



LOVE WAGNER — WILL TRAVEL

It's been said before that Wagner's 1876 Bayreuth Festival began the age of cultural tourism for the musical world. Certainly, throughout the following century the Travel-for-Wagner urge grew relentlessly, and today we are seeing a veritable explosion of activity. More and more people are going to more and more *Rings* the world over, and everywhere you look there's a *Meistersinger*, a *Tannhäuser*, or perhaps a *Rienzi* or a *Das Liebesverbot* — early operas that even the mature Wagner wouldn't risk staging.

Down here in Australasia the pattern has been the same. Last month, the Wagner Society's twenty-fifth birthday was a good excuse for looking back, and we were reminded that New Zealand's first official Wagner Society trip was when twenty members went to Bayreuth in 1996. A memorable start. But look what happened — only two years later, more than a hundred eager Kiwis descended upon Adelaide for the very first fully-staged cycle of *The Ring* in this part of the world.

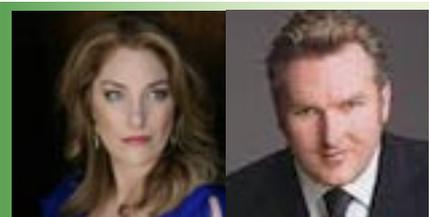
Since then, the growth in home-based and home-grown Wagner

productions has been phenomenal, and the frequency of travel to Wagner culture-spots has shot up.

Look at the way next year is shaping. Michael Sinclair is already well into organising two WSNZ trips to widely scattered *Rings* next year: Chicago in April, and Brisbane in November. Some incurable Wagner travellers are even adding the Paris *Ring* to their Brisbane experience. Iceland has just announced a semi-staged *Walküre* in May. Earlier in the same month, Melbourne will offer four Australian Opera performances of *Lohengrin*, and then in August, Melbourne Opera will semi-stage *Das Rheingold* (the 150th birthday of the first performance in Munich).

And that's not all. In October, New Zealand is exporting its world-renowned Wagner tenor Simon O'Neill to Queensland Opera's *Tristan* in October, with many NZ supporters already planning to be in the audience. How things have changed!

Could Wagner, tucked away in his little Bavarian town, have foreseen such an embarrassment of global activity? Probably not, but one thing's clear — no-one is complaining.



Meagan Miller is to be Queensland Opera's *Isolde* with Simon O'Neill as *Tristan*



Electrifying Ernst

About 60 Auckland members turned up for Antony Ernst's presentation on *Lohengrin* on 14 July. They were the brave ones who would not be put off by the fact that this session was billed to last for a very Wagnerian four hours, which meant that everyone's Sunday afternoon would be completely filled up with one person talking, a few visuals, and some bursts of recorded music. Not a riveting prospect, you might think.

In the event, the four hours rushed past like a train. Ernst brought with him three priceless commodities that all speakers yearn for: a spellbinding delivery, a voluminous knowledge, and an arresting bouquet of original insights.

To start with, he shot down the usual way of tracing Wagner's growth out of the operatic diet of France and Italy, plus the Dresden composer Weber. Not so, said Ernst, as we blinked and blinked again. Weber yes, but French and Italian opera, he went on, is a form of art that was born out of the Catholic traditions of these two countries, whose art was first and foremost a display art just as their Church was about power and display, and not the folk-based soil that produced Richard Wagner.

Ernst pointed to the Church-influenced opera stories that were circulating during Wagner's youth. All these, he said, revolved around sin, guilt, and a search for the kind of atonement that issued only from Rome. *Tannhäuser* showed the anguish of those who strayed outside of the conventional contract with the Church.

But *Lohengrin* ushered in a new theology that was neither French nor Italian but German, presaging the age of Luther and the Reformation. And in musical terms, Wagner looked to a musical predecessor who had instinctively understood the personal relationship between God and Man — a composer who was the schoolboy Wagner's musical meat and drink in Leipzig: J. S. Bach,



Photo credit Todd Rosenberg/
Lyric Opera of Chicago

Siegfried (Burkhard Fritz) in Chicago. Some two dozen WSNZ members will be there next April

cantor at the city's St Thomas' Church, the very church where Wagner was baptised. Wagner's 'operatic' background, Ernst insisted, came from Bach's highly dramatic approach to the Christian gospel, his ability to fuse words with music, and his uniquely personal possession of church music.

From that point, Ernst led us magically, step by step for the next two hours, through the whole opera. There was the 'miracle' of Lohengrin's swan-drawn arrival and there were Lohengrin's Christ-like attributes, musically symbolised by the soft halo of strings that opens the overture and stretches back to the early cantatas of Schütz, Bach and others.

We moved to Act Two and felt the crushing, tribal shame that hit Telramund when he was exposed by the newcomer, and the black-magic skill of Ortrud in bringing him back to emotional life. For once, King Henry the Fowler became a real person as Antony explained how he was reacting to actual historical cases of invasion from the East. By Act Three, even the vexing subject of the Forbidden Question gained clarity as a symbol of the Protestant reliance on Faith as opposed to the Catholic view of 'earning' one's forgiveness through confession and good works.

By the end, Ernst had reminded us that although we rightly think of the opera as a work of music, the context and story are massively important. The thin, often overlooked 'libretto' of *Lohengrin* was transformed from an operatic tale into a world encyclopaedia.

Antony Ernst is a master dramaturg — that vital member of an opera team who is its literary and historical consultant, explaining and clarifying through a study of authors, composers, scripts, libretti, texts and programmes. The art of a great dramaturg demands genius-level knowledge, a visionary appreciation of art, and a story-telling gift that entrances and communicates. Ernst has all this in spades and we were sorry when the four-hour session ended.

Ernst went on to Christchurch where reports tell us that he was equally fascinating on the subject of *Tristan*, which he saw as Wagner's radical attempt to describe in words and music the internal world of the self and its loving relationship with another human being.

The newness of the message, he said, is reflected in the music, which Wagner wrested out of its comfortable diatonic construction into strange new chromatic shapes that come together yet are unresolvable because they are different and separate — a musical parallel to the reality of human love relationships.

Two days later it was Wellington's turn — a two-hour version of the *Lohengrin* talk and a *tour de force* of compression. John Davidson adds that Ernst saw the Act III duet between Lohengrin and Elsa as a theological dialogue between God and the soul, and heard the timpani at the crisis moment pointing forward to *Die Walküre*.

Overall, Ernst's talks provided an original take on *Tristan* and a refreshingly new approach to *Lohengrin* as a significant bridge between 'early' and 'mature' Wagner.

Utterly absorbing!

EVENTS

Christchurch

Venue: *The Music Centre
St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Manchester St.*

Friday, 13 September at 7.30pm

Magic Fire

Alan Badel stars as Wagner in this 1955 film, with music ingeniously adapted by Korngold.

**Sunday, 13 October
Afternoon Time and Venue TBA**

Tristan und Isolde

Complete with a meal between acts.

Sunday, 1 December, Time and Venue TBA

Christmas BBQ/Pot-Luck

Auckland

Venue: *St Heliers Community Centre,
100 St. Heliers Bay Road*

Sunday, 22 September, 3.00pm (NB time)

Lohengrin

Full screening of the opera starring Anna Netrebko and Piotr Beczala. "One of the finest *Lohengrin* releases in years" says *Operawire*. Optional catered dinner; further details will follow by e-mail or post.

Sunday, 8 December at 7.00pm

A festive mix of Wagner items, and — at last — the cake and wine.

Wellington

Venue: *St Andrew's Hall, 30 The Terrace*

Sunday, 13 October at 4.00pm

Documentary film. Details to follow.

Sunday, 1 December

End of year party. Details to follow.

Dunedin

Venue: *Black-Sale House Lecture Room
cnr. St. David and Leith Streets*

Sunday, 20 October at 2.00pm

Don Juan in Hell

Mozart, Ibsen, Wagner, and Shaw

Chris Ackerley joins this quartet through two operatic imitations by GBS. See next page.

Sunday, 24 November at 12 noon

Note Venue Change: *Carrington College,
57 Heriot Row (Turn right off Pitt St.)*

Christmas lunch, to be followed by Wagnerian goodies.

Brisbane

Michael Sinclair is organising tickets and travel to Opera Australia's new production of *The Ring* in Brisbane in November, 2020.

A large group of WSNZ members is already booked but a few tickets are still available (Premium, A and B Reserve) These are for the second cycle (19 to 26 November 2020).

If you are interested in these tickets (members receive a 10% discount) or would like further information, please contact Michael by email at wsnz@theoperacritic.com.

NOTES

Changeover

As we announced earlier, the Newsletter changeover from print to digital will happen next year, after the September 2020 issue.

If you're happy to change now to the e-mail version, do please request this from the Secretary, Peter Rowe (peter.rowe@minterellison.co.nz) or phone him on: 021 610 869).

Largesse

Society Treasurer Jeanette Miller has been taking an overview of the financial ins and outs of the Wagner Foundation, which is the charitable 'arm' of the WSNZ.

Since the Foundation's inception in 2003, gifts from individual members, donations from the Society, and the substantial Roa Morissey bequest have totalled nearly \$300k, including interest earned.

Grants and sponsorships made over the same period have come to \$163.8k and money on hand totals \$130.5k.

Cheque-Free Kiwis

The Wagner Society's bank, Kiwibank, has informed us that it will no longer be dealing with cheques as from 28 February, 2020, i.e., in about 6 months' time.

In an explanatory leaflet (*Kiwibank is Going Cheque-Free*, available at any branch), the options suggested are internet, mobile, or phone banking.

Many of our members are already set up for one or more of these facilities, but if you normally pay your sub by cheque, you will, from 28 February, have to switch to one of these payment methods.

Should you not have a home connection to the internet and/or find phone banking difficult, please contact WSNZ Secretary Peter Rowe (Ph: 021 610 869) who will make it possible for you to pay your sub by cash at one of the Wagner Society meetings. It is not recommended that you send cash through the mail.

New Members

"Ho-jo-to-ho!" say all of us in welcoming:

Alison Grimshaw.....Christchurch
Brigid O'Meeghan.....Wellington
Barbara Peddie.....Christchurch
Jonathan PerrattAuckland
Cheryl ScottWellington

Editorial

The Newsletter Team consists of:

Heath Lees (Auckland), Editor

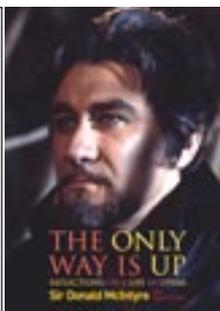
and Centre Co-ordinators:

Lesley KendallDunedin
Gloria StreatChristchurch
John DavidsonWellington

The Only Way Is Up

The Memoirs of Sir Donald McIntyre

reviewed by Richard Green



The *Only Way Is Up* struck me as an odd title from a man who had stayed for so many decades at the top of his game. How much higher could he go after all? Now, to wind up his career, Sir Donald McIntyre hands on his memoirs in this beautifully presented volume, solidly bound in glossy hardcover, and packed with illustrations, information and insights.

At the time, New Zealand knew little of his overseas triumphs, but now we have it all. WSNZ founder Heath Lees writes the foreword and with co-author David Rees can take credit for an outstanding job of 'ghost-writing', editing and proof-reading. It's stylishly bound, robust, nice to hold, all credit going to Christchurch publisher Quentin Wilson. Plaudits too to the NZ Wagner Foundation and the Sir Donald McIntyre Trust whose financial heft made the project happen.

'Sir Don' always knew he was good, but there are many amusing and frank admissions of failure. An under-performer academically he was 'not the least bit interested in book learning', got stood down from his school rugby team for shirking a match, and was 'kicked out of Guildhall' one of London's world-ranked conservatoires. Hardly a failure there though, since his burgeoning career was making regular attendance impossible. Through it all he clung on to the lessons learned, asked questions endlessly, and sought out mentors he could trust.

Don Juan in Hell: Mozart, Ibsen, Wagner and Shaw

Emeritus Professor of English Chris Ackerley previews his talk to the Dunedin Centre on 20 October

Irecall, from a university lecture long ago: "George Bernard Shaw didn't really believe in God... there simply wasn't room in the universe for both of them."

What Shaw did believe in, after his apprentice years as a theatre and music critic, a would-be boxer and a failed novelist, was what he called the Life Force: an idiosyncratic synthesis of Lamarckian evolution, Nietzsche's theory of the *Übermensch*, and Bergson's *élan vital* — avant-garde theories that were in their day controversial, and in time discredited.

This philosophy informed Shaw's advocacy of Ibsen and Wagner, whom he often mentioned together, notably in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), which did much to advance Ibsen as a formative force in Modernist drama; and in *The*

Not much here on the rudiments of vocal technique, of which, as he states, little can be learned from a book. But McIntyre is strong on posture, bearing, resonance, lifting the voice, the phrase, and the placement (up, up, up) and he throws in a plethora of *bon mots* that singing teachers might well pin to their studio walls: prepare well, eat a healthy diet, exercise, practise self-discipline, ask lots of questions, and SHOW UP. Support yes, but no mention of that much-misunderstood diaphragm — his support comes from the perineum or, as Pavarotti advised, the balls (close enough, but not much help to divas).

There is little light thrown on the challenges and sacrifices that face an international singer who is also a family man raising three children. Shots of him running, swimming and playing tennis give a glimpse of his expansive estate in Kent, yet more insight into the juggling of career and home life would have been of interest. Wife Jill and daughters make cameo appearances, then abruptly we encounter colour shots of the startlingly beautiful Bettina, to whom he is now married. Not our business I guess.

The book is richly illustrated. Who could forget McIntyre's tormented, patch-eyed Wotan grasping that colossal pendulum in the Chéreau *Walküre*? Peerless. With whitening hair and beard he gracefully matured to become the quintessential *Meistersänger* Hans Sachs and we get a shot of the brilliant Wellington production in 1990 that the late Chris Doig realised (me seated behind Sachs, at rear, obscured. *Damn.*) It was without doubt his best-ever performance on home turf.

Sir Don devotes an entire chapter to the notorious Chéreau centennial *Ring* cycle which he and Gwyneth Jones (Brünnhilde) probably saved from being scrapped when cast and audience alike reacted with shock-horror. Their lonely

support was vindicated as the production slowly gained audience favour, culminating in an hour-and-a-half's thunderous ovation with the final curtain. (More measured sources put it at 45 minutes but, that's Don — think 'up'.)

I enjoyed the Who's Who of leading conductors, stage directors and singers. Helpfully, they are listed in the chapter index. Legendary characters abound, including conductor Reggie Goodall — he of the super-expansive tempi. (Singers' in-joke: Goodall dreamed he was conducting *Die Meistersinger* and woke up to find that he was.)

I'd hoped for a word on the *Flying Dutchman* that Don did with conductor John Matheson for Auckland Opera in 1992. It should have been a triumphal homecoming but he was wrestling with vocal and personal problems at the time and, sadly, the season didn't go well for him. Not a word in the book. All singers have their off nights and the ever upbeat Don doesn't dwell on that part of his memory. Then, suddenly, stepping in for Bryn Terfel in a Covent Garden *Rheingold* (not having sung it in three years) he tells us he sang below standard and 'felt very guilty indeed' — a startlingly honest acceptance of personal blame.

Preparing the book must have been stimulating therapy in Sir Don's present retirement in Munich. Informative and entertaining, it closes with good advice for next-generation singers. Lift the voice — keep it up — UP! For aspiring career singers it's the only way.

Richard Green, bass, sometimes shared opera stages with Sir Don, notably in the 1990 NZ *Mastersingers*. A long-time member of the WSNZ (Auckland), he sang as Hunding in the 2004 Adelaide *Ring*.



The book will be on sale (\$35 for members) at your next WSNZ meeting. Cash or cheque please.

High Note

The recently released 'Distant Beloved' CD by Simon O'Neill and Terence Dennis hit the Top Spot in Bayreuth's *Disc of the Week* during the Festival last month. Bravo!



Sad Note

Bryan Magee, philosopher, former BTV presenter and perpetual Wagnerian, died in an Oxford nursing home on 26 July. His Wagner and Schopenhauer-centred books were full of clear and stimulating insights.

He also had a significant New Zealand connection, being a regular visitor to Otago University.

Roger Wilson Winds up the Tale of the 1990 Meistersinger



After the very final curtain-call, some of the cast and players crowd around Wolfgang Wagner (centre, in jacket and tie). Roger Wilson is at the back, in line with WW's head. Chris Doig is in front of Donald McIntyre, extreme right.

The full dress rehearsal for *Die Meistersinger* took place two days before the first night. Dress rehearsals are often made open to school parties in the hope that the young might get hooked on opera. Young audiences are very honest and a bit like sports crowds. If they don't like you they'll boo and hiss, but conversely they'll cheer loudly if they do like you. If you get a good clap you know it's been well earned. The doubters who said you couldn't sell Wagner to New Zealanders were wrong, but even the most patriotic were aghast at the thought of school pupils being bored silly by hours of *Meistersinger*. A compromise was reached: first act only.

In fact the kids were enthralled. Surtitles had been introduced into New Zealand only a couple of years before, and for the first time these children could follow every word. They loved the verbal exchanges and roared when Walther's first attempt at a Mastersong was ruthlessly demolished by the hidden, chalk-wielding Beckmesser. At the end of the first act they flatly refused to go home.

A Last-Minute Stand-In

The other feature of the dress rehearsal was that we had a stand-in for the young male lead role of Walther von Stolzing. William Ingle, an American tenor had arrived full of enthusiasm but unaware of pernicious jet-lag. He sang himself hoarse on his first day, immediately fell ill and never really recovered. Gamely he soldiered on through the rehearsals, but it was reluctantly decided that he shouldn't

attempt to sing the dress rehearsal but should save himself for the season proper.

Was there a Heldentenor in the house? Well actually, yes, there was one in the Festival Director's office. Chris Doig ran over, still in his suit, bounded into the orchestral pit, rolled up his sleeves, opened his score and let rip. He was preparing the rôle at the time and knew it well, in fact I think he sang quite a lot of it from memory. I'd not heard Chris singing Wagner before and it was a revelation. Of course he was on a roll, as one is when saving the day, but never before, in my opinion, had he ever sung so brilliantly. Poor Bill, miming on stage to the Doig voice from the orchestra; he could only rue his sick condition.

Opening Night . . .

When opening night arrived and we lined up to go onstage to the thrilling sound of the NZSO striking up the famous prelude, I think even the most seasoned of us felt a sense of history in the making. My own entrance was almost a stagger thanks to an almighty thump on my back that nearly knocked me over. It was the massive McIntyre paw delivering a message of good luck. We had a full house and the excitement was intense.

One of Doig's ideas was to have a Festival Guest Celebrity, who was to be the legendary American soprano Beverly Sills. With a fortnight to go it was announced that Miss Sills had had to cancel, and her replacement would be — Wolfgang Wagner! When I next saw Chris I asked him how on earth he

had engineered such a coup. 'I rang the bugger up' he replied.

So after the performance, there was the famous Wolfgang, almost like a reincarnation of his grandfather. He declared himself most impressed with our performance — well of course he did — but we took him at his word. What a thrill to have performed in such a work alongside such colleagues, and then to press the flesh with the great Richard Wagner's grandson!

Even now, revisiting all the photographs and glowing reviews, I can still feel the enormous excitement of that wonderful *Meistersinger* summer.

Roger Wilson studied German at the University of Otago and the Universität Zürich, then music at the Staatliche Musikhochschulen in Detmold and Köln. He began his professional career in Europe in the 1970s and in recent years has performed in the UK, the USA, Australia and Malaysia.

Much of his career has been spent in New Zealand where he is one of the country's most experienced singers with an extensive opera, concert and recital repertoire as well as being a recording artist and frequent broadcaster.



Grateful thanks are offered to the Goethe-Institut New Zealand German Cultural Centre for permission to edit and serialise these four articles.