



SIR JEFFREY TATE

28 April 1943 – 2 June 2017

It was with great sadness that we reported, in the last newsletter, the death of conductor Jeffrey Tate. For most of us in the WSNZ Jeffrey was an important part of our Wagner journey. His work with the State Opera of South Australia, *The Ring* in 1998 and *Parsifal* in 2001, gave us the start. In recognition of this, we asked Margaret Medlyn and Peter Bassett, two people who worked with Jeffrey, to tell us about their experiences working with him. Margaret from a singer's viewpoint and Peter from behind the scenes as dramaturge and artistic administrator on the *Ring*.

MARGARET MEDLYN:

A persuasive and cajoling presence, Jeffrey Tate was highly influential at the start of my time singing Wagner. His overriding concern was always to draw the best out his fellow musicians to serve the composer and, once I had benefited from his wisdom and started to observe him with others, it was a lesson in how to manage the varied and fragile egos of singers. He was a firm and commanding conductor; always fair, he expected the best from you and I worked hard to fulfil those expectations. What impressed me the most about his conducting of the Strosser *Ring* in Adelaide in 1998, was that he came a month before the stage rehearsals to work with the orchestra. Consequently they adored him and did anything he asked: very few of them had played Wagner before so he had to build their stamina and interest, and develop the sound he wanted. He took the time to tell them the story of the *Ring* and to explain about the Leitmotive, and what was implied when they were played, while the singer was singing about something else.

In the studio, on the rehearsal floor, you had Jeffrey's full attention: he was interested in everything – the sound you made, the clarity of the text and the thought process that got the result he wanted. It was demanding work, but so long as you were trying and thinking about it, he was patient. He couldn't



Sir Jeffrey Tate Credit: Daniel Bockwoldt/Photoshot/Avalon

stand people who would not change their set ideas and try something new.

While I was singing the various Rhinemaidens, Valkyries and covering Sieglinde in Adelaide, I was asked to understudy Kundry at English National Opera in the important new Niklaus Lehmann production. Both Jeffrey and Lionel Friend were encouraging, and they taught me the role in their "spare" time. Taking the time to explain the plot and the background, the musical structure was examined in detail, and the importance of the rhythm of the text was emphasised. Jeffrey then asked me to sing Kundry for the Adelaide production and, while I was in London, invited me to his Camden Town home to do some coaching. There, to my delight, having just been reading about Dresden and porcelain, I found he was an avid and knowledgeable collector of Meissen porcelain. He had a cabinet full of the rare early red stoneware made by Böttger, and Jeffrey took great delight in explaining the provenance of each piece.

Elke Neidhart's production of *Parsifal* in 2001 with Jeffrey was a highlight of my singing career. Jeffrey knew how I worked, and I knew what he wanted. I felt as if I could create anything on stage musically and vocally and he would be right there with me: it seemed as

though we were an entity working to the same end. The first night was a few days after the awful events of September 11 and was an incredibly emotional performance. Standing on the stage at the end of the performance we were all in tears. Not having sung *Parsifal* before, I asked Jeffrey if it was normal to have this sort of catharsis at the end of the show. He said "No, darling. We were all beyond wonderful and these are truly exceptional circumstances."

PETER BASSETT:

Jeffrey Tate came to Adelaide in 1998 as music director and conductor of the first Adelaide *Ring*. That production had been hired from the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris where it had had a season in 1994 which Jeffrey had also conducted. It is no exaggeration to say that the success of the 1998 Adelaide *Ring* owed a huge amount to Jeffrey's input and to his four months of meticulous preparation of the cast (most of whom were new to their roles) and the augmented Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. His knowledge of the score, garnered from his experience assisting Solti, Davis, Kempe and Kleiber at Covent Garden and Boulez at Bayreuth, was second to none. Listening again recently to recorded excerpts of the 1998 *Ring*, I have been struck by the beauty and transparency of his reading,



Photo: J. Konrad Schmidt

and I have heard orchestral details that I had never noticed before.

Apart from Jeffrey's musicianship, the quality that stays most clearly in my memory was his courtesy and kindness in dealing with everyone involved in the production. He could not have been further removed from some of the notorious autocrats who have wielded batons over the years, and he made a point of knowing and addressing every member of the orchestra by name. His effect on the orchestra's sense of achievement was long-lasting and, many years later, the ASO appointed him Principal Guest Conductor and Artistic Adviser, a position he held at the time of his death.

Jeffrey returned to Adelaide in 2001 to conduct *Parsifal*, and again he brought to the task a deep love of Wagner's score. This was reflected in his introduction in the printed programme in which he wrote: 'Stained glass cannot glow with any greater luminescence than the chords that accompany the first appearance of the Grail ... Why am I, the unbeliever, still moved almost to the brink of tears each time Gurnemanz ushers in the great interlude that links the forest and temple in an unhurried depiction of time becoming space? Are we not being invited to be seduced by, and therefore to 'feel', the very rhythm of our universe, the cycles of birth and rebirth that metaphysics tries to grasp, to 'feel' this as only music can make us feel?'

Those thoughts seem a fitting epitaph for a beautiful human being and an outstanding musician.

*Leb' wohl, du kühnes,
herrliches Kind!*

Our grateful thanks to Margaret and Peter for sharing their memories of a great musician.



Adolf Hitler with Winfried Wagner during the 1938 Bayreuth festival



A Wagner Tuba

Einleitung
Langsam und schmachtend

2 Hoboen
2 Clarinetten in A
1 Englisches Horn
1 u. 2' Fagott
Violoncelle

The most notorious chord in the world – the opening of *Tristan und Isolde*

WAGNER MURMURS

- Bayreuth *Ring* director, Tankred Dorst, died in June aged 91.
 - Yuval Sharon will be the first American to direct at Bayreuth when he stages a new production of *Lohengrin* at the 2018 festival. Roberto Alagna will make his Bayreuth debut singing the title role.
 - Plácido Domingo will conduct *Die Walküre* at the 2018 Bayreuth Festival.
 - Melbourne Opera will perform *Tristan und Isolde* in February 2018.
 - Philippe Jordan will conduct a new production of the *Ring* for Opéra National de Paris in its 2020/21 season.
 - Anna Kelo will direct a new production of the *Ring* for Finnish National Opera. It will be staged between 2019 and 2021 and will be conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen.
- *STOP PRESS* – Opera Australia have just announced a production of *Die Meistersinger* for Melbourne in November 2018. Details next issue.

- Michael Sinclair

AT A MEETING NEAR YOU!

With the arrival of Spring the warmer weather sees an increase in WSNZ activity. Two meetings in September may have been held prior to the newsletter being sent out but nevertheless deserve a mention:

Dunedin gets the ball rolling on 10 September with Terence Dennis presenting a talk on a composer who influenced Wagner, Carl Maria von Weber. The following week, 17 September, Auckland will host John Davidson, thankfully back to good health, presenting his *Visions of Valhalla* poems.

As we move into October Chris Brodrick will be in Wellington to present the third part of his series of talks, *The View from the Stage*, about famous and interesting people who attended the Bayreuth Festival. Part Three covers the festival during the most difficult period in its history, 1924-1945, a time in which Wagner was appropriated by a certain Herr Hitler. On 8 October Dunedin will resonate to the sound of brass – the Wagner tuba to be precise – when John Pattinson, in his illustrated talk, ponders the question *Tuba or not Tuba?* October ends with Otago's John Drummond travelling North to Christchurch to talk about *The Most Notorious Chord in the World – the so-called Tristan chord*. Judging by his previous talks this will not only be informative but highly entertaining.

WSNZ 2017 PROGRAMME DETAILS

Auckland

Sunday, 17 September at 7.00pm

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

Visions of Valhalla: John Davidson's presentation featuring his recently published collection of Wagner poems. A selection of these will be read, interspersed with talk, pre-recorded clips and piano excerpts.

Sunday 10 December 7.00pm

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

Christmas Function: Featuring a Pot-pourri of Wagneriana plus our famous cake and wine.

FROM THE WEB:

A RING FOR THOSE IN A HURRY

In 1952, American composer John Cage wrote his most famous work 4' 33". It is a composition of such simplicity that it can be performed by anyone who is prepared to sit at a piano for 4 minutes and 33 seconds and do nothing! While this 'sounds' strange it is as valid as sitting at an organ and playing a chord or single note for four and a half minutes! But where is this leading and what has it to do with Wagner? Well, in 1987 Cage commissioned Frank Scheffer to record Nikolaus Lehnhoff's *Ring* at the Bayerische Staatsoper in the form of an experimental film using a single frame technique where chance determined when the camera shutter would be opened. The resulting film, which lasts 4 minutes and 24 seconds, can be viewed on the the-wagnerian.com web site or by visiting the following web page: <https://youtu.be/ESVeE5E1EaI>

THE REST IS... WAGNERISM

More news from the Wagnerian.com that will excite fans of American music critic and columnist for the *New Yorker*, Alex Ross. Those of you who have read his best-selling books *The Rest is Noise* and *Listen to this* will be delighted to know that his new book, *Wagnerism*, is well on the way with a rough draft of thirteen of the fifteen chapters completed. He comments "I have, indeed, produced a considerable pile of paper imprinted with words, although skeptics might wonder whether any given page of the manuscript contains nothing more than typographically varied repetitions of the sentence "All work and no play makes Jack an ambivalent boy." Ross even posted evidence on his blog - therestisnoise.com of his cat Millie giving the work some careful study (see above next column).

Wellington

Sunday 1 October at 4.00pm

Venue: St Andrew's Hall

The View from the Stage Part 3 (1924-45)

Chris Brodrick presents his illustrated talk about famous and interesting people who attended Bayreuth Festival during the most difficult period in its history.

Sunday, 19 November at 4.30pm (*please note early starting time*)

Venue: Tibby and Adrian Simcock's 2 Rankin Street, Wadestown

End of Year Function: For catering purposes, please ring Tibby (472 7029) to let her know you're coming. There will be a charge of \$10.00 per head.

Christchurch

Friday, 27 October at 7.30pm

Venue: The Music Suite, Room P2, Rangī Ruru School, Merivale

The Most Notorious Chord in the World – the so-called *Tristan* chord.

John Drummond explains what the chord is all about, how Wagner came up with it, and why it is so appropriate to the story of the opera.

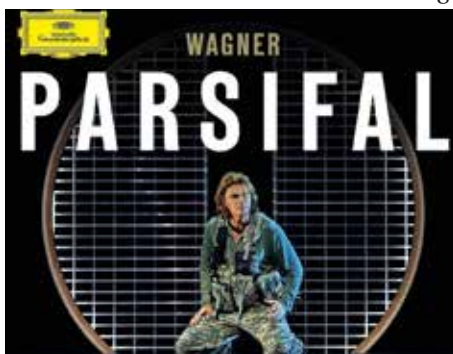
Date to be announced

Venue: TBA

Christmas Social Function



Some cat-basket-time reading?



Uwe Eric Laufenberg's acclaimed Bayreuth production of *Parsifal* has just been released on DVD and Blu-Ray. Klaus Florian Vogt sings Parsifal, with Georg Zeppenfeld as Gurnemanz, Elena Pankratova as Kundry and Ryan McKinny as Amfortas. The conductor is Hartmut Haenchen.

Dunedin

Sunday, 10 Sept at 2.00pm

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

Weber and Wagner: Kapellmeister in Dresden. Terence Dennis presents film and sound examples from Weber's masterpieces.

Sunday, 8 Oct at 2.00pm

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

Tuba or Not Tuba? That is the Question:

John Pattinson traces the development of this noble creature from the depths of the Rhine to its emergence on the modern concert platform.

Sunday, 26 Nov at 12.00 noon

Venue: Carrington College, 57 Heriot Row

Christmas Luncheon and Wagner Concert to inaugurate the Sydney Opera House.

NEW MEMBERS

A big Wagnerian welcome to:

Jennifer & Michael Culliford ... *Wellington*

BAYREUTH TICKETS:

A REMINDER

In about three to four months time we will be informed as to the number of tickets we are to be allocated for the 2018 Bayreuth Festival. For those of you who would like to obtain tickets for the event next year, you are urged to make contact with WSNZ Secretary, Peter Rowe, (Peter.Rowe@minterellison.co.nz) and request that your name be placed on the Bayreuth ticket list. If you are unsure if your name is already on this list, please play safe and contact Peter anyway.

There will also be some members whose name will be on the list but will be unable to attend in 2018. If you are one of those please let Peter know that you won't be able to make the trip next year but that you still want your name to be retained on the list. Finally, if you believe that your name is already on the list and that you are no longer in a position to travel to the festival, could you please request Peter take your name off the list. This will save a great deal of extra work when the allocation of tickets takes place at the end of the year.

As we write the newsletter, nine members of the Society are currently in Bayreuth for the 2017 festival. We hope that, on their return, they will be able to write about their experiences for the next issues of the newsletter.

LORD OF THE RING MEETS LORD OF THE RINGS

Heath Lees Examines
the Long and Deafening Silence
around Wagner and Tolkien

Until a few years ago, nearly everyone who spoke about the influence of Wagner's *Ring* on Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*) assumed that there was none. Hardly surprising this, since the world had been firmly told by Tolkien himself that "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases".

A pretty clear statement, you would think. Yet many people have tied themselves in knots trying to come to terms with Tolkien's flat denial while also admitting the obvious fact that similarities suggest themselves everywhere between *LOTR* and Wagner's *Ring*.

It's easy to tick off these similarities: there's the common currency of the ring itself of course, promising power and glory to those who hold it, yet trailing murky tales of evil, harm, and death in its wake. Alberich's frenzy to dominate finds its counterpart in Sauron's obsession with the power he hopes to re-gain through the "one ring to rule them all". The mysterious Gandalf — charismatic one minute, hapless the next — forces a sober comparison between his godlike wizardry and Wotan's tarnished divinity. Aragorn's re-forging of the sword of Elendil brings alive Siegmund's re-casting of Nothung. In his last, desperate attempt to grab the ring, Gollum perishes in the final fire at Mount Doom, just like Hagen does in Wagner's final pages of fire and flood . . . and so on. The parallels are many, and striking.

Not surprising say some, since Tolkien worked independently of Wagner but drew his ideas from the same sources. Tolkien's fans and biographers have invariably taken this line — so consistently in fact that people like New Yorker music-critic Alex Ross have recently blown a loud whistle on what he calls their "conspiracy of silence" designed to rob Wagner of any credit for Tolkien's tale¹.

More seriously, the question of where Wagner fits around *Lord of the Rings* has recently been taken up in two books, surprisingly published in the same year (2012)². Both authors list about twenty to thirty of the most significant comparisons that leap out from the two stories, and then turn to the matter of why so much secrecy has surrounded



Wagner and his favourite chair.

the question of Wagner's influence on Tolkien. Of course, they say, no-one can even start in the face of Tolkien's crushing "Both rings were round . . ." statement.

But one of these authors has a bright light to spread. Ms. Renée Vink, a language scholar from Amsterdam, went back to the original source of Tolkien's withering comment, namely a letter of 23 February 1961 from Tolkien to his publishers Allen and Unwin. There, she found an enraged Tolkien fiercely rubbishing an incompetent Swedish translator called Ohlmark who had blithely claimed that "[Tolkien's] *Ring* is in a certain way *der Nibelungen Ring*". The deluded translator then goes on to describe that ring in terms that have almost nothing to do with Wagner. It soon becomes clear that the ring in Ohlmark's mind is the ring which is briefly mentioned in the Middle High German epic of the *Nibelungenlied* (though Ohlmark gets many of its details wrong too). In any case, Wagner's title is *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (singular, referring to Alberich the Nibelung) whereas Ohlmark's title of *der Nibelungen Ring* is most often used to describe the *Nibelungenlied*. Tolkien's *Ring*, Ohlmark is saying, is really the ring that appears in this ancient Nibelungs' poem, so it's no surprise that Tolkien becomes furious. "Both rings were round," he declares in his famous sentence, "and there the resemblance ceases".

What's important for us is that Ms Vink is telling us that Tolkien was not talking about Wagner's *Ring* but about Ohlmark's far-fetched version of the *Nibelungenlied*. In that case, although Tolkien continued to be tight-lipped about the influence of Wagner's *Ring* on his story, he was certainly not uttering a flat denial of that influence.

This is not to say that Wagner was a mentor and a model for Tolkien. Far from



Tolkien and his favourite pipe.

it. Although he was a fervent Wagnerian in his early Oxford days, his training as a philologist and literary critic led him to increasingly harsh pronouncements over Wagner's cavalier treatment of the stories, to say nothing of the composer's musical but unscholarly use of the language. Knowing this, Tolkien's first biographer Humphrey Carpenter described Tolkien as holding Wagner's interpretations of the myths "in contempt". But then Carpenter immediately attached this observation to the "Both rings" statement, without realising that each statement had referred to a different work. And so the matter of Tolkien's 'denial' of Wagner's influence took permanent shape in most of the relevant literature.

All that said, it must be admitted that Tolkien didn't say much that *did* support the case for influence from Wagner's *Ring*. But that's easier to understand. Apart from his professional dislike of Wagner's unscholarly method, Tolkien also harboured an increasingly strong dislike of the composer on account of the contemporary Nazi appropriation of Wagner, and Hitler's perversion of the "Germanic" mythology that he had put on stage. Having begun *LOTR* under the gathering shadows of the year 1939, Tolkien might well have accepted Wagner's influence, yet discreetly refrained from pointing it out in public during such perilous, anti-German times.

At the conclusion of all this, writers are now able to examine each work more clearly in the light of the other and, in the process, the value of careful scholarship is raised even higher. Who knows, with this "Both rings" barrier removed, the road may now be clear for that famous Kiwi Sir Peter Jackson to do for Wagner what he's already done for Tolkien. Wouldn't that be amazing?

Or maybe not . . .

1 Ross, Alex. "The Ring and the Rings: Wagner vs. Tolkien." *The New Yorker*, December 22 and 29, 2003.

2 MacLachlan, Christopher. "Tolkien and Wagner: The Ring and Der Ring". Also Vink, Renée. "Wagner and Tolkien: Mythmakers". Both (2012), Walking Tree Publishers, Zurich and Jena.

