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Gary Jankowski (Fafner), Peter Rose (Fasolt), Anna Leese (Freia), Eckehard Stier (conductor), Paul Whelan (Wotan) & Elizabeth Campbell (Fricka).



The Wagner tubas (l-r, Simon Williams, David Kay, Jillian Christoff & Emma Richards) entertain at the post-performance party.

It was wonderful to see such a large number of Wagner Society members attend the Auckland Philharmonia's concert performance of *Das Rheingold*, particularly as the WSNZ and Wagner New Zealand Foundation provided financial support for the event.

Looking back, our support produced numerous positives. Firstly the performance itself: it had been 14 years since the last New Zealand performance of this work, in the main due to the large orchestra and 14 soloists which makes it an expensive exercise to undertake. Without 'special' financial support from sponsors these performances are impossible to stage. Secondly the performance provided an opportunity to blood young New Zealand singers in roles that may or may not come their way in the future. Thirdly we all had the chance to hear experienced Wagner singers in performance.

All credit must go to the Auckland Philharmonia for the success. They took the risk and produced the goods with only a minor blemish or two. The decision to have an interval was strange. *Das Rheingold* is interval-less as everyone who attends a *Ring* cycle is warned - "make sure you go to the loo before the performance, as there is no break!" The sudden stop just before Wotan and Loge encounter Mime was jarring and the recapitulation of the God and demigod's journey to Niebelheim rather spoilt Wagner's descriptive transformation. The other slightly strange decision was to give the role of

APO STRIKES GOLD!

Donner to a lyric tenor when the part is written for a bass-baritone! The result meant Donner's 'Heda Hedo' lacked the necessary oomph! Overall these were minor complaints when looking at the complete performance. The orchestra was magnificent, Eckehard Stier kept everything in control and provided a solid platform for the singers.

There are two central roles in *Das Rheingold*: the dwarf, Alberich, and Loge, the God of Fire. In John Wegner (Alberich) and Mattias Wohlbrecht (Loge) we were treated with not only magnificent singing but acting as well. There was no need for costumes and sets when these two were on stage. Wegner, reprising his Adelaide *Ring* role, has a truly commanding voice. Alberich's curse had real venom and the interplay between Loge and Alberich was electric. Wohlbrecht, who was the second replacement for the role was simply superb. It was hard not to watch him as his use of facial expressions (his raised eyebrow was wonderful), shoulders, arms and hands all contributed to create a flickering, mercurial, cunning character who, when not centre stage, would react to the other singers. With world class performances from Wegner and Wohlbrecht the rest of the cast were swept along. It became obvious which singers were hardened Wagnerians and which were not.

Elizabeth Campbell (Fricka), Deborah Humble (Erda) and the giants Peter Rose and Gary Jankowski all showed their experience with strong dependable singing. Likewise, Richard Greager (Mime) made sure the Niebelungs were brought to vibrant life thanks to good characterisation and singing.

While all of the singers above have had experience in singing Wagner the APO, quite rightly, gave an opportunity to singers who would not normally be considered for these roles. It is, after all, only experience that allows singers to 'get into' the part and, as Wegner and Wohlbrecht demonstrated, once vocal security is achieved characterisation can develop.

The engagement of Paul Whelan to sing Wotan was brilliant and could in the long run pay a handsome dividend. It was an opportunity for Paul to 'test the waters' in supportive surroundings and, while his voice may need more of an edge, to give it real authority, and this will come, the end result was impressive. He certainly has the presence of a god! The Auckland *Rheingold* was the start of a journey for Paul that will hopefully lead to another great NZ Wagnerian bass-baritone. Time will tell, but without opportunities such as that presented by the APO we might never know.

In summary it was a wonderful night that achieved all our objectives: a local performance of *Das Rheingold*, great singing and characterisation and New Zealand singers given a rare opportunity to perform this wonderful work.

THE VIEW FROM THE STAGE

On Sundays 4 September in Auckland and 18 September in Dunedin, Chris Brodrick will present the first of his series of talks on the Bayreuth Festival audience. Part one looks at those hardy Wagnerians who made their way to the new Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876 for the very first Festival. Among the pilgrims were contingents from France, Britain, America, Russia and Germany comprising composers, artists, members of society, royalty and even a couple of Emperors. A famous philosopher who happened to be travelling from London to Karlsbad at the time of the 1876 festival found that all the accommodation in Nuremberg he was booked up by Wagnerians and was forced to spend the night on a bench at a railway station.

Sunday, 4 September 7.30pm

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

Sunday, 18 September 2.00pm

Venue: Sale-Black House, Department of Music, The University of Otago

“SUPERB RING” - “A TRIUMPH!”

Productions of the *Ring* are always going to appeal to some while disappointing others, it's just human nature. Of late, though, there has been more agreement between Wagnerites as to their feelings about new productions of the tetralogy. For instance the high hopes everyone had for the new Metropolitan *Ring* seem to have diminished under the weight of the very heavy set, while the Los Angeles production was judged to be just too whacky for most. On the other side of the coin, there are some very positive vibes for the new *Ring* production in San Francisco under the direction of Francesca Zambello and conductor Donald Runnicles. The Wagner Society in Queensland is carrying a rave review by Graham Bruce, 'A Superb *Ring* In San Francisco' (<http://www.members.optusnet.com.au/kbclifford/> - then click on FAV) and the following is an edited view of the production by Wagner scholar and friend of the WSNZ, Hans Vaget.

“San Francisco Opera's new *Ring* – the sixth homegrown cycle in the company's seventy-five year history – is a triumph, the result in equal measure of an imaginative and plausible reading of Wagner's monumental work, and of a spirited musical realization.

Environmentally conscious readings of *The Ring*, such as this one, are by no means new. They are firmly anchored in the two nature-violating acts that Wagner



“That is no Man” - Siegfried (Jay Hunter Morris) awakens Brünnhilde (Nina Stemme) *Siegfried* Act 3, San Francisco Opera

placed at the beginning of everything. Alberich takes the gold from the river Rhine and Wotan tears a branch from the World Ash Tree. Their exploitation of nature causes its gradual disappearance – a process which this production traces with imagery that is highly compelling.

Francesca Zambello's true achievement lies in the imaginative way in which she connects *The Ring's* catastrophe-bound story to an unmistakably American iconography. Historical moments and images that are deeply imprinted on the American cultural memory and that we have come to think of as part of progress and the pursuit of happiness are, when viewed through the prism of Wagner's parable, revealed as markers of decline and of an altogether fateful trajectory.

Appropriately, this *Ring* starts out by a river in the pristine Californian wilderness, into which stumbles Alberich, here presented as a Forty-niner equipped with a map and the requisite prospector's equipment. At the end of the cycle, the river will be littered with trash that the Rhinemaidens will be obliged to collect in plastic bags. The gods of *Das Rheingold* – Froh and Donner wear the colors of Princeton University – conjure up the leisure loving world of Scott Fitzgerald. The giants, sitting on a steel beam, are lowered onto the scene from a crane that was used to build Walhall and the great American skyscrapers. Erda, fittingly, is made to look a native American.

Hunding's hut is a Depression era homestead stuffed with hunting trophies. Wotan, in the meantime, has become a captain of industry; his command center offers a panoramic view of a smog-covered skyline suggesting Chicago or perhaps even San Francisco itself. Siegmund's battle with Hunding is set between the pillars of an elevated stretch of Freeway against the background of an industrial cityscape. In the preceding scene, 'the

Annunciation of Death', we see American soldiers marching zombie-like on the road to Walhall to be refitted for future wars. The Valkyries, fetchingly dressed in jumpsuits, leather caps and goggles, parachute onto the scene, all looking like sisters of Amelia Earhart. Mime's cave is a hilariously decked out trailer in a trash-littered backyard. By the time we arrive at the Forest Scene, no nature is left. We find ourselves in an abandoned factory building in some rustbelt city – the forest is reduced to a mere hallucination. The dragon is a monstrous scrap metal compact. In *Götterdämmerung* we get a glimpse of our world in the not so distant future: the Norns no longer handle the rope of fate; instead they attempt to sort out a giant tangle of computer cables that have begun to rule our lives as capriciously as the rope of fate.

Would Wagner have applauded this production? You bet he would. Unhappy with the results of his own efforts as stage director in 1876, he promised his co-workers: “Next time we do it differently.” Nothing sums up his artistic personality more succinctly than his famous exhortation: “Kinder, schafft Neues” – “Children, create something new!” The new SFO *Ring* does just that.

More than any individual performance, what delighted me the most was the lively stage action throughout, including the realistically choreographed battle scenes, and the infectious *esprit de corps* of the entire ensemble, for most of which, astonishingly, this was their first *Ring*.

The SFO orchestra cannot match the virtuosity and dependability of the Met Orchestra. But this mattered little here, given the refreshingly fleet and flexible reading of this tremendous score by Donald Runnicles, who delivered all the showcase passages with all the deftness and, when called for, delicacy, one could wish for.”

Hans Rudolf Vaget

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2011 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 4 September 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
A View From The Stage – Part 1

WSNZ President Chris Brodrick looks at those who attended the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876

Sunday, 4 December 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music,
University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
Wagner Pot Pourri - A Christmas celebration: An evening of requests, roundups, selections and surprises

Christchurch

Friday 30 September 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Lifting the Lid on Wagner's Piano

Heath Lees looks at Wagner's attitude to the instrument. Some send-ups will be included & lots of illustrations.

Friday 28 October 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Stephen Fry on Wagner: Chris Brodrick introduces this 1-hour BBC programme

Sunday 27 November 6.00pm

Venue: 6 Parkinson Place, Ilam,
Christchurch

Christmas BBQ at the home of Audrey Harrison and Laurie Higgins

Dunedin

Sunday, 18 September 2.00pm

Venue: Sale-Black House, Department of Music, The University of Otago
A View From The Stage – Part 1

WSNZ President Chris Brodrick looks at those who attended the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876

Sunday, 6 November 2.00pm

Venue: Sale-Black House, Department of Music, The University of Otago
Wagner: The Early Operas 1

Terence Dennis presents *Die Feen (The Fairies)* and *Das Liebesverbot (The Ban On Love)*

Sunday, 4 December 1.00pm

Venue: Barclay Theatre, Otago Museum
Wagner - The Early Operas 2
Rienzi plus our end-of-year Christmas celebration

Wellington

September/October

Venue: TBA

Details to be finalised

Members will be sent information in due course

December (TBF)

Venue: *The home of Tibby and Adrian Simcock*

Christmas Cocktails

End of year Christmas celebration.
Details to follow

BAYREUTH NEWS

Just before this year's Bayreuth Festival opened at the end of July the announcement came that 60 year old Frank Castorf (below left) will replace Wim Wenders as director of the 2013 *Ring*. Castorf who has been running the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxembourg-Platz in Berlin for almost 20 years has a reputation for daring productions so we may well be in for another 'interesting' interpretation. This link to an article about Castorf is courtesy of the Goethe Institute: - <http://www.goethe.de/kue/the/reg/ag/cas/por/enindex.htm>

Meanwhile, Simon O'Neill (above left with Detlef Roth as Amfortas) stepped on to the Bayreuth Festspielhaus stage in the title role of *Parsifal*.

NEW MEMBERS

A very Warm Wagnerian Welcome to:-
Martin Pollock..... Dunedin
Melville Killip Auckland
Ross Craig..... Wellington
Hilary Liddell Auckland

THE MELBOURNE RING CYCLE 2013

As we have already reported in the newsletter Opera Australia will present three complete cycles of *The Ring* at the Arts Centre, Melbourne, during November and December 2013, in celebration of the 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth.

The cast will include:

Susan Bullock as *Brunnhilde*

Juha Uusitalo as *Wotan*

Gary Lehman as *Siegfried*

John Wegner as *Alberich*

with further details being announced over the coming months.

As tickets will go on sale at the end of 2011 the WSNZ would like to have an indication from those members who would be interested in making up a group booking. Unfortunately we have no specific dates for each cycle so by registering an interest you will not be making a final commitment. But with well over 100 members travelling to the last Adelaide *Ring* we want to ensure we get in early!

Please contact Michael Sinclair at email: info@wagnersociety.org.nz or mail: PO Box 99826, Newmarket, Auckland

CHRISTCHURCH IS BACK!

On Friday 30 September the Christchurch branch of the WSNZ will hold the first meeting of 2011. The February earthquake and continuing aftershocks effectively put the lid on any activity as lecture theatres were closed and members didn't have much enthusiasm for going out at night. Wagner's Birthday was celebrated in May with a Pot Luck dinner but otherwise there have been no meetings for almost a year. So what better way to celebrate the reawakening than to host Heath Lees. In *Lifting the Lid on Wagner's Piano* Heath will look at Wagner's attitude to the instrument and, as with all his talks, an entertaining and factual evening will be in store. Let's have a strong turnout for this event which will also give us a chance to reconnect with our fellow Shakey City Wagnerites.

A month later, on 28 October, Christchurch members will have the opportunity to see the Stephen Fry documentary which had to be postponed earlier in the year when the University was closed by earthquake damage. *Wagner and Me* will begin with an introduction on Stephen Fry and his search for information about the fate of his Jewish relations during World War II.

Friday 30 September 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Friday 28 October 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury



Photo: Bayreuther Festspiele/ Enrico Nawrath

DAS RHEINGOLD - HAMBURG



Alberich and the Rhinemaidens frolic on the 'river' bed

John Davidson continues with his report on the Hamburg Ring

Traditionalists were very unhappy with the opening scene of *Das Rheingold* which I actually thought was the most successful in the opera. The stage was dominated by a large bed (claimed by some, perhaps rightly, to be the 'bed of the Rhine'). From beneath the gently rippling sheets emerged the Rhinedaughters, little girls in pink nighties with teddy bears enjoying pillow fights. They sang extremely well both here and later in the Cycle, their voices blending beautifully. Alberich (Wolfgang Koch) was initially sighted in protective overalls with weed-spraying equipment which he soon jettisoned to clamber lustfully onto the bed and frolic with the 'nixies'. He was most impressive both here and throughout the Cycle. It wasn't altogether clear where or what the gold actually was, and an apparent lighting malfunction didn't help. The scene, however, worked well on its own terms (with good use too of an upper level), although it didn't seem to fit into an overall 'concept'. There was an apparent anomaly too with regard to the innocence and 'youth' of the Rhinedaughters and their advanced sexual awareness!

The next scene was, quite frankly, a muddle. The set was dominated by a large model rock with a little model hut on the top, presumably a model of Valhalla – and Wotan, as we were to discover, was very much into modelling. This rock (which revolved) had the effect of pushing characters awkwardly to the side of the stage unless they were clambering over it. It wasn't altogether clear who or what the gods actually were. The rather large and matronly Fricka (Katja Pieweck) was weak both vocally and dramatically. Falk Struckmann as a

suited Wotan was less than impressive, but he was to shine in the next two operas. Fasolt (Tigran Martirosian) and Fafner (Alexander Tsybalyuk) appeared from the stage rear frame as construction workers with hard hats, soon to drink from cans of beer and smoke, though later, incongruously, joining the gods in a genteel cup of tea when negotiations seemed concluded. They were both excellent, Fafner ruthless, Fasolt with his sentimental streak. Loge (Jürgen Sacher) was got up as a music hall magician complete with top hat and wand which cracked fire periodically. His was a slick performance (he regularly produced coloured handkerchiefs out of the

air), but disappointing vocally, and his get-up and movements made him too predictably 'unpredictable'.

Nibelheim was also disappointing. It appeared to be a boiler room and Mime (Peter Galliard – excellent throughout) seemed initially to be a repair plumber. The Alberich transformations were weak. There were no other Nibelungs in sight (cost cutting?), the hammering got a bit out of synch, and the 'gold' was piles of bank notes. And so we went back 'upstairs' to our revolving rock which in one revolution produced the 'loot' in suitcases. Freia, wearing a white dress throughout (Sieglinde, by contrast, was to wear black), had a bridal veil thrown over her and bank notes pinned to her (she was by no means rendered invisible!). Erda (Deborah Humble) wandered in with a watering can and ministered to a dwarf tree, but sang well. The entry to Valhalla was messy and accompanied by some feeble smoke. It seemed that the gods had already reached their goal when they were squatting on the rock drinking champagne, but they then wandered off and climbed clunkily up a small ladder to the stage rear frame to dance against the background of an orange glow. Despite the infelicities, the stage action and at least adequate music held my interest and commanded my involvement. Was it fate, though, that the Danish man who happened to be sitting next to me introduced himself as 'Mess'?

The Gods enter Valhalla leaving Loge (front) to play with fire



Pssst!

Word has it that the highlight of the 2013 BBC Proms in London's Albert Hall will be a complete *Ring Cycle* with Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Staatsoper. Meanwhile at Hungary's Palace of Arts in Budapest a new production of *Lohengrin* has brought conductor Adam Fischer a little closer to his goal of annual 'Wagner Days' festivals. Each year a Wagner opera is added to the repertoire so that by 2013 all ten operas can form a festival. Unfortunately by 2013 there will only be nine as a major disagreement between the Festival and The National Opera Company has thwarted the production of *Der flegelnde Höllander*.