



TEARS AND TANTRUMS ON THE GREEN HILL

While relative peace may have reigned on Bayreuth's Green Hill for a number of years now, this was rudely shattered earlier this year with a couple of incidents that had all the hallmarks of the feuds that have been the trademark of the Wagner family since the composer's death.

In 2008 an uneasy peace was brokered between Katharina Wagner and Eva Wagner-Pasquier, the composer's great-granddaughters from Wolfgang Wagner's two marriages, who were jointly elected to run the festival, and have since done so in relative harmony. However, in June this year this peace was broken with the news that Wagner-Pasquier was no longer welcome on the Green Hill, being forbidden to offer any directorial input and physically banned from the Green Hill itself. This acrimonious outburst seems all the more bizarre given that Wagner-Pasquier was already due to stand down as joint director at the conclusion of this year's festival.

And adding fuel to the fire, heavyweight conductors weighed in on the feud. Both Daniel Barenboim and Kirill Petrenko expressed strong dissatisfaction at the treatment of Wagner-Pasquier with Petrenko threatening to withdraw from this summer's *Ring*. Only Bayreuth favourite, Christian Thielemann seemed unperturbed by events, but that would not last long.

While Bayreuth was busy feuding, events were taking place in Berlin that would add another angle to this tortuous tale. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra was grappling with the choice of a new chief conductor to succeed Simon Rattle who is standing down in 2018. It is common knowledge that both Christian Thielemann and Kirill Petrenko wanted this prestigious role, and when Petrenko was finally elected in late June this seemed to create further acrimony on the Green Hill.

Petrenko has been conducting *The Ring* at Bayreuth since 2013 and



King Marke (Georg Zeppenfeld) and Tristan (Stephen Gould) in Tristan und Isolde at the Bayreuth festival.

is already on record as saying that Bayreuth has been too demanding on his time, leaving him unable to conduct at the Munich Opera Festival (where he is music director) and giving him no summer break. Accordingly this will be his last year at Bayreuth and, given his comments about Wagner-Pasquier, it seems evident that relations with Katharina and Bayreuth in general are not good.

Meanwhile Thielemann had his eyes on Berlin, but it was not to be. Bayreuth swiftly moved to make him music director there, the first in the festival's history since Furtwängler, but it seemed like a small consolation prize. One can only speculate on the tensions between Thielemann and Petrenko, both rehearsing at Bayreuth for this year's festival, but a clear visible sign that these existed came when Anja Kampe unexpectedly withdrew from the role of Isolde, the opera Thielemann is conducting. Kampe is a close personal friend of Petrenko and there is more than a whiff that she was "taking sides."

Evelyn Herlitzius bravely filled the gap left by Kampe, and if there was to be redemption at Bayreuth after all these tantrums and tears it was that Katharina Wagner's new production of *Tristan und Isolde* was enthusiastically greeted on its opening night, with high praise for Thielemann's conducting. Even German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, gave it a "like," although it almost certainly came as light relief after an over-indulgence in Greek tragedy!



The announcement of Christian Thielemann's appointment, to the position of Musical Director of the Bayreuth Festival could be described as slightly unusual, even 'a world first'. Rather than call a press conference or send out a press release the world heard the news by way of Twitter and a sign in the Bayreuth car park!

@mystic_cat tweeted:- #Petrenko got Berlin, but #Thielemann got a parking lot #Bayreuth



MELBOURNE RING 2016

Thank you to everyone who responded to our recent email survey regarding the revival of *The Ring* in Melbourne in November/December 2016. The large response makes us confident that there will be sufficient people to make a WSNZ tour feasible. Accordingly we will go ahead and look into package options and advise everyone in due course. If you are not on email or did not receive the email survey for some reason and would like to register your interest, then please contact Michael Sinclair on 021 444 673 or melbournering@wagnersociety.org.nz.

FAFNER'S HORDE?

In the first of his occasional articles on recordings, Wellington member, Ben Thomas looks at the Ring.

It is possible that Wagner attracts those who tend towards obsession. In my case the obsession is collecting recordings of Wagner from every era. It started in 1965 when my bank very kindly deposited £90 into my account; three months' salary at that time. After waiting for a decent interval to see whether the money would disappear I extracted some of it to buy *Götterdämmerung* (Solti), closed the account and transferred my ill-gotten gains to another bank. So was my collection of Wagner recordings built on the same shaky ethical foundations as Valhalla.

Since 1965 my collection has grown to fill several shelves in a record cabinet and the obsession shows no sign of abating.

This is a brief story of collecting *Ring* recordings. There is no pretence at musical scholarship; I have no musical background. I just get great pleasure from collecting and listening to Wagner recordings over the years.

Between 1927 and 1932 HMV issued what is best described as a 'Potted Ring' which covered 122 78rpm sides (try sneaking that lot past your wife!). About 20 years ago the Pearl label issued the whole lot on to seven CDs including part of one CD devoted to *The Ring* leitmotifs. The recording featured the well-known Schorr, Leider and Melchior as well as lesser known artists such as the British tenor Walter Widdop. The array of orchestras and conductors is too bewildering to cover.

These are recordings no Wagner lover should be without and give a glowing picture of Wagner performance of that period. The sound is remarkably good and it is fascinating to hear interpretations from that era.

Over recent years a large number of complete *Ring* performances from the 1930s and early 1940s have become available mainly from the Metropolitan Opera under Bodansky and Leinsdorf. These recordings feature the great singers of that time with one exception: there seems to be no complete recording available of Frida Leider in a *Ring Cycle* (for that matter there is no complete recording of Leider singing any Wagner opera and if someone knows differently let me know where I can get the recordings). It is my dream that one day someone will unearth a complete *Ring Cycle* with Leider's Brünnhilde. There is however a taster in the form of a complete *Götterdämmerung* Act 2 under Beecham from Covent Garden in 1936. Oh for the power of time travel.



The Bodansky recordings are well worth hearing not least for hearing Marjorie Lawrence as both Brünnhilde and Sieglinde. As a non-musician I, for one, reckon she is at least the equal of Flagstad and in some respects, particularly youthfulness, outshines Flagstad. It seems to me though that she has been overshadowed by Flagstad and Leider. For anyone wanting to know more about her I would recommend the recent biography *Wotan's Daughter* by Richard Davis. It is a fascinating story not only of her career but her courage in battling polio.

There are some splendid recordings from the 1940s, many under Leinsdorf. Listening to some of these recordings I ponder the fact that while the world was tearing itself apart great music was still being made and preserved for posterity.

The 1950s provide an embarrassment of riches. If one wants one can probably have every *Ring* recording from Bayreuth for that decade. They are all worth listening to but for the purpose of this article I want to focus on just two recordings.

There were various bootleg recordings issued of the 1953 *Ring* under Clemens Krauss with a young Hotter plus Windgassen, Varnay and Neidlinger. I thought this *Ring Cycle* could never be surpassed; until that is a stereo recording of the 1955 *Ring* under Keilberth (why did all the great Wagner conductors of that era have names beginning with K?) appeared with the cast much the same as for 1953 but much improved sound. If I were only allowed one *Ring* recording on my desert island this would be the one. When the recording appeared I decided that there was not much point in continuing to collect *Ring* recordings and unless a complete Leider recording appears it would take a lot to tempt me into buying yet another version.

If you are interested in Bayreuth from that period one can also get recordings from the first post-war *Ring* under Karajan with what I thought was a much under-rated Wotan, Sigurd Björling (a wonderful *Walküre* Act 3 farewell) and pretty impressive but long forgotten tenor, Bernd Aldenhoff.

If the house is large enough there are recordings to be had from Furtwängler,

Karajan, Knappertsbusch, Kempe and a few others.

I cannot finish this without at least mentioning the recordings that started me on this path; the Solti *Ring*. I still love this recording. I still find the singing thrilling, and I love the recording effects that one would be unlikely to hear in a theatre. I suppose it has its faults (it certainly now has its detractors) but it was and remains a magnificent achievement. I remember growing up and reading *Gramophone* reviews as the cycle was released making comparisons with a so called golden age of Wagner singing in the 1930s. Listening now to recordings from the 1950s and 1960s that period too would qualify as a golden age.

We are incredibly lucky that recording engineers from the 1920s onwards have left such a rich legacy and we are lucky that modern technology enables us to listen to this legacy in reasonable sound and without having 122 shellac records sitting on the shelf with side changes every five minutes. There is no need to be restricted to one particular interpretation of *The Ring*. With or without the generosity of your local bank anyone can have immediate access to multiple interpretations.

WSNZ ACTIVITIES

The WSNZ springs into action on 6 September with an Auckland meeting featuring Simon O'Neill in conversation with Heath Lees. After the huge success of Simon and Christine Goerke's meetings in June this event will be most entertaining.

The following week, 13 September, Wellington hosts John Drummond with his fascinating talk on *Wagner and Hotels* while on 25 September John Pattinson will delve into *Wagner and the Operatic Drug Scene* for his talk in Christchurch.

Meanwhile the September meeting in Dunedin has a new date and will now take place on **Sunday 20th**. The programme is unchanged: Terence Dennis talking about the singers that Ben Thomas discusses in this newsletter.

There are two meetings in October. The first in Wellington on 11 October when Roger Wilson will remember the 1990 International Festival's momentous *Meistersinger*; while on 30 October in Christchurch, Jenny Lee will present an illustrated talk based on Arthur Rackham's drawings for *The Ring Cycle*.

RECENT DEATHS

We sadly report the deaths of:-
JON VICKERS, aged 88, one of the truly outstanding operatic tenors of his generation. (A full tribute will feature in the next newsletter).

LUDMILA DVORAKOVA, aged 92, who died in a fire at her home in Prague. Her international singing career, including Bayreuth, lasted from 1960 to 1985.

WAGNER MURMURS

- The Teatro Real, Madrid, will perform *Das Liebesverbot* in February/March 2016. This is a co-production with the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, though no dates have yet been announced for its London performances.
- Opéra national du Rhin will give the French premiere of *Das Liebesverbot* in May 2016.
- Stuart Skelton will sing Tristan in Baden-Baden, Berlin, London and New York in 2016.
- Opera North will give 6 cycles of its semi-staged *Ring* in 2016 in Leeds, Nottingham, Salford Quays, London and Gateshead.
- The Staatsoper unter den Linden will give two cycles of *The Ring* in June/July 2016. Simon O'Neill will sing Siegmund.
- *Tannhäuser* will be performed in Havana, Cuba in March 2016. This follows on from performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* in 2013.
- Klaus Florian Vogt will sing the title role in a new production of *Parsifal* at the 2016 Bayreuth Festival.

- Michael Sinclair

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Rosemary Barnes..... Auckland
Shirley Smillie.....Dunedin
Robin Ransom..... Auckland
Robyn Vavasour..... Wellington
Lenore & Lance West..... Auckland
Ian Phillips..... Wellington
Michael Snowden.....Christchurch
Diana Duff-Staniland..... Wellington
Biddy Welch..... Wellington
Sarah Dennis..... Wellington

WAGNER GALA:

SOME THOUGHTS FROM SYD KENNEDY

In a word this concert was **magnificent** and a credit and hugs all round to NZSO, WSNZ, and WNZF. For me it was another tick on my personal bucket list.

Christchurch, post earthquakes, is still without a performing arts venue for a concert of this scale, with the Horncastle Arena just a large tin shed designed for basketball, netball, other sports, and trade exhibitions. On visits I have found the hard plastic seats to be very uncomfortable, there is cramped leg room, and acoustics that are very fickle, indeed diabolical. The thought of a *Wagner Gala* in such a setting was not particularly appealing. This, I am pleased to say, was not the case.

A temporary screen wall divided the arena into two areas, and the NZSO was positioned on a huge elevated stage

WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND 2015 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 6 September 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
VIP evening: with Simon O'Neill and Heath Lees

Sunday 6 December 7.30pm

Venue: Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds St
Christmas Function: Featuring a Pot-pourri of Wagneriana plus our famous cake and wine

Dunedin

Sunday, 20 September at 2.00pm

NOTE NEW DATE

Venue: Black-Sale House, Department of Music, The University of Otago
Historical Perspectives: The First Recorded Ring

Terence Dennis presents a guided tour of the highlights of HMV's *Ring* recordings made between 1926-1932, including such singers as Frida Leider, Florence Austral, Lauritz Melchior, Walter Widdop, Friedrich Schorr and Ivar Andresen

Sunday, 29 November at 12.00pm

Venue: To be confirmed

Christmas Luncheon followed by Wagner In Exile - DVD

Antoine Wagner heads to Switzerland on the trail of his great, great-grandfather Richard Wagner who spent several years in political exile amongst the Alps

At the conclusion of the above, and as a bonus, Terence Dennis will give a piano recital of works from Wagner's Swiss period

Christchurch

Friday 25 September at 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

Wagner and the Operatic Drug Scene

John Pattinson will present his illustrated talk on the use of mind altering substances in Wagner's operas

Friday 30 October at 7.30pm

Venue: Lecture Theatre A6, University of Canterbury

An illustrated talk based on Arthur Rackham drawings for *The Ring Cycle*, as seen in Heath's *A Tale told in Music*, presented by Jenny Lee

Sunday 29 November Christmas BBQ, venue and time to be confirmed

Wellington

Sunday 13 September at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace Hall
Wagner and Hotels:

Professor John Drummond presents two life-changing moments for Wagner which took place in hotels: one in Chemnitz in 1849 and one in Stuttgart in 1864

Sunday 11 October at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's on the Terrace Hall
Die Meistersinger 25 years on: It's 25 years since the 1990 production of *Die Meistersinger* in Wellington. Roger Wilson, a member of the cast, will give an illustrated talk on this landmark Wagnerian event in New Zealand

Sunday 29 November

Time and venue to be confirmed
Christmas Party. Details later

taking full advantage of the tiered semi-circle of fixed and temporary seating affording every seat with a good elevated view of the stage and orchestra.

The setup really suited the 107 strong NZSO. Rather than being shoehorned onto a tight concert hall stage, or squeezed into an inadequate cramped opera pit, the NZSO were laid out with plenty of room. From my seat the acoustics excelled, from full NZSO orchestral tutti to the silky subtle sweetness of the soft solos.

The orchestral prelude to Brünnhilde's awakening '*Heil dir, Sonne*' was exquisite but I felt the stadium setup proved to be a mixed bag for soloists Christine Goerke and Simon O'Neill. As Brünnhilde and Siegfried the love duets were licentiously lustful, but at times visually awkward. Despite this their voices overcame the acoustic shortcomings and they managed to

make the stage and stadium their personal domain. To me though the NZSO and maestro Pietari Inkinen were the heroes of the Gala.

This concert was a real encore to the stunning performances of *Die Walküre* in 2012 and the spontaneous standing ovation was richly deserved. We had all dined on a magnificent musical feast.

RESTORED

The renovated Richard Wagner Museum has reopened alongside Villa Wahnfried in Bayreuth.

Revamped and doubled in size, at a cost of €20 million, the complex, of three buildings, contains an array of opera costumes, audio-visual displays, a cinema and a cafe, and will have changing exhibitions.

Wagner's Villa Wahnfried, also has been restored with many original furnishings.

A WAGNER WANDERER RETURNS

*Wand'rer heisst mich die Welt . . .
auf der Erde Rücken rührt' ich mich viel!*

*The world calls me Wanderer . . .
far over the earth's face I wend my way!*

Heath Lees reports on a recent three-week lecture tour of six North American Wagner Societies:- San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, Washington DC, Boston and New York.

When he arrives in *Siegfried*, the Wanderer tells Mime he has travelled far and wide, implying that this has taken him years, maybe even decades. In my case, comfortably aided by jet travel, e-mail, and Booking Dot Com, a single month was ample for covering more than half the world, and getting a really good view of what our collegiate North American Wagner Societies are up to.

The closing 'question-time' in first-stop San Francisco (one of the most lively and fascinating sessions of that sort that I've ever had) was all about the music, and no-one seemed worried if they had to sing the point of their query! They really work on their Wagner there: one member (a retired physicist) left me with a worked-out plan for video accompaniment to *The Ring* based on the mountainous Grand Teton area in his home state of Wyoming. Fascinating idea!

On the day of the Frisco presentation, it was exciting to discover that the three committee-members greeting the audience were all Asian. (SF was the point of arrival for the very first Chinese immigrants in 1848). Obviously the current Asian attraction to Wagner is not just a recent thing! But Frisco had great tourist attractions. On one morning I paid homage to the crooner Tony Bennett by taking one of their little cable cars halfway to the stars, while the next morning the famous bridge sparkled between rain and sun; nearly a Wagnerian Rainbow Bridge.

It was an education to see how some of the societies work hand in glove with their local opera company. They jog along supportively with all the company's repertoire, they move to a gallop with composers like Weber,

Beethoven and Richard Strauss, and they break into a positive lather when the mighty Wagner makes an appearance. During my short visit to next-stop Seattle, they were mounting a season of Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos* and the Wagner Society was right up there with the other friends and supporters. Seattle Opera is of course famous as a *Ring* city, thanks to the legendary Wagnerian Speight Jenkins, and now his successor from NZ Opera, Aidan Lang.

In this city, the Wagner Society is firmly and happily a part of Seattle Opera and linked to its outreach programme called *Wagner and More*. Really serious Wagnerians there included a playwright who has nearly completed a play that includes a theme about Wagner's 'alternative' endings to *The Ring*. What a great idea! And there were pictures all around of the soprano Christine Goerke, who had just triumphed there, and who has recently graced our own shores in the NZSO *Wagner Gala* concerts in June.

For the Wagner Society in third-stop Toronto, my presentation formed their first joint seminar with COC (Canadian Opera Company) in a newly opened lecture room. Thanks to great publicity it was a full house, plus a waiting list. I suggested they call the new venue the *Heath Lees Auditorium*. They said they would think about it.

Toronto's adventurous opera programme was sporting a double-bill of Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. Thanks to the warm relationship between opera company and Wagner society, I was given a free ticket for the final dress rehearsal (same as I'd had for *Ariadne auf Seattle*); an uplifting experience.

On to Washington DC, where a communication glitch meant that I got a splendid venue, marvellous technical resources, but alas, no piano. For me, trying to talk about Wagner's music without a piano is like trying to cut a lawn without a mower. Undaunted, I clipped out appropriate bits of my trusty DVD set; instead of me sitting at a piano playing examples, I showed them video clips of me sitting at the piano playing examples! It seemed to work. The Washington chairman



Rackham's Wanderer

Jim Holman, is a very distinguished Wagnerian with half a dozen Wagner books to his name, and runs a society whose membership embraces famous politicians (there was a Senator in the front row), diplomats, and cultural emissaries. Great company, eh?

Boston, my second-last stop, was the society that reminded me most of our own. Founded in 2003 and run by a husband-and-wife team of Dalia and Paul Geffen, who have directed what they call their "Mom-and-Pop opera company" as a "labor of love". Sometimes, in a city that lacks an opera house, they feel a little isolated (cf NZ) and have to travel many miles to come into contact with Wagner performances (cf NZ). But their combined skill in concert management and communication pays off in spades. Just look at the fun blogs they attract in, for example, www.missmusicnerd.com. (June 17, 2010). In the audience was Joanna Porackova, a noted Boston soprano (find her on YouTube).

The large and warm-hearted audience in New York embarrassed me with a standing ovation, and conversations afterwards revealed that the quality and depth of Wagner-awareness was again remarkable. They much enjoyed the left-field connections I made with Mendelssohn, Elgar, and the film composer James Horner. No doubt it appealed to their famously racy, NY 'chutzpah'. Their tireless chairperson, who glories in the name of Nathalie Wagner, has a genius for publicity, including face book and twitter; her clever campaign drew in a large crowd that cheered me off on my journey with wonderful memories to re-live back home.



The Rainbow Bridge?