

JOHN BENTLEY MORRISON

1 JULY 1930 – 10 JULY 2012

We are extremely sad to report the death, in Wellington on 10 July, of dedicated Wagnerian John Morrison. John had been involved in the establishment of a Wagner group in Wellington even before the foundation of the national Society, and had been tireless in his efforts for the cause ever since. His presence will be sorely missed on the committee of the Wellington branch, for which he was organising the next event at the time of his death.

John had a most distinguished career in the legal profession and played key roles in the Wellington Diocese of the Anglican Church. He was also a most generous patron of the arts and served on numerous boards and committees. He was well known, too, for the strong support which he offered to New Zealand singers, both up and coming and established. His enthusiasm for Wagner's music was infectious. He attended the Bayreuth Festival on a number of occasions over the years and had a wealth of knowledge and experience. His wry sense of humour sometimes belied what was in fact a deep passion. He will be impossible to replace, and we offer our deepest sympathy to his wife Diana and all the family. – *John Davidson*

FOOTNOTE: In a magnificent tribute to John, Margaret Medlyn, accompanied by Bruce Greenfield, sang the Liebestod from *Tristan & Isolde* at his funeral in Wellington Cathedral.

Leb' wohl, du Kühnes, herrliches Kind!

JOY & SORROW

July 2012 will be remembered as a month of emotional extremes. The 'high' was the magnificent performances of *Die Walküre* and the first visit to New Zealand of soprano Christine Brewer. Both events will remain in our thoughts for many many years to come. The low was the loss of one of our dearest and most ardent supporters, John Morrison, who died on 10 July. The loss to New Zealand of first Lloyd Morrison and then his uncle, John Morrison, will be immense, particularly as they were both such strong supporters of this country's artistic and sporting talent. While the *Die Walküre* performances were dedicated to Lloyd they were also a tribute to John for all the support he has given New Zealand singers. It is such a shame that John died a matter of days before the Wellington performance as he would have been thrilled at the wonderful achievement of the artists he supported.

In this edition of the newsletter we have contributions from a wide range of members. John Davidson pays tribute to John Morrison while Les Holborow, Sid Kennedy and Juliet Rowe look at the three performances of *Die Walküre*, Bob O'Hara reports back on the APO Christine Brewer concert and Gloria Streat recounts her visit to the *Ring* in Budapest and tells us all the in and outs of booking.

As the year moves into Spring the WSNZ programme swings back into action. First up is Auckland's screening of *Lohengrin* on 2 September followed by Chris Brodrick presenting his *View from the Stage* (VFTS) talks in Dunedin and Christchurch. VFTS Part 2 (1882-1914) features on Dunedin's programme on 30 September while a month later he will present VFTS Part 3 (1924-1944) to Christchurch.

Finally if you glance to the top of the page you will see that this edition of the newsletter is Vol 10 No 10 or, to put it simply, No. 100! Many, many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this important milestone.



THREE VIEWS

WELLINGTON:

There was a real air of expectation as a good audience gathered for the opening performance of the NZSO *Walküre* tour at the Michael Fowler Centre on Sunday 22 July. Several lead-up events in the week before the performance had whetted the appetites of devotees, and many others had clearly come out of curiosity to sample this rare opportunity.

After a confident start it was soon evident that the orchestra was in great form. The surtitles were concise and well sited and the singers were to act on a space in front of the stage without attempting to mimic a fully produced performance. Any doubts about whether conductor Pietari Inkinen was a true Wagnerian were well and truly put to rest within the first half hour of glorious sound. As the performance progressed we were reminded of how important the intimate moments of interaction between the characters are, in addition to the better known triumphal sections.

The first few minutes established a palpable tension as the drama started to play out, assisted by some wonderful singing by Simon O'Neill as Sigmund, Edith Haller as Sieglinde and Jonathan Lemalu as Hunding. It would be difficult to imagine a trio better suited to these roles anywhere. Although this was Jonathan's first concert performance in a Wagner opera, he confessed during the week that he was greatly enjoying playing a character so unlike himself. He also expressed his gratitude to his friend Simon for persuading him to join

this project despite his initial diffidence about it. Simon and Edith, together with Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde, are all singers whose careers are on the rise and we were shown why they have such exciting engagements ahead.

The scene between Wotan and Fricka at the beginning of the second act is a key moment in the opera. Margaret Medlyn's ability to dominate the stage and her impressive singing carried this scene most effectively. The experienced John Wegner, as Wotan, was troubled by an obvious throat infection but still managed to convey both the dignity and pathos of the god who has let events spin out of his control.

Just when those unfamiliar with the opera must have been wondering what Wagner could produce next we had the Valkyries, called Valkiwis in some of the publicity because some of New Zealand's best young overseas-based singers had been teamed with several local high achievers to produce a formidable group of warrior princesses. Their obvious enjoyment of their roles added to the drama of these familiar scenes. The farewell scene between Brünnhilde and Wotan was tenderly realised.

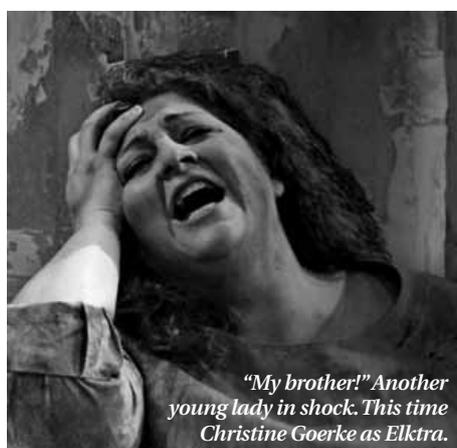
Wellington audiences do selectively recognise great performances with a standing ovation, but many commented afterwards that we had not experienced such an immediate and enthusiastic surge to stand and applaud as occurred at the conclusion of this amazing four hours of wonderful singing and playing. It was fully deserved. – *Les Holborow*

CHRISTCHURCH:

In a word this concert was **magnificent!** Credit and hugs all round, to NZSO, Morrison Trust, WSONZ, and WNZF.

Sadly, post-earthquake Christchurch has no dedicated concert venue for an event of this scale, leaving the CBS Arena, a large tin shed designed for basketball, netball and trade exhibitions, as the only alternative. Attending big concerts by Cat Stevens and Leonard Cohen in the CBS Arena I found the hard plastic seats to be very uncomfortable, the leg room cramped, and the acoustics very fickle. The thought of The Valkyrie in such a setting was off-putting: an endurance test for a numb bum, and aching legs? To my genuine surprise this was not to be the case for The Valkyrie.

A temporary screen wall divided the arena into two areas, and the NZSO was positioned on a huge elevated stage taking full advantage of the tiered semi-circle of fixed and temporary seating. Every seat had a good, elevated-view of the stage and orchestra. Stall type seating on the main floor was limited to just 3 rows. Stage steps each side accessed black marquee tents which acted as



dressing rooms, and over the stage were suspended 3 banks of large sound reflectors.

The stadium setup really suited the 106-strong NZSO who, rather than being shoehorned onto a tight concert hall stage or squeezed into an opera pit, were laid out with plenty of room for vigorous bowing and trombone sliding although the acoustic limitations of the building proved to be a mixed bag for the singers as voices would fade as they turned from stage left to stage right.

All the singers were good and ensemble work was well balanced, including the eight 'Valkiwis'. Voices that touched me most were Sieglinde, Brünnhilde and Hunding as their voice range overcame the acoustic shortcomings of the stadium.

The big surprise though was the semi-acted staging. While the 'clip, clop' of leather soled shoes across the stage was a distraction, the spectacular way in which Hunding literally dropped dead at 'Go, go', made me wonder if he had actually injured himself and could only have been achieved with space. To me the Act 3 conclusion conjured up a mental image of Brünnhilde as a very bad girl sitting in the naughty chair but this was soon lost in the magnificent finale from the NZSO which produced an almost spontaneous and richly deserved standing ovation.

The programme was worth every dollar. The supper hamper was delicious, if not a bit expensive. Unfortunately my plastic wine tumbler was cracked, and wine dribbled on my jacket. Swigging red wine from a plastic bottle is not my Wagner style. – *Sid Kennedy*

Sid Kennedy has been a member of the WSNZ since 2000, and was from 1992-99 Stage Manager of Christchurch Symphony and fondly known as Symphony Sid.

AUCKLAND:

Wagner society members lucky enough to attend the NZSO's concert performance of *Die Walküre* (in Auckland) are still basking in the glow of a glorious Wagnerian experience. From the opening storm sequence we were mesmerized by the gorgeous orchestral

THE SHOCK OF THE OLD!

It's nice to know that Wagner still has the power to shock!

As *Die Walküre* Act 1 approached its conclusion, at the recent Christchurch performance, the surtitles ensured that even those who were new to the story could understand what was going on. A split second after it was revealed that Siegmund and Sieglinde were lovers **and** siblings, a young lady in close proximity, exclaimed, under her breath, "Oh no!"

sound, by the superior quality of the voices, by the drama so clearly evinced by both singers and orchestra, right to the luminous final notes – which were followed immediately by a standing ovation, deafening bravos, cheers and whistles.

In a performance consisting almost entirely of highlights, there were some stand-outs for this reviewer. The two sopranos were a revelation: Edith Haller as Sieglinde acted, sang and looked the part to perfection. She was as good as Eva Maria Westbroek in Bayreuth 4 years ago (which is saying something!). Christine Goerke in her first Brünnhilde role was truly outstanding – the best Brünnhilde I have ever seen. And Simon O'Neill was a perfect Siegmund. The latter two were infinitely superior to their counterparts in Bayreuth in 2008. As for the Valkyries, it would be hard to find a better band of women warriors. Apart from one they are all New Zealanders, so too is Margaret Medlyn who was a very fine and fierce Fricka.

We must all be grateful for the outstanding quality of our national orchestra, our amazing Music Director, Pietari Inkinen, our own New Zealand singers and the brilliantly chosen guest singers who gave us, truly, a Wagnerian event to remember. – *Juliet Rowe*

OPERATUNITY KNOCKS!

Operatunity are organising a Charity Gala event in the Grand Ballroom at the Langham, Auckland on 1 December. Simon O'Neill has agreed to sing at the Gala, along with the New Zealand 3 Tenors and others. For those outside Auckland the Operatunity Travel Club has put together a weekend package to attend the event which will also include afternoon tea with Simon.

The Gala night will include an auction for which Simon has generously given 2 tickets to the Met for one of his performances followed by his meeting the winners afterwards and giving them an escorted backstage tour. We will publish further details when they come to hand or you can find out more information at www.operatunity.co.nz

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2012 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 2 September 5.00pm

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

Lohengrin – DVD Screening:

Production from the Bavarian State Opera with Jonas Kaufmann and Anja Harteros.

NB This meeting will begin at 5.00pm

Sunday 9 December 7.30pm

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

Wagner's Early Operas:

Terence Dennis presents *Die Feen* (The Fairies) and *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love) – plus Christmas festivities!

Christchurch

Friday 26 October 7.30pm

Venue: A6, University of Canterbury

The View from the Stage - Part 3 (1924

-1944) Chris Brodrick continues his series on the Bayreuth Festival visitors.

Sunday 25 November 6.00pm

Venue: TBA Christmas Barbecue

Wellington

Sunday, 25 November 5.00pm

Venue: 27 Wade Street, Wadestown

Christmas Cocktails

End-of-year Christmas celebration at the home of Tibby and Adrian Simcock.

Dunedin

Sunday, 30 September 2.00pm

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

The View from the Stage Part 2:

Christopher Brodrick (WSNZ President) looks at those who attended the Bayreuth Festival 1882 – 1914.

Sunday, 4 November 2.00pm

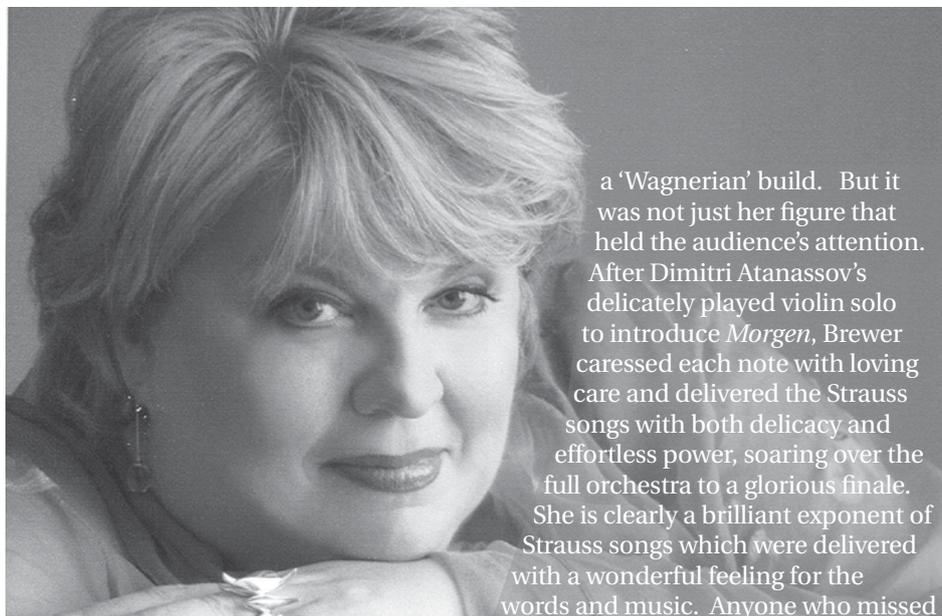
Venue: Sale-Black House, Department of Music, The University of Otago

Women in Wagner's Life and Art: Some of Wagner's most intriguing operatic characters are women – often appearing as part-angel, part-demon — Elisabeth, Venus, Kundry . . . Heath Lees investigates.

Sunday, 2 December 12.00 noon

Venue: Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row, (Turn right at top of Pitt Street)

Christmas Luncheon: followed by *The Golden Ring* documentary.



a 'Wagnerian' build. But it was not just her figure that held the audience's attention. After Dimitri Atanassov's delicately played violin solo to introduce *Morgen*, Brewer caressed each note with loving care and delivered the Strauss songs with both delicacy and effortless power, soaring over the full orchestra to a glorious finale. She is clearly a brilliant exponent of Strauss songs which were delivered with a wonderful feeling for the words and music. Anyone who missed

BREWER WOWS AUDIENCE

Many Wagnerians were sad to learn that Deborah Voigt's visit to Australasia had to be cancelled due to urgent hip surgery. By a stroke of great fortune the APO was able to engage Christine Brewer to sing the scheduled Strauss/Wagner programme. Coincidentally Voigt was Brewer's replacement in 2009 as Brünnhilde at the Metropolitan Opera, when Brewer had knee surgery, so it was really a quid pro quo. Named by the BBC Music magazine as one of the 20 greatest sopranos of the recorded era, Brewer has studied under the great Swedish Wagnerian soprano Birgit Nilsson. In recent years Christine has sung a lot of Wagner and Strauss and has carefully managed her singing career around family commitments. She prudently waited until she was 40 before singing *Isolde*.

Brewer is a commanding figure on stage with what one could describe as

the concert can hear her wonderful rendition of *Morgen* on the APO web site. Japanese conductor Tadaaki Otaka led the orchestral accompaniment with great sensitivity in both the Strauss songs and the later Wagner excerpts from *Tristan & Isolde*

In the second half of the concert, Brewer came on stage and sat through the Orchestral Prelude before rising to sing the *Liebestod*. She projected the overwhelming love that *Isolde* has for *Tristan* in a truly ethereal way, and her voice seemed to float over the full orchestra with commanding ease. The audience loved it and gave her a standing ovation.

Some members of the Wagner Society were fortunate enough to meet Christine Brewer and also the conductor, Tadaaki Otaka, at a social function after the concert. She proved to be a relaxed and delightfully warm personality who was plainly very happy in this her first visit to New Zealand. – *Bob O'Hara*

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Patricia Sanger Wellington
Margaret Clark..... Wellington
Joachim Stossberg Auckland
Malcolm Monteath Christchurch
Joel Baldwin Auckland
Sandra Greenfield Auckland

FAREWELL

Maggie Riley..... Wellington

MELBOURNE RING 2013

To date more than 80 members have booked either packages or tickets only to the *Ring Cycle* in Melbourne next year ensuring that there will be a large WSNZ contingent at this event!

If you are still considering whether to book for the Melbourne *Ring* then you need to make your mind up in the very near future as tickets are selling extremely quickly. Renaissance Tours, our package provider, now only has tickets available in Categories B and C, with the higher grades already sold out. If you are interested in making a booking then please call:

RENAISSANCE TOURS

PH: 0800 403 62

(TOLL FREE NUMBER)

DANUBEGOLD

Wagner In Budapest – June 2012

Christchurch member Gloria Streat reviews her recent visit to Hungary and explains the How.....

Budapest in the summer is an enticing prospect. Budapest in the summer with a *Ring Cycle* is seductive. Budapest in the summer with a *Ring Cycle* of the highest order musically, and with ticket prices that don't break the bank, is irresistible!

In a week in June this year, Jonet Ward, another Christchurch Wagner Society member and I spent a glorious week in the Hungarian capital attending the *Ring* performed during the *Wagner in Budapest* opera festival. And what a *Ring Cycle* it was!

The operas were presented, not in the beautiful baroque opera house, but in the Budapest Palace of the Arts, a handsomely appointed and modern concert hall (see opposite) situated outside of the city-centre on the banks of the Danube.

In the semi staged, minimalist production, the singers were in evening dress (with the exception of Siegfried who was dressed more informally) singing out to the audience from the front of the stage, with the superb Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra placed below on the floor in front of the stalls, and the whole, masterfully conducted by the Hungarian maestro Adam Fischer.

A large screen behind the singers was integral to the production, as was a team of very versatile and athletic dancers.

The screen enabled images to be projected on to it, or reflected through it to suggest, for example, the Rhine maidens swimming in the Rhine or an idyllic meadow setting as Siegmund and Sieglinde run from Hunding's house. Dancers were used to act out scenes, sometimes just their silhouettes behind the screen but more often performing alongside the singers in front of the screen. Puppets and models were also widely used. The dancers became the Nibelungs, leaping and cavorting around Alberich at all his appearances; they also became two menacing ravens with black feathered wings, hovering as it were over the scene from the high balcony, or accompanying the Wanderer in Siegfried. Loge, a dancer in a bright red suit darted, flame-like in and out of the action throughout the cycle.

The story was also enhanced by the evocative body language and facial expressions of the singers and, because they were facing the audience, we got the full force of their glorious voices.

To me, the most amazing performance was from the German tenor Christian Franz. He sang Loge in *Rheingold*,



Budapest at night and right, Gloria standing in front of the Budapest Palace of the Arts

the next night Siegmund in *Walküre*, and then, with a night off in between, Siegfried in *Siegfried* and Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung*. Throughout he sang, without loss of tone or sign of tiredness, most musically and beautifully. His performance, as he regained his memory of Brünnhilde in the scene before he died, was extremely moving. His singing is the best Wagner singing I have heard.

Other stand out singers were the Hungarian mezzo Judit Nemeth, who sang Fricka, Waltraute and the 2nd Norn; Matti Salminen, now looking his age but still a commanding figure as Fafner and Hagen; the Wotan of Juha Uusitalo, who incidentally is the Wotan in the Melbourne *Ring* next year; the Alberich of Hartmut Welker; Gerhard Siegel as Mime and Michaela Kaune as Sieglinde.

The Brünnhilde was the Swedish soprano Iréne Theorin. With her fair good looks and her sparkling evening dress she looked stunning. Her voice, strong and accurate certainly handled the wide range required for the role, but her vibrato and some shrillness spoiled her singing for me.

Most of the other roles were sung by Hungarian singers and there was not a weak link among them. The eight Valkyries, lined up along the front of the stage, raised the roof while their dancing actors with horse heads cavorted in front of and behind the big screen as images of slain warriors floated down. Most impressive too was the large men's chorus of the Budapest Studio Choir as they belted out their answers to Hagen's challenge in *Götterdämmerung*.

Finally there was the orchestra, and what an orchestra! They made a fabulous sound always enhanced by the live, but not too live, acoustic of the hall. The playing gripped me, moved me, swept me along in the most memorable of *Ring* journeys.

This was my 7th *Ring Cycle* and it was the best.



How.....

How did I find out about the 'Wagner in Budapest' Festival?

My first visit to the Festival was in June 2011 when I saw two very good performances of *Lohengrin* and *Tristan & Isolde* that I found on the excellent website www.OPERABASE.COM. Tickets for these performances had been booked for me with the help from a Hungarian friend of a friend who lives in Budapest.

When I realised that 'Wagner in Budapest' was an annual Festival and that they were performing a *Ring Cycle* in 2012, I was determined to go back and persuaded Jonet Ward and a Kiwi friend who lives and works in Germany to go too.

In September 2011 I tried booking on-line for the 2012 *Ring Cycle* but, for some reason my credit card was blocked. Luckily I found an email address on the website for the booking office and sent a note explaining the problem. A nice lady immediately replied and said that they would hold the tickets for me and I could collect and pay for them before the performance of *Rheingold*. I must admit I was very relieved to pick them up – it was quite a leap of faith going all that way without my tickets.

You won't believe this!

The tickets were cheap – A reserve, about halfway back in the stalls, excellent seats as they all have good sight lines, and they cost us NZ\$324 each for the whole cycle, that is about NZ\$60 per person per opera! Compare that to the prices for Opera Australia *Ring Cycle* next November.

To find out about next year's opera festival... Google 'Wagner in Budapest Opera Festival 2013'. On the programme is *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*. The ticket booking site is: www.mupa.hu