



TRISTAN & ISOLDE: TRIUMPH!



Eckehard Stier conducts while Daveda Karanas (Brangäne) keeps watch. Photo: Adrian Malloch

Those members of the Wagner Society who were lucky enough to attend the Auckland Philharmonia's concert performance of *Tristan & Isolde* not only became part of history, attending the New Zealand premiere of the work, but were treated to a wonderful performance.

For those who could not be there we asked four members of the Society, Bob O'Hara, Neil Jenkins, Jeanette Miller and Richard Green, to share their thoughts with us.

BOB O'HARA:

"With a stellar cast of international singers this performance promised to be an exciting event. There was a pregnant pause as conductor Eckehard Stier raised his baton, then launched into the poignant cello opening of the Prelude. We then heard the *Tristan chord* for the first time and began to appreciate the musical challenge of Wagner's enigmatic modulations. The orchestra were superb: playing at an exceptionally high standard throughout the work. Tenor Henry Choo, singing

the Steersman, opened Act 1. We were then enthralled by Annalena Persson's Isolde and Daveda Karanas as Brangäne. Persson's voice was bright and clear while Karanas' singing was contrastingly rich and lustrous giving the impression that she always had more in reserve. These two quickly established their characters and Lars Cleveman (Tristan) arrived on stage, his ringing heldentenor stamping a mark of exceptional quality on the performance. Eckehard Stier made no visible effort to subdue the volume of his large orchestra to accompany the singers and they had to sing nearly all of their lines with resonant 'edge' to cut through the orchestral volume. In a large Wagnerian role opera singers have to 'pace' themselves in order to survive to the very end. It was a mark of the experience of these three principals that they were able to do this without any sign of holding themselves in reserve.

When Brangäne admits that the drink she prepared was in fact a love potion,

MIXED EMOTIONS

July 2014: two performances of Wagner one in each hemisphere and two different reactions.

In Auckland the response to the APO's concert performance brought the audience to its feet cheering. In the words of Jeanette Miller and Richard Green: "*More's the pity if it were to prove a once-in-a-lifetime concert experience—the massed standing ovation that greeted the final chord of the Auckland Philharmonia's Tristan und Isolde was surely testament enough that New Zealand audiences have a hunger for more of the same.*"

12,000 miles away (give or take a few) the audience in Bayreuth was also on its feet reacting to Frank Castorf's 'radically deconstructed' *Ring* with a different sort of hunger in mind. Lance Ryan, who sings the role of Siegfried in this year's production, gave the following quote to *The Guardian*: "*I have never come across an audience with so much hatred, so much anger, such a thirst for revenge. They take everything personally. It makes you a little bit scared, and it's really quite terrifying.*"

So much for killing the dragon, dispatching Mime and making kindling out of Wotan's spear! Has the boy who knows no fear finally found something terrifying? But was it the audience or the production that was terrifying: The sword replaced by a Kalashnikov gun, Wotan receiving oral sex from Erda and plastic crocodiles crawling across the stage? *Berliner Zeitung's* reviewer wrote that the performance was perfectly bearable as long as one kept one's eyes closed.

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2014 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 31 August at 7.30pm (NOTE TIME)

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
DVD Screening: Tannhäuser Acts 2 & 3
Following Act 1, that was shown earlier in the year, Ken Tomkins introduces Acts 2 & 3 of the popular Baden-Baden production. Replaces the previously advertised *Die Walkure*

Sunday, 7 December at 7.30pm

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

Christmas Function:

Featuring a presentation by Professor Heath Lees on the Ups and Downs of Wagner on Film

Wellington

Sunday, 21 September at 5.30pm (NOTE TIME)

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace, Church Hall

John Pattinson will give an illustrated talk entitled *Wagner and the Operatic Drug Scene*

Sunday, 16 November at 4.00pm

[venue to be confirmed]

The Ups and Downs of Wagner on Film:

Professor Heath Lees will talk about Wagner in film, and the making of the film *Wagner's Ring – A Tale Told In Music*

December

Christmas Party. Details later

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

John & Margaret Skegg..... Auckland
Jane Cameron Christchurch
Diana Wallingford..... Whitianga

FAREWELL

With sadness we report the death of Wellington member, Peter Heginbotham.

CROSSWORD CLUES ANSWERS :

Last clue: DONNER-E-D
by R,
30 GUNTHE-R anagram of 'the gun'
R,
29 R-ULED anagram of 'duel' by
25 STAB
22 PRATI anagram of 'part'
19 WAG(N)ER 'n' inside 'bet'
inside R & N
13 R(EFFRA)N anagram of 'Fretia'
anagram of 'spelt'
8 Pe(D)AI D = Germany IVR code
CROSSWORD CLUES ANSWERS :

Christchurch

Friday, 31 October at 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Rounding off the Wagner bicentenary year: Michael Sinclair, former secretary of the WSNZ, takes us through the Wagner year of 2013 with images, music and video from around the world including a round-up of the Melbourne *Ring*

Sunday, 30 November at 6.00pm

Venue: TBA

Christmas Party. Details later

Dunedin

Sunday, 5 October at 2.00pm Venue:

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

The View from the Stage - Part 3

(1924 -1944): Chris Brodrick continues his series on the Bayreuth Festival visitors

Sunday, 7 December at 12.00 noon

Venue: Te Rangi Hiroa College, 192 Castle Street, Dunedin

Christmas Luncheon followed by

Historical Perspectives:

Winifred Wagner, wife of Wagner's son Siegfried, was the director of the Bayreuth Festival through the momentous period of 1930-1945.

In 1975 she was interviewed by German film director Syberberg. This presentation will cover excerpts from the original five hour interview. German, with English subtitles

HEY BIG SPENDERS!

The Australian reports that Wagnerites who descended on Melbourne last November for Opera Australia's *Ring Cycle* boosted spending in the state by \$15.8m.

An economic impact study shows visitor spending on hotels, meals, transport and shops exceeded expectations.



the two lovers are rendered speechless. It is at this point that Wagner brings Act 1 to a dramatic conclusion with a glorious trumpet fanfare as the curtain falls on the act.

In Act 2 the King and his court are out on a hunting expedition and Brangäne warns Isolde as she senses a trap set by the jealous Melot. Isolde disregards the warning and signals Tristan who joins her in an ecstatic duet in which they sing a melodic form of the enigmatic *Tristan chord* first heard in the Prelude. Despite Brangäne's beautiful warning, sung while keeping watch from the organ loft, the two lovers abandon themselves to their growing passion and ecstasy using the darkness of the night to hide their loving embraces. The music climaxes when Melot and King Marke burst in on the couple's embrace. King Marke, sung by bass, Rúni Brattaberg, then launches into what Sir Donald McIntyre always refers to as "King Marke's twenty minute moan". Brattaberg's delivery was powerfully sung and backed by an eloquent bass clarinet obligato by Bridgit Miles. Tristan challenges Melot and then falls on his adversary's sword, suffering a serious wound.

Act 3 opens in melancholy mood with Martin Lee's eloquent cor anglais. Kurwenal has brought Tristan to Kareol Castle and, unable to dress his wounds, summons Isolde as he has faith in her healing powers. In this act Bo Skovhus showed his consummate experience of the Kurwenal role and sang with precision and intense feeling. His rich baritone voice commanded the stage and projected Kurwenal's role to perfection. When Melot and King Marke arrive with Brangäne, Kurwenal believes they have come for vengeance rather than forgiveness and pardon, and he throws himself at Melot killing him before being fatally injured himself. When Tristan dies in Isolde's arms, she becomes lost in a vision of their complete union in death, and she concludes the opera with the famous *Liebestod*. This was beautifully sung and was a fitting end to the opera.

At the conclusion of the opera, the audience rose as one and gave a standing ovation to the soloists, conductor and orchestra as they took their bows on stage. This New Zealand premiere was a truly momentous occasion – magnificent performance worthy of the event. On reflection one could say that the orchestra were the true stars of this performance, and while every section played well, the woodwind and horn sections were especially effective."

JEANETTE MILLER AND RICHARD GREEN:

“More’s the pity if it were to prove a once-in-a-lifetime concert experience—the massed standing ovation that greeted the final chord of the Auckland Philharmonia’s *Tristan und Isolde* was surely testament enough that New Zealand audiences have a hunger for more of the same.

Ranking up there with the hugely successful 2006 *Parsifal* in Wellington, this stunning New Zealand premiere rendition of the Meister’s most headily-romantic work drew Wagnerites to a packed Auckland Town Hall. Full credit to the APO for taking up and delivering on this monumental challenge. It was truly a tour-de-force, given full recognition by a rapturous response. One marvels that this orchestra finds time to prepare its vast repertoire, quite aside from inserting four hours of *Tristan* as a bonus. Indefatigable Music Director Eckehard Stier was on the podium, powering the work forward with ever-mounting passion, sensitive always to maintaining balance between singers and the on-stage orchestra.

A splendid assembly of Nordic singers filled the leading roles. The demands Wagner makes on his artists (his first troupe grumbling that the work was unsingable) always evoke a nagging fear that someone mightn’t make it to the finish. (The Met once needed three Tristans to match Birgit Nilsson’s Isolde!) No such concerns here. Lars Cleveman’s robust heldentenor might lose beauty of tone on the occasional pianissimo, but thrilled with its volume and clarity and made easy work of the role’s extreme demands. Even hints of a challenged throat, with a vocal break in his Act I ‘Isolde’, did not detract from a robust and moving performance in Act III’s difficult mad scene. (The exquisite cor anglais pastorale was delivered here by Martin Lee.)

Annalena Persson makes a rare Isolde. Slight, beautiful, for once a plausible object of Wagnerian romantic passion, she gives forth a ringing dramatic soprano of startling volume. Could she possibly sustain the energy and drive of her opening Act I scenes? Yes indeed, her *Mild und Leise* bringing the night to its climactic close was finely nuanced, thrilling, and remarkably fresh-voiced. Yes the vibrato was wide at times, but she brought passion and drama to a clearly-familiar role, and the performance was stunning.

From Denmark, Bo Skovhus is a consummate Kurwenal, faithful vassal to Tristan, a singer-actor of imposing stature and stirring vocal delivery, ably expressing the divided loyalties and confused justice the plot presents. His fellow-countryman Rúni Brattaberg is vocally and physically a heavyweight bass King Marke, short-

Tristan & Isolde was supported by The Wagner New Zealand Foundation and The Wagner Society of New Zealand



Daveda Karanas (Brangäne) & Annalena Persson (Isolde) in rehearsal Photo: Adrian Malloch

changed by his brief scene of rather meek acceptance that his nephew has just seduced his fiancée, but his famously long aria had a hefty and rich sonority.

Greek-American mezzo Daveda Karanas was an inspired Brangäne; a young singer possessed of a big and lustrous voice with tremendous carrying power, and from whom we are sure to hear more. The mixer of the fateful potions had an impressive vocal command and dramatic familiarity with the character. Minor roles were well filled by the Swedish-Greek baritone Marco Stella as a sinister Melot, Henry Choo from across the Tasman as the sailor/shepherd, and Jarvis Dams, the cast’s sole New Zealander, singing the helmsman. The Chapman Tripp opera chorus gave forth with stirring sailors’ choruses.

Once-in-a-lifetime? Hopefully not. But even if it was, the APO has given its supporters, out-of-town visitors, and even Wagnerites from overseas, a concert-goer’s peak experience that memory will forever treasure.”

NEIL JENKINS:

“Aucklanders were treated to a superb concert performance of the opera where the highest credit must go to the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra and their Music Director Eckehard Steir.

There were many special orchestral moments. All the singers sang with enthusiasm.

Special mention must be made of the cor anglais solo from Martin Lee in the third act.

Annalena Persson would have to be the most ideal Isolde, visually, one could wish for. Her presence was excellent. However her voice, rather shrill and with a noticeable vibrato, was always loud, making her attack on the music aggressive.

The singing from the remainder of the principal cast was as good as it gets.

Lars Cleveman can be proud of his interpretation for the role of Tristan.

His experience enables him to pace through the long passages without faltering. His facial expressions will always add greatly to his character, whether it be a concert or fully staged performance.

Daveda Karanas was outstanding and gave a warm and sympathetic portrayal as Brangäne. She was electrifying in several scenes. Her rich mellow tone, especially during the second act duet, was welcome.

Rúni Brattaberg sang a glorious King Marke. He performed the role with conviction, giving a quality of depth to his lower notes. His height and presence was commanding.

Bo Skovhus has the right stature to be vocally and visually ideal as Kurnewal. His voice sounds magnificent and showed no hint of tiring, especially when joined by Tristan during the final act.

Marco Stella was rich in voice. He sang a mean and devious rogue as Melot to perfection. I can imagine the extent of his portrayal if he were given the chance for the audience to see him in costume.

The two minor roles were sung by Jarvis Dams and Henry Choo. The Chapman Tripp chorus sounded robust.

In all, the evening was certainly a winner and should be considered by Wagnerian enthusiasts as a tremendous success.

But it was really the Auckland Philharmonia under accurate and careful guidance from Eckehard Stier that won the audience over and made this an ecstatic event.”

Many thanks to Jeanette, Richard, Neil and Bob for sharing their thoughts with us.

In the next newsletter: Peter Rowe in discussion with Eckehard Stier – a conductor’s view of *Tristan & Isolde*.



Noel Mangin as Hagen in a Seattle Ring

PUZZLING QUESTIONS!

In the July newsletter Christchurch member (Symphony) Sid Kennedy alerted us to a clue in the Press crossword and gave us the solution. The story prompted an email from Wellington member Rex Benson who is now in his 17th year composing the *Kropotkin* crossword for the *Saturday New Zealand Herald*. His email contained some more clues for you to unravel. Have fun! -(*The answers are at the bottom of page two*)

8. A version of *The Ring* shown around Germany has a piano part (5)
11. What Brünnhilde did when Siegfried slew Mime is spelt out in the opera (5)
13. 'Burden of Freia' composed in 19's 6th and 4th pieces (7)
19. If he revised opera, bet new beginning would be in it! (6)
22. Silly part played by Siegfried some think (4)
25. What finished off Siegfried? Guess! (4)
29. Wotan did this duel – got beaten by 19 finally (5)
30. 19's character in the gun – shot by Rex (7)

and one more:

Dull-witted god of thunder appearing on the third and last parts of *Rheingold* (8)



LORIN MAAZEL 1930 – 2014

Lorin Maazel, the first American to conduct at Bayreuth, died in July aged 84. Born in France to Jewish American parents of Russian origin, Maazel was brought up in America and made his conducting debut at the age of eight. He embarked on his career in earnest in 1953, establishing a reputation in European concert halls by 1960 where in the same year he made his debut at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus conducting *Lohengrin* with a stellar cast that included Windgassen, Varnay, Neidlinger and Adam.

During his career he was appointed music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, and the New York Philharmonic.

In 1989, after the death of Herbert von Karajan, Maazel expected to be appointed chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, even calling a press conference to announce his appointment. Maazel was left publicly humiliated, albeit of his own making, when the Berlin Philharmonic announced their new conductor would not be Maazel but Claudio Abbado. Maazel immediately severed all connections with the orchestra.

A TIGHT SPOT!

If you fancy wandering down memory lane, Seattle Opera have made 14 audio tracks from their mid 70's *Ring Cycles* available on the internet. To find them go to 'the-Wagnerian.com' and look for the story dated 27 June 2014 or type – <http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2014/06/listen-now-seattle-operas-mid-70s-ring.html> – in your browser.

What makes these released clips of particular interest is the chance to hear New Zealand bass, Noel Mangin, singing the role of Hunding in *Die Walküre*. Noel had a long association with the opera company and sang a number of the bass roles in their *Ring* productions including Hunding, Hagen and Fafner. Seattle Opera began their *Ring Cycles* back in 1973 performing the cycle twice, once in the original German and then in English using Andrew Porter's English translation. Noel, who was based at Hamburg Opera, was fluent in both languages.

Which reminds one of the story Noel used to tell of a particular performance in Seattle when Hunding's menace would have come to nought had it not been a particularly hot night!

Hunding's costume for the Seattle production included a pair of leather trousers. Unfortunately for Noel just as he made his Act 1 entry in *Die Walküre* the buttons on his leather trousers succumbed to the pressure of his ample girth. His modesty and Hunding's malevolence were maintained thanks to the heat. Noel was sweating so profusely that the leather stuck to his legs long enough for him to complete the Act before undergoing emergency repairs!

COMING UP IN THE NEXT TWO MONTHS

Over the next couple of months members of the Wagner Society will be in for some real treats. On 31 August, Auckland members will have the chance to complete watching the DVD of the Baden Baden *Tannhäuser* production. Act 1 was shown earlier in the year and on the last day of Winter Ken Tomkins will present Acts 2 and 3.

The day after the election on 21 September John Pattinson will give Wellington members a break from politicians with his very entertaining talk *Wagner and the Operatic Drug Scene*.

Christchurch welcomes Michael Sinclair back from warmer climes, on 31 October, to round off the Wagner bicentenary year, while on 5 October, in Dunedin, Chris Brodrick will present his talk *View from the Stage – Bayreuth 1924 - 1944*.