with the Berlin Philharmonic for EMI) and Bernstein. Wagnerians who love those classic interpretations are likely to be quite fascinated and thrilled by Bychkov’s approach in the above audio link.

When it came to the soloists, however, reactions were rather more mixed. Reviewers felt that Camilla Nylund in particular sounded overparted and was often straining to sing loudly; meanwhile, Andreas Schager as Tristan was certainly convincing as a heldentenor, but employed relatively little in the way of pianissimo shading. Somehow, both singers also sounded a little uncomfortable, but perhaps they had not yet fully settled into their roles. As Marke, Günther Groissböck gave a satisfactory, although oddly out-of-character performance; ditto for Olafur Sigurdarson as Kurwenal. However, praise was unanimous for mezzo-soprano, Christa Mayer, who has been singing Brangäne at Bayreuth since Katharina Wagner’s production in 2015, and here she also had to fill in for Ekatarina Gubanova, who had been suddenly taken ill. All the other minor parts were also well sung.

The other main news from Bayreuth this year was that Australian conductor Simone Young at last made her long-awaited Green Hill debut, conducting the *Ring*. For this, she received cheers, foot-stomping and a standing ovation. The production was still the rather unloved one from

Valentin Schwarz, which will be given for the final time next year, again with Young conducting. Meanwhile, Oksana Lyniv conducted Dmitri Tcherniakov’s production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, with Michael Volle (the Dutchman), Elisabeth Teige (Senta) and Eric Cutler (Erik) all garnering high praise. Nathalie Stutzmann conducted *Tannhäuser*, still in the quirky and popular Tobias Kratzer production from 2019, here too with Elisabeth Teige (as Elsa), along with Günther Groissböck (the Margrave) – evidently more comfortable in this role than he was as King Marke in *Tristan*. Finally, Pablo Heras-Casado was again lauded for his distinctly ‘non-pious’, often swift conducting of *Parsifal*, with Ekatarina Gubanova (Kundry), Andreas Schager (Parsifal) and Jordan Shanahan (Klingsor) all reprising their roles from last year. Praise for Jay Scheib’s experimental but shallow production remained muted, however, and, as before, the much-vaunted augmented reality glasses were available to only a small proportion of the audience.



Tristan sets, Acts 1 & 3 (photos: Bayreuther Festspiele/Enrico Nawrath)

Meier in Bayreuth’s celebrated Jean-Pierre Ponnelle production (1981–83 and 1986/87), only even more voluminous, and with giant white wings for sleeves. Act 1 was a blank stage, except for some stylised ship’s rigging, while Acts 2 and 3 were set in the rotting hull of a shipwreck, full of Isolde’s (?) belongings in Act 2, but emptier and eerier in Act 3.

Some criticised the highly gifted Soviet-born American conductor, Semyon Bychkov, for not being more dramatically propulsive, and for allegedly providing more of a supportive accompaniment for the singers rather than driving the action. However, even a cursory listen to sections of the live audio stream from one of the performances – www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXXCplAuSlg – reveals Bychkov’s interpretation, taken at a deliberately measured pace, to be uncommonly rich, broad and full (try the full Act 2 Love Duet, from 2h 39m in), with fabulously thick, glutinous orchestral textures. This was an unashamedly grand, soaringly passionate reading that called to mind the likes of